

JUXTAPOSITION OF WESTERN, ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN METAPHYSICAL ORIENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to trace the metaphysical orientations of western, oriental, and African traditions and how they inform their development and progress. Metaphysical orientation is the sum total of metaphysical doctrines that form the foundational assumption about reality. Metaphysical orientations makes explicit the way a tradition grasps and conceptualizes being. The paper discovers that the metaphysical orientations of the western tradition is dualistic in outlook, while the oriental is monistic, and African is complementarity (or duality). Though metaphysical orientations are what provide the foundation for the epistemology, ethics and socio-political arrangements of the various intellectual traditions and civilizations we studied. Nonetheless, in Africa it is not the case, due to web of complex historical and existential issues. Therefore the paper argues that metaphysical orientation provides the primordial principles that formed the basis for epistemology, ethics, and sociopolitical arrangement that serves as the gateway for development or modernization. However, in the case of Africa it is somewhat different. The paper employs the comparative method.

Keywords: Metaphysics, development, Oriental, western, African

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to trace the metaphysical orientations of western, oriental, and African traditions and how they inform their development and progress. Metaphysical orientation is the sum total of metaphysical doctrines that form the foundational assumption about reality. It can be a conceptual framework or primordial principles that framed a people's understanding of reality. The paper is a comparative exercise that seeks to look at the metaphysical orientations that underline Western, Oriental, and African philosophy. The paper argues the claim that metaphysical orientation provides the primordial principles that formed the basis for epistemology, ethics, and socio-political arrangements that serve as the gateway for development or modernization. However, when it comes to Africa the case is different due to a whole web of complex historical and existential issues.

Metaphysical orientation is the sum total of a people's worldviews either systematized or not but which underpins their fundamental assumptions about life, values, society, and the human person. It is an exclusive property of a people, which is rooted in their intellectual traditions, as thought out by their indigenous philosophers. It is the national

philosophy of a people that predicated their collective understanding of reality. It is the basis for a people's ideology, corporate values, and national attitude to life. Though it is not fixed or essential to the very nature of a people, nonetheless, it can be a product of mutual borrowing from other traditions. This is why a comparative understanding of the metaphysical orientation of various traditions in the world, is essential for mutual accommodation and tolerance which is necessary for global peace. It is this end, the paper seeks to achieve.

This paper shall be divided into five sections. Section one will discuss conceptual issues like the meaning of metaphysics and metaphysical orientation. Section two will discuss the metaphysical orientations of Western, Oriental, and African traditions. Section three will discuss their similarities and difference while section four will trace how this metaphysical orientation inform the development of each of this traditions. While section five will contain the evaluation and conclusion.

METAPHYSICS AND METAPHYSICAL ORIENTATIONS

Metaphysics as a systematic inquiry was first conceived by Aristotle. It was an ancient editor of Aristotle's works that coined the word to describe the works of Aristotle that deal with the study of entities that are beyond what the physical sciences are interested in. He called it "ta meta a physika" (Cohen, 2000). Subsequent metaphysicians follow that Aristotelian tradition. Nonetheless, for Aristotle, metaphysics is the study of the first principle of things or the science of existence in general (Singer 2005). He contrasted this with other sciences that study particular aspects of existence but metaphysics study existence from a general, comprehensive, and totalizing prism. What is general or totalizing in all existence is substance. As a term substance occupies a central position in the work of most of the great metaphysicians who came after Aristotle. 'Substance' he declared to be what primarily existed, and was prior to all other things in respect not only of existence but of explanation and of knowledge as well; that is to say, the explanation of anything else involved the idea of substance; knowledge of anything else involved knowledge of substance; the existence of everything else depended on the existence of substance. Therefore Metaphysics, then, is regarded by Aristotle as a single, comprehensive study of what is fundamental to all existence, all knowledge, and all explanation. It will at once be evident that different identifications of substance, that is, of what has this fundamental character, will yield different systems of metaphysics (Singer, 2005).

From the above, metaphysical orientations is the way different metaphysical systems treat the question of what constituted substance, how it can be known, and how it can be explained. The way the west conceived substance was radically different from the way the oriental conceived substance, and the way the Africans conceived it. However, there are various metaphysical orientations such as Monism, dualism, pluralism, and duality (Ozumba, 2016). These various metaphysical orientations resonate both in

western, oriental, and African traditions but the attention of this paper is on the dominant orientations in these traditions.

METAPHYSICAL ORIENTATIONS OF WESTERN, ORIENTAL, AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS

Western Tradition

In western tradition, Heraclitus and Parmenides were the first to give an account of Being which is the central issue of Metaphysics. The question between Heraclitus and Parmenides is on: what can account for existence?. In other words, what does it mean for a thing *to be* (to exist)? For Heraclitus, Being which is what characterized all existence is in a state of perpetual flux and it is ever-changing, ephemeral, and multiple. This is because at the base of being is the presence of an everlasting fire that brings things to be and to it, all things return. Everything moves on, he said, and nothing remains; the world is like a flowing stream. If we stand by the riverbank, the water we see beneath us is not the same two moments ago, and we cannot put our feet twice into the same water. So far, so good; but Heraclitus went on to say that we cannot even step twice into the same river. This seems false, whether taken literally or allegorically; but, as we shall see, the sentiment was highly influential in later Greek philosophy (Kenny 2006, p.8).

Contrarily, Parmenides see Being as one and fix, immutable and eternal. We cannot talk of Being coming into Being or going out of Being. It is illogical and absurd to talk about Nothing as coming to Being. Parmenides puts it this way: “What you can call and think must be Being, for Being can, and nothing cannot be”. This means that Being is and Nonbeing is not. What Parmenides is saying, in essence, is that anything that can be at all, must be something or other; it can be just nothing (Copleston 1946). If Being is that of which something or other, no matter what, is true, then Nonbeing is that of which nothing at all is true. That, surely, is nonsense. Not only can it not exist, but it also cannot even be thought of (Kenny 2006:9). From the foregone, it is clear that from Parmenides's perspective that Being is what 'is' and its opposite side is what *is not*. What 'is' is Being which forms the content of thought and it can be related to real things in our experience and thinking. Therefore, to sum up, Parmenides thought we can say Being is undivided, unlimited, and everlasting, and there is no becoming in Being or going out from Being. This position runs contrary to commonsense and the way things are in our experience. However, subsequent western philosophers especially Plato and Aristotle, tried to reconcile this Parmenides's position though logical, with common sense.

The problem facing future philosophers was this: Common sense suggests that the world contains things that endure, such as the Rocky Mountains, and things that constantly change, such as rushing streams. On the one hand, Heraclitus had pronounced that at a fundamental level, even the most solid things were in perpetual flux; on the other hand, Parmenides had argued that even what is most apparently fleeting is, at a fundamental level, static and unchanging. Can the doctrines of either Heraclitus or

Parmenides be refuted? Is there any way in which they can be reconciled? For Plato, and his successors, this was a major task for philosophy to address.

In an attempt to surmount this Parmenidean difficulty, Plato bifurcates Being into two via the World of Idea and the World of the Sensible. The world of ideas contains the forms of things and they are unchangeable, immutable, fix and eternal. The world of the sensible is the world of appearance which contains things that are mere copies of the archetype which is in the World of Idea. Being is in the World of Idea which is a kind of conceptual world and the particular things in the sensible world are photocopies that respond to the principles of differentiation, growth, death, etc., but in the Platonic thought, Being is in the world of idea and it cannot be grasped with the senses. In Plato's thinking, the Forms (meta-material) are the real while the particular things (material) in the sensible world are nonbeing and just mere appearance or sensuous illusions. Therefore, through the process of transcendental intellection (elenchus) the mind or soul can recollect or grasps the forms. From the above Plato places premium on the meta-material as Being, which represents an idealist account of Being.

Likewise, Aristotle in a bid to solve the Parmenidean difficulty dichotomize Being via substance and accidents. 'Substance' is the thing that can exist on its own without depending on any other, while, while 'accident' is the modification or property of substance. Even accidents possess substances because they are animated by substances. Substance account for the active and passive change in everything. Therefore, to account for change, Aristotle opines that all finite and infinite beings possess matter and form. The 'form' is the purpose or cause and 'matter' is the substantial material a being is made of. While 'form' may change, 'matter' remains. Being is substance while nonbeing is nothing and cannot be predicated on anything. Therefore, Aristotle places a premium on substantial beings. This is a kind of realist account of being.

According to Kenny (2006), since the Renaissance, it has been traditional to regard the Academy and the Lyceum as two opposite poles of philosophy. Plato, according to this tradition, was idealistic, Utopian, other-worldly; Aristotle was realistic, utilitarian, commonsensical. These two traditions of platonic and Aristotelian form the metaphysical orientations of western metaphysics. Furthermore, these two traditions form what Heidegger later called traditional metaphysics which is problematic. According to Unah (2006), traditional western metaphysics is monistic and it reduced Being to *The One* which makes it static, fixative, and rigid, as such, it is the cause for all the crises in western society and other societies that the west came in contact with. Western metaphysical orientation has a disdain for nonbeing (nothing) as nonsensical and it places a premium on Being as *what is*. The implication is that *what is* is material and Being was reduced to beings. More, it sees Being as opposed to nonbeing because nothing can't come from something. Though Unah (2006) maintains that even nothing is something. While western metaphysical orientations are monistic in the sense that it places premium to the *One* as being, it is also dualistic in the sense that it conceived of two basic opposing substances as the foundation of Being. It sees reality as the

composite of two opposing primordial entities but one is superior (active or present) and the other inferior (passive or absence). While Plato sees the Forms as supreme and the particular things as inferior, Aristotle, on the other hand, sees substantial beings as supreme and their accidents as inferior because everything in so far as it is a being is composite of matter and form. Therefore, from Aristotle moving forward, western traditions have adopted this materialistic orientation in all their conceptualization of whatever is Being.

Oriental Metaphysical Orientations

There are variants of philosophical thought in oriental tradition with conflicting positions but in this section, I will look at Taoism which represents the metaphysical orientation of Chinese Philosophy. For Taoism, Tao is the only reality that exists. It is the ultimate reality, the source of all beings, the mystic force underlying all things and all happenings, both transcendent and immanent. It is the ground of being, the foundation of existence, a boundless self-existence, and self-manifesting, self-diffusing, all-pervading reality (Omoregbe, 2004). Similarly, Hinduism used the concept of Brahman to describe this ultimate creative principle that individuates itself in things in this world. According to Omoregbe (2004), Brahman is immutable, unmovable, but it is the dynamic source of all changes in the universe. In itself, it does not change, but its individuates change. Its individuations are the actualizations of its potentialities. It unfolds and actualizes its potentialities with the passage of time. Brahman is not an individual being but the Ground of all beings, including God, are actualizations. While Hinduism accommodates the idea of dynamism in its conceptualization of Being or the Ground of existence, Taoism does not accommodate the idea of dynamism in its understanding of the ultimate creative principle. However, both systems are predicated on the monist metaphysical orientations. Therefore, the metaphysical orientations of oriental tradition tilt towards monism. This implies that it places a premium on the *One* as the ultimate irreducible basis of Being.

African Tradition

The general trait of any metaphysical system which is distinctively African is that it is basically integrative. To speak of integrative metaphysics or the metaphysics of integration, therefore, is to simply say that African metaphysics is the metaphysics of harmony, which in turn makes African philosophy, the philosophy of harmony (Okoro, 2011a). Integrative metaphysics simply means the metaphysical system which regards spirit, force, life-force, or vital-force as the primordial principle which permeates all things and is responsible for unity in diversity. It is a metaphysical system that sees spirit (i.e. mind, idea, subject, and all things mental or spiritual) and matter (i.e. body, object, and all things physical) as being equi-primordial and complementary. Since for the African, the primary element that sustains the universe is spirit, then spirit or life force permeates and interpenetrates all things.

C.S. Momoh (2000), a member of the purist school of thought, maintains that African metaphysics can best be defined as the "African doctrine on the spiritual". Thus for the African, "the concept of reality encompasses the totality of everything that exists visible or invisible, real, actual or potential" (p.8). And because this metaphysical system does not bifurcate mind from body, subject from object; because it does not separate politics from the economy, the economy from religion, religion from culture, culture from spirituality, spirituality from education, education from physical existence, physical existence from the totality of life; because it does not create a hiatus between theory and practice, action and reaction; it is referred to as an inclusive system and therefore, integrative.

African metaphysical orientation is integrative and complementary in the sense that Being is a Binary Complementarity of the opposite i.e. there is a reciprocal relationship between nothing and something. This is because for African Metaphysics anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality (Asouzu 2004). This implies that Being is relational and interconnected and interpenetrating. The aim of African metaphysics is to harmonize all opposites by way of interfusion or integration. This system of metaphysics is also known as metaphysical vitalism, metaphysical symbiosis, spiritual primacism, or the principle of interpenetrability of forces (Okoro, 2011b). Therefore we can submit that African metaphysical orientations are tilt towards integration, complementarity, and holism.

This implies that African metaphysical orientation recognizes the divide between the two primordial substances of Being and Non-being but it does not bifurcates or dichotomizes them, rather it sees them in mutual complementary relationship (Asouzu, 2007; Oluwole, 2014). One cannot be grasp without the other, and their harmonious relation is what brings balance to nature, the world and human society. Therefore, in the epistemic process, there is an interplay of the subject and the object of knowledge, and knowledge is not only empirical but rational and intuitive (Oluwole, 2014). For African ethics, whatever that seeks to destroy the mutual relationship in the community is intrinsically bad and what promotes the harmonious relationship in the community is seen as good (Asuquo, 2019; Asuquo & Akerele, 2020). Politically, the African places more premium in consensus building, village democracy and bipartisanship (Wiredu, 2001).

Having given the metaphysical orientations of western, oriental and African traditions, I will compare the distinctive features of these traditions and how they resonate in the development and modernization that have occurred in these traditions.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE METAPHYSICAL ORIENTATIONS OF WESTERN, AFRICAN, AND ORIENTAL TRADITIONS

Both oriental tradition and western tradition are absolute monists who maintain that Being is ultimately one (Omogbe, 2004). In the west Parmenides see Being as one and

other western philosophers follow suit. It is either they are reducing Being to one particular substance or the other. For example, Plotinus tells us that the ultimate is the "One" which is absolutely transcendent, it transcends being, transcends existence, transcends essence, transcends thought, transcends anything we can think of. This one was reduced to *Nous* according to Anaxagoras. Likewise, Spinoza reduces this One to God or Nature. For Hegel and the German Idealists, it is the Absolute or Absolute Ego or Spirit. Therefore, to ground Being western tradition reduces it to materiality or matter and downplay the spiritual aspect of it. It is on this note that Okoro (2011b) describes classical Western metaphysical orientation as monistic and reductionistic.

Similarly, Oriental metaphysical orientations share the same trait with the west. For the Orientals especially the Taoists and Hindus being is the Absolute One through which other beings emanates. For Taoists it is Tao, and for the Hindus it is Brahman. This nonmaterial posture shows that Being is essentially nonmaterial and it can give an account of material which is seen as a corruption of Being, just like 'nothing' is a corruption of Being which is 'something'. This is why oriental moves from the soul to matter. The sharp difference between these two is that Europe reduced the Being to *what is* and '*what is*' is always 'something'. The oriental, on the other hand, reduce it to Spirit veiled with the concepts of Tao or Brahman. There is a need to provide a synthesis and that synthesis is in African Metaphysical orientation.

Africans do not see the world as a pure rational abstraction or as mere appearances; they simply reproduce reality in the life-world. We define the life-world as man's native transcendental capacity to effectively and pragmatically synchronize the objective world with subjective understanding. It is the visioning of the world about us imaged in symbolic forms. In such a symbolic representation of the world, things are not compartmentalized. On the contrary, in the universe of the life-forces things are inclusively interconnected and interpenetrating. This explains why the African cosmos is said to be cyclical, hierarchical, and tripological in outlook. Chinweizu describes the African cosmos as one that operates the logic of "concentric circles" (Chinweizu, 2005, p.140). In other words, the cyclical nature of the African cosmos rotates and revolves on a triangular dimension otherwise known as the tripod.

The cosmos, society, and man are said to live in a symbiotic unity. Holism is the appropriate word for describing the African understanding of the inter-relationship between the cosmos, society, and man. Each is an individual whole energized and interconnected to the other by spirit. Spirit as the motivating element ensures that the cosmos, society, and man are one intricate web, harmoniously integrated. This interfusion is such that the "world order is replicated in the "social order" and the "social order" is replicated" in the "self-order" and vice versa. Again, by way of interfusion, the three orders are said to be identical and hierarchical. Whereas the hierarchization of the forces and there are identical to nature requires that: " All forces are strengthened and not weakened, that an individual should be seen in the light of the whole and that meaning, significance, and value depend on the art of integration" (Anyanwu, 1981, p. 371). By implication, world reorientation, social reconstruction, should begin from the

enlightenment and reformation of the self, for the re-attunement of the self-order to the social and the cosmic orders.

METAPHYSICAL ORIENTATIONS AS THE FIRST STAGE OF A PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT: WESTERN, ORIENTAL, AND AFRICAN TRADITION

Metaphysics as we discover in the preceding part of our discourse is the ground for all studies because it investigates the first principle of Being. This means that the way people understand themselves is predicated on their metaphysical orientations, and the thought systems they have cumulatively built over time which forms the foundation to assert their development whether it is science, technology, or their sociopolitical arrangement. It is on this note, we will explore how the metaphysical orientations of western and African traditions inform their socioeconomic and political development.

As has been established in the previous section that western metaphysical orientations are tilt towards monism or strict dualism whereby one aspect of being is abstracted and elevated to an absolute pedestal. We see this in those metaphysical systems that place a premium on an aspect of Being and elevated it to Being and the other aspect is seen as nonbeing. In the west it is either they uphold materiality over and beyond metamateriality or the other way round. As such they have built their economic, political, social, and educational foundations on the aspect of being they have so identified. Historically, the west has moved in priding an aspect of Being as Being. The elevation of the rational substance of giving rise to the idea of individual substances either as atoms or monads. This rational substance must collude for something to come into being. It is on this note that Aristotle sees the individual human person as a rational animal because metaphysically, the individual human being is a rational individual substance. Therefore, for society to be possible the individual is seen as a political animal which due to his instinct of self-preservation he must necessarily live with other human beings. This Aristotelian metaphysics underlines the trajectories of western society and philosophy. On the economic front, Western society has moved from primitive communalism to feudalism and today to Capitalism. More so, in the sociopolitical front western society has moved from absolute monarchy to aristocracy and to democracy. The way they conceive being informed the kind of society they have constructed over time, and the nature of their values, norms, and attitude to life. Contemporary western society is individualistic in outlook and it reflects in their sociopolitical and economic systems like liberal democracy, free-market economy and it at the same time prioritized political rights over economic rights.

Similarly, Oriental metaphysical orientations is tilt towards strict monism whereby being is one without any other. It is either it is being or nonbeing, or if it is nonbeing it is nothing which means it cannot command existence. Hence, everything is reduced to the One. According to Hegel's account of history, this One resonates in the Oriental leadership as the Absolute. This is why the oriental place's premium on the collective as the One and everything is understood and interpreted from this One. The implication

is that Oriental society emphasizes the supremacy of the one they have identified. On the sociopolitical front, this one can be the State or the Empire or the collective. This is why in China the State as the One is central in all things and in the activities of the people. Hence, the oriental values such system as State capitalism, consultative democracy, and prioritization of economic rights over political rights.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we highlight the meaning of metaphysics and metaphysical orientations. Metaphysics is an inquiry into the foundation of being as being. It investigates the first principle that constituted being or existence by looking at their causes, nature, and categories. On the other hand, metaphysical orientation is the primordial principle that captures the substantial form of a people understanding of reality. Metaphysical orientation is at the core of how people understand nature which forms the basis of their epistemology, ethics, and sociopolitical organization. It is on this note, the paper trace the metaphysical orientation of the West, Oriental, and African traditions and how it informs their epistemology, ethics, and sociopolitical arrangement. The paper maintains that while the metaphysical orientation of the West and Oriental serves as the basis of their development, such cannot be said for Africa due to existential and historical forces that are playing out in Africa. Some of these existential and historical forces include imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization.

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