

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

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Abstract

The question of death is enigmatic in African metaphysical discourse. Many people fear the mention of death while some others accept it as a necessary end. Death however, is the end of that which is and since nothing lasts forever in this material world, it follows therefore that death is part of life. Many African authors tend to see man (the human person) as a being unto death. This means that man is born to die and he dies in order to live. This paper submitted that death is a necessary end for everything that is in this physical or material world. It is equally an extension of life because as one dies in this physical world he is born (transits) into the world beyond. People should live positively facing death squarely whenever it comes.

Death is simply the ending of that which lives and as such means perishing. As a member of the species “homo sapiens” which lives, death is inevitable for man. It may come after conception, at birth, soon after birth, or in early childhood, youths, manhood or middle age and even in old age (Kamath:2005.). The fact remains that it must surely come as what man meets at the end of his life, the stage of development notwithstanding. Omoregbe (1991) alluded to this but added also that death is a way of life for man, for he is a being-towards-death, a being who lives every moment of his life towards his death. Man’s whole life is a progressive journey to death, for he begins to die from the day he is born.

However, it is not only when man is born that he start this march to death. We must quickly add that this process of death starts from the time man is conceived. So, with the cessation or departure of the life force, death is said to occur and what is left behind is only but the dross. Philosophically, can this be taken to be the end of man? What happens to this force that has left man? This transcends the realm of ordinary perceptual knowledge and resides more or less with the metaphysical. Indeed, the history of philosophy is also the history of the search for answers to these questions. In this paper, we try to answer these questions, as they are located in African metaphysics. We shall examine the concept of life after death or what comes after death. This would help us determine the kind of life it would be and for whom?

African Metaphysics

Etymologically, the word “metaphysics” is derived from the Greek statement “meta ta physika” which literally translates to “after the things of nature”. Put simply

and differently, classical metaphysics is the search for that fundamental element which permeates everything. This way, it is an inquiry into the cause and nature of ultimate reality. This inquiry emanates from and transcends factual and/ or scientific questions about the world. Strictly, these “questions centre around what goes on beyond the mundane world.” (Idjakpor: 1995). They are extra-mental and supersensible and therefore go over and above mere sense experience. To get to this height, metaphysics calls for a synthesis of all known experiences so as to arrive at a consistent and coherent-whole, which gives the picture of ultimate reality. Classical metaphysics is, therefore, an attempt to know reality or qua being.

Now the big questions are “what is African metaphysics and what are its characteristics and objects of enquiry? Aristotle who gave a detailed and rigorous touch to the issue of metaphysics has rightly asserted that: “all men by nature desire to know”. This natural tendency to know has driven the African philosophical and inquisitive mind to reflect on happenings or what obtains in the environment where he lives. This reflections is directed on what goes on in the visible world and beyond. He grapples with the problems or basic questions of his world or reality and tries to adduce solutions. Most often, in trying to come to terms with these basic questions, he steps beyond the phenomenal for possible answers. Here is the point where his metaphysics takes over.

From the foregoing, one can rightly say that African metaphysics is the inquiry directed at the thinking of the African man or reality. It is simply the study of his thinking about what underlies or constitutes reality in itself. This is the position Ozumba tried to capture in locating African metaphysics in the African man’s interpretation of reality from his perceptions.

African metaphysics should be seen as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions among being and reality in general. It is the totality of the African’s perception of reality. African metaphysics will therefore include systematization of an African perspective as its relation to being an existence (Ozumba 2004:3).

Suffice it to say that African metaphysics is the aggregate of the solutions abumbrated to the problem of reality to the African man and by the African man or as the African man’s questions about reality and his answers to them. However, some aspects of this reality, which the African metaphysics seeks to unravel include: personality, being, substance, causality, immortality of the soul, appearance and reality, witchcraft and death among others.

African metaphysics cannot be seen as being deeply rooted in the analytic tradition of western philosophy, African metaphysics is pragmatic. This is to the extent that “if an idea, an explanation, a conception, a belief or folk wisdom worked, it was accepted even though they may not fulfill certain fundamental criteria of

objective reality”. (Ozumba, 2004). Even when an idea has worked, the African does not relent but continues to explore and dig deeper in his thought system to understand the basis for such reality in itself. He strives to understand the underpinnings of his physical and transcendental realities because he is amply not oblivious of the implications and consequences of superficial reflections or contemplation.

African metaphysics, in its primeval stage, was largely unwritten and this development hindered, to an extent meaningful reflection after-thought, which written and documented experiences can give. After all, mere mental acquaintance with reality does not necessarily ensure consistency, steadfastness and longevity. It is established that with time, ideas fizzle out and new efforts are made to recapture and relocate their substance. This notwithstanding, “the African”, as Omoregbe (1996) enthused, “store their ideas in form of folklores, folk wisdom, mythologies, traditional proverb, religious world-views etc. actually, this manner of preservation aided the African man to examine, re-examine and reflect on his ideas seriously. But the fact is that this little effort cannot be equated to compared with documentation preserved in written form which created room for accelerated improvement and development.

Death in African Metaphysics

The concept or issue of death is an inescapable phenomenon in all –human existence. It is universal and occupies the centre-stage of all the religions of the world, everybody is involved, “believers and nonbelievers alike “ (Ongonja: 1990). Man knows, from experience, that death is a way of life or part and parcel of life, unavoidable and mode of existence. In our world that is in a continuous state of flux, death is a necessity, which opens the gate for subsequent generations to be created or born. It remains one phenomenon that can never be transferred and which every individual must pass through. In doing this, we cannot experience our own death but rather the death of others. it is the only reality, amidst other realities that is indubitable. We have not personally experienced death (our death) yet we are cocksure of its truth. In all its reality, we tend to ask same questions all the time; why should man die? What happens to him after death? Is death the end of everything or life?

It may be difficult, philosophically, to tackle these questions, but an attempt must be made, metaphysically, to proffer possible answers from the African man’s outlook. We may indeed, start with the last question which inquiries if death is the end of life. In African metaphysics, death is taken to be the transaction of life to a different and supernatural state. It marks the beginning of an onward journey to the world of the ancestors and so does not at all annihilate life. Kibicho (1990: 49) “emphasized that, death is not annihilation: it is only a transition to the next and final stage of a person’s life’s pilgrimage.” At death, the individual is separated from the worldly existence so as to be united with the ancestors.

As to the question, what happens to man after death? We must admit the fact that African metaphysics is claiming that the human person is a being composed of both body and spirit or soul. It attributes corporeality to the body and spirituality to the spirit or soul and the later belongs purely to the realm of metaphysics. Interestingly, there is this closely related questions of whether or not in death; the deceased retains his identity in corporeal term in the world of the invisible beings. Is this identity lost in death such that we have only spiritual or immaterial existence of the dead?

In death, the human body ceases to be part and parcel of the life and activities of the living as it grossly becomes inconsequential. But within the context of African metaphysics, claims that there is a continuity of life directly associated with the dead body by asserting that it is the spiritual, immaterial dimensions of the human person which survives bodily death. The implications of this is that the spirit, which is now in its immateriality, lives on in the realm of the invisible. What clearly arises from this state is that IMMORTALITY is of the spirit and not the corporeal. What, also, comes out of this is that we are essentially composite beings: floating materials bodies and incorporeal souls, which are endowed with the capacity and capability of independent existence. Thus, the person, in African metaphysics is at the same time a physical and a metaphysical being.

Jahn (1961) outlined Kagame's theory of forces where he placed category Muntu at the top of the echelon. It is in this category that all manners of intelligence (God, gods, the living and dead) share or partake. The dynamic nature of the "being" or force of the deceased, the theory of ontological hierarchy and interaction of forces in African metaphysics explain how the deceased ancestors can be in the spirit world and yet his presence felt in the world of the living. For the Bantu, what lives on after death is called "the man himself or " the little man" who was under the shadow of the living as a vital force with intelligence and will the (Onyewuenyi: 1981).

There is a harmonious web or inextricable connection between the living and the dead whereby the dead is termed the "living –dead" or ancestors. He is understood to have only transited from life in the material world to life in the supersensible world. Thus, the living as well as the "living –dead" or ancestors, partake in the socio-economic and political life of the community. The living-dead or ancestors interact with the living through dreams and other medium and, at times, make their wishes known, however, the living keeps this line of communication open through sacrifices and offerings in honour of the ancestors. This close affinity between the living and living-dead or ancestors is maintained for as long as the later continues to be remembered by the former. In this state, as the ancestor gradually slips into oblivion, so does he also gradually get disconnected to the –life of the living? This continues from generation to generation and gets to the point where the ancestors ceases to be

remembered by his personal names. This way, the memory of the ancestors is lost and he goes into non-existence. Mbiti (1970) in his contribution submitted that after four or five generations, the living dead are finally forgotten personally because those who knew them while they were human beings will by then have died as well. Their spirits are consequently lost to human memory. Their identity is eclipsed. It has no personal interest in any human family. It really withdraws from human activities. We note that the spirit, although still human, becomes the ghost of an unknown person and no longer a living –dead.

Conclusion and Appraisal

One must admit at this point that African metaphysics is an admixture or a hotchpotch of beliefs and realities as a by-product of our lived experiences. Appearance, we know, is not in its entirety reality. Physical perception holds its reality while supersensible perception holds its own reality. We have not exhaustively x-rayed the issue of death in African metaphysics because of its open –ended nature. Our views are not static and the discussion is inconclusive but rather will stimulate more discussions on the topic. We must end this discussion by declaring that African metaphysics, the issue of “death” is inseparable from that of life. Rightly, to have life is to begin dying or the process of death and the end of life, we all know, is death. Philosophizing metaphysically, on death is appropriate as it enables us transfigure death and accord it a positive attitude instead of drowning or suppressing its thought.

Recommendation

It is abundantly clear from the submission of this paper, and from the evidences of life experience that death is a necessary end. No one can escape it, since we are born to die and die to live. It is therefore imperative that we prepare for death anytime. This paper recommends the following attitudes towards death

- (a) death is a reality; we should realize that death is a necessary reality that must come at the end of our physical (material) life. The awareness of this would help us live a worthwhile life here on earth, in this way we would be preparing for our death.
- (b) meditating on the reality of death would help us live a quality life, since life has no duplicate. Life must be seen as a great privilege given to us by the Supreme Being, which must be appreciated. To appreciate life would mean to live it out qualitatively and in this way we would be preparing for our death.
- (c) death should not be seen as the termination of life but a transition into another form of life. The knowledge of this would help us prepare for death since that transition will surely come.
- (d) death should not be a reality to be feared but a phenomenon to be accepted. Africans believe that man is a being unto death. This belief should help us accept and face death because it is part of our nature as humans to live and die. This means that life and death are two sides of the same coin, for if we

experience life by living, we should also be ready to experience death by dying at the end of our sojourn here on earth.

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