

Ìwà Metaphysics: A Systematic Framework for African Philosophy

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Emmanuel Ofusia's book Iwa: The Process-Relational Dimension of African Metaphysics seeks to establish a systematic framework for African metaphysics. This review intends to engage this book. The originality and profundity of Ofusia's ideas are indisputable, particularly about his concept of Ìwà metaphysics. This concept introduces a novel dimension to African metaphysical systems, founded upon a thorough understanding of African thought that distinctly differs from ancient Greek philosophy and other alternative logical frameworks. My review focuses on event ontology, the problem of evil and vegetarianism.

Key words: *Ìwà* metaphysics; event ontology; substance ontology; Kemet; vegetarianism; Emmanuel Ofusia

The idea of *Ìwà* metaphysics, as outlined in the book *Ìwà: The Process-Relational Dimension of African Metaphysics* (2024), is rooted in African culture. Its primary objective is to harmonize the historical narratives of African metaphysics and to provide an Afro-inspired framework for Being (xxv). Emmanuel Ofusia, the author, specializes in process metaphysics, philosophical logic, and ethnophilosophy. A core area of his research is studying the impact that logic has on any effort at codifying African ontological systems. This is, incidentally, one of the core doctrines of the Conversational Society of Philosophy (CSP), of which he is a member. The arrival of his metaphysical theory, therefore, lends credence to this conviction. According to Ofusia, *Ìwà* metaphysics constitutes an Afro-centered system that explores Being independent of classical logic or prevailing expressions of traditional thought (xxv). This metaphysical framework seeks to address the deficiencies of earlier attempts to interpret Being from a process ontology, which places weight on becoming, change, dynamism, and interdependence among all things even when they seem unrelated. Process ontology sees change as the key feature of reality, as opposed to the substance-based paradigm, where changelessness equals perfection. Aristotle's emphasis on substance has been signalled as the origin of this thought pattern in the history of western philosophy.

The concept '*Ìwà*', which is grounded in Yoruba culture, possesses an ontological heritage connected to the philosophical doctrines of the ancient Egyptians, especially the Hermopolitan

and Heliopolitan schools of thought, where doctrines of change, unity of opposites, and duality are some characteristic themes. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Ofuasia's analysis transcends the contemporary Yoruba culture of modern Nigeria, aiming for universal applicability in the interpretation of existence, regardless of race or geography. *Ìwà* metaphysics endeavors to reconstruct a framework that prioritizes becoming or event over other aspects of existence. Ofuasia asserts that the fundamental attributes of African reality—specifically change, dynamism, and interconnectedness, may be found in other traditions like India and Chinese philosophies, but are not dominant in the European tradition. Nevertheless, his conviction is that these ideas, peculiar to African thought systems and these other philosophic cultures, cannot be sufficiently comprehended through a solely substance-oriented approach. To remedy this inadequacy, Ofuasia discloses *Ìwà* metaphysics, as an original Afrocentric metaphysical perspective grounded in event ontology. In this context, *Ìwà* passes as Being. It serves as the Being of beings and as such is the foundational principle upon which all entities, both visible and invisible, animate and inanimate, thrive.

The principal idea of the reviewed book is expressed in three parts, each with its chapters. The first part is titled “The Besetting Sins of Previous Formulations of African Metaphysics” (3-55). Here, Ofuasia identifies some problems in studies of African metaphysics such as pre-coloniality and pre-logicality. The problem with pre-coloniality is that a genuine comprehension of Africa's history is missing. Rather than starting from Kemet, the African narrative is tied as an appendage to European history for it to be meaningful. The term ‘pre-colonial’ often glosses over the various conflicts, enslavement and efforts made by Africans to contribute to European civilization. To elaborate the concept of the ‘pre-coloniality sin,’(4-13) Ofuasia discusses three significant themes: language, religion, and history. Ofuasia notes that Africans are often immersed in languages and religions that are foreign to their ancestral roots.

While it is crucial to address the issue of “pre-coloniality,” the concept of “pre-logicality” presents another challenge. For Ofuasia, the concept of pre-logicality is one of the factors that impedes the acceptance of authentic African philosophy by the west. African ideas are rejected because they are taken as not conforming with established classical logic and its associated principles. The assertion that Africans lack the capacity for logical thought, undermines their recognition as members of homo sapiens with inherent intelligence. To counter this perspective, Ofuasia argues that both African and non-African scholars have not only articulated their ideas coherently but have also critiqued the deficiencies inherent in classical logic and its traditional principles. In discussing how these two allow themselves to appear as challenges to original African metaphysics, Ofuasia talks about the ‘distortion sin’(31-53)—the fusion of ‘pre-coloniality’ and ‘pre-logicality.’ Grounded in a substance-based framework, both hinder the development of an original African metaphysics. The discussion about pre-coloniality and pre-logicality leads Ofuasia to present *Ìwà* metaphysics as a distinctively Afrocentric metaphysical paradigm.

The second part is titled “The Principal Character of *Ìwà* Metaphysics” (59-139). Ofuasia traces the origins of the concept of *Ìwà* to Kemet (ancient Egypt), aiming to demonstrate a philosophical link between Kemet and *Ìwà*. For instance, the ancient Egyptian concept of Nun parallels the Yorùbá concept of *Ìwà*, both supporting a process ontology that prioritizes the

investigation of Being as Being. In other contexts, there is the temptation to equate God with Being. This has caused the onto-theological warrant which was raised by Martin Heidegger against the history of traditional metaphysics where God is invited as the explanation for the existence of all things but the explanation of God itself is absent. The foundational logic of Ìwà metaphysics is rooted in an Afro-inspired system of logic called Ezumezu, which was first, developed by Jonathan Chimakonam. Nevertheless, Ofuasia engages in a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of certain elements of Ezumezu logic to create a framework more congruent with the principles of Ìwà metaphysics. This revised version of Ezumezu logic serves as the basis for developing Ìwà metaphysics, which comprises four categories: (i) Ohun, denoting entities/beings/things; (ii) Ori, representing potentialities; (iii) Olodumare, referring to the God-head and encompassing divinities and spirits; and (iv) Ìwà, signifying Being. In Ìwà metaphysics, there exists a hierarchical structure of entities that is more robust and scientifically informed than traditional metaphysical frameworks, which typically categorize entities as deriving from God down to plants and animals. Ìwà metaphysics functions as the medium through which God influences all entities in their endeavor to maintain a balance between ìwà burúkú (bad agency) and ìwà réré (good agency). This framework also addresses the roles of divinities and spirits within this context. While metaphysicians across both African and non-African philosophical traditions have generally positioned God as the ultimate category, Ofuasia's system contends that Ìwà is the same as Being—the ultimate category. Ìwà is delineated as the primordial substance that catalyzed the origin of experience and the perception of the world. It is fundamental to the entirety of reality. Ultimately, Ìwà metaphysics does not prioritize God; rather, it considers Being as the ultimate category, accounting for the relationships and interactions among all entities, including God.

In the last part of the book, titled “Navigating the World from the Perspective of Ìwà Metaphysics” (143-99), Ofuasia applies the theses of this system to some topics, commencing with external world skepticism. He contends that much of our comprehension of the actual world is not only unreliable but often constitutes a misinterpretation of how the world operates. This perspective is more accurately understood through the lens of Ìwà metaphysics. Ofuasia posits that skepticism remains a significant area of scholarly inquiry, continually demanding caution regarding our cognitive certainties related to the finality of statements about the actual world and its operations. In his attack on moral vegetarianism, for example, Ofuasia posits that humans are inherently omnivorous, equipped to consume and digest both plants and non-human animals. In addressing the ethical implications of vegetarianism, he emphasizes the concept of experiential value within Ìwà metaphysics, asserting that all entities possess intrinsic worth. Thus, he argues that if vegetarians are willing to harm and “kill” plants to avoid meat, they bear a similar moral responsibility as those they accuse meat eaters of abandoning(?), since plants and non-human animals are entities with value and sentience.

Ofuasia applies Ìwà metaphysics to examine the existence of evil in the world as an affair which should not command much scholarly attention, provided we are ready to accept that God is a limited entity and evil is expectation mismatch. The mismatch arises due to the discrepancy between what was anticipated or hoped for and what actually occurs. By employing Ìwà metaphysics as a framework, he seeks to enhance the global relevance of philosophy of religion, particularly in the light of ongoing discussions advocating for the discipline's separation from

its Christian and western origins. This framework offers a coherent and logical basis for understanding human experiences. In addition, Ofuasia explores the relevance of *Ìwà* metaphysics within African medical practices, particularly in addressing somatoform disorders. He asserts that this metaphysical system provides an essential framework for understanding the intersection of metaphysics and medicine. Given the complexity of the human body, consisting of billions of cells regarded as individual entities, it follows that illnesses must not be analyzed solely from an empirical standpoint or evidence-based medical practices. Ofuasia highlights the importance of African medicine as a complementary approach to western orthodox medicine, especially in the treatment of ailments classified as somatoform disorders or those with unknown etiologies in western medicine. Finally, in his application of *Ìwà* metaphysics to the concept of life's meaning, Ofuasia asserts that while life may lack intrinsic meaning, this realization should not invoke despair. Instead, it fosters an optimistic perspective, suggesting that recognizing the absence of objective meaning should inspire individuals to prioritize the cultivation of a fulfilling life in the present.

There is no doubt, that Ofuasia's book demonstrates a remarkable originality of thought within the context of African intellectual history/culture/traditions(?) in the twenty-first century. He effectively articulates a historical continuum of several enduring issues pertinent to African philosophy, with a specific emphasis on African metaphysics. Furthermore, Ofuasia elucidates how the *Ìwà* metaphysical framework can serve as a more effective and sustainable foundation. Despite these commendable elements of his work, there exist certain aspects that a discerning scholar specializing in metaphysics may find less than satisfactory within Ofuasia's metaphysical system.

First, event ontology. He argues that

The ontology of a people must be expressed through language which also implies logic. The failure to comprehend the logic which undergirds African languages accounts for the distortion that has visited African ontology since the wrong logic has been used to misrepresent the people's ontology (33).

I ask, what are the factors that shape a people's ontology before its expression through language? I seek to know whether there exists a relationship between logic and ontology, and how logic fundamentally supports African languages, which, in turn, may contribute to the distortion of African ontology, as posited by the author.

Second, according to Ofuasia, the essential characteristics of the African reality—change, dynamism, and interconnectedness—cannot be fully comprehended through a purely substance-based perspective. This observation raises a pertinent question regarding whether these characteristics are unique to the African context alone. The concepts of change, dynamism, and interconnectedness have been acknowledged throughout the history of philosophy, suggesting an established foundation for events ontology. Given this context, one must inquire what specifically renders an event ontology as being distinctly African. Or, what criteria are pertinent in classifying an event ontology as an ontology within African philosophical thinking?

Third, the notion that vegetarians may share moral culpability with meat eaters is valid, as all beings possess intrinsic worth and none are devoid of sentience. In his application of his metaphysical theory to botany, Ofuasia deduces how plants are sentient and also possess moral worth—similar argument tendered by moral vegetarians against meat eaters. I share his convictions on this matter. As he contends, the human alimentary canal is omnivorous—fitting for the consumption of meat and plants vis-à-vis the herbivorous and carnivorous options. So, I agree with him that vegetarians are just as guilty as meat eaters. Finally, the existence of evil in the world has been a philosophical problem. However, Ofuasia posits that “evil is something that is relative” (139). My contention is what is responsible for the presence of evil in the world, be it relative or universal? What is responsible for the formation of *iwà burúkú* (bad agency) and *iwà réré* (good agency) in the *Ìwà* metaphysical system?

Despite its shortcomings, Ofuasia's *Ìwà* metaphysics represents a significant advancement in the development of contemporary African philosophy. It presents the historical context and prevalent challenges of African metaphysics in a distinctive manner, offering plausible solutions derived from the *Ìwà* metaphysical framework. In this regard, Ofuasia's work is for me a landmark achievement.

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