

## **CAUSALITY AND AFRICAN METAPHYSICS: A MEETING POINT**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper makes a case and argues for causality as the foundation and a fundamental ingredient of African metaphysics. It attempts to establish the fact that implicit in African metaphysics are different motions and processes of causality that are traceable to the influence of continuum of spiritual beings consisting of the living, the ancestral dead, deities and God. The paper further contends that in spite of the objections by David Hume against the concept of causality, such objections had not, in any way, negated causality within the context of African metaphysics. Causality remains a phenomenon that permeates and penetrates the whole gamut of African metaphysics.*

**KEYWORDS:** causality, African metaphysics, meeting point

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Causality is one of the many problems that philosophers had grappled with over the years. It is one fundamental issue that has perennially engaged the minds of philosophers in all times and clime. It is a philosophical problem that is not peculiar to any period in philosophical history as philosophers of every era had their different positions on the issue. Hospers alluded to the perennial currency of causality when he observed that the issues lead directly to two of the most-discussed problems of philosophy: whether everything that happens has a cause, and the relation of cause to human freedom.

The idea of causality is what informed a lot of practices and activities associated with African metaphysics. African metaphysical doctrines are such that they can only be made meaningful and defended against the backdrop of causality. There is therefore the propelling need to examine the complex and intricate relationships that exist between causality and African metaphysics, and the extent to which African metaphysics could be said to be fundamentally rooted on causality.

As a method of procedure, this paper shall examine the concept of causality and that of African metaphysics. The casual relationship between causality and African metaphysics shall be discussed in detail form. Critical summary and evaluation of the subject-matter shall also be considered by this paper.

### **The Concept of Causality**

Though the concept of causality has emerged in the Pre-Socratic period, it was probably Plato who first stated the principle of causality: everything that becomes or changes must do so owing to some cause, for nothing can come to be without a cause (Timeaus, 28). Plato's emphasis was therefore on the causal importance of formal causes which, by stretch of analysis would mean that nothing can be unless there be a changeless pattern of formal phenomenon is a mere appearance. In the bid to understand the concept of causality Aristotle could be said to be the first philosopher to give an extensive account of causes.

In his discussions, Aristotle state that in reference to any singular entity, the question 'what is it this?' could be answered in four different ways, each of which corresponds to what he called a cause, in the sense of something without which the thing would not be (Physics II. 3, 194).

Thus, we make reference to material cause each time we are concerned with questions like 'What is this thing made of?', efficient cause for questions like 'Who is this made by?', final cause for questions like 'What is this made for?', and formal cause for question like 'What is made for?', and formal cause for question like 'What is it that makes it what it is and not something else.

While it is true that other well-meaning subsequent philosophers like the stoics, Malebranche Hume, etc, had maintained various positions on causality, our working definition of causality is efficient cause. Efficient causes are conceived of as things responsible for. They are things that, by their activities bring about effects in other things. Aristotle calls efficient cause the primary source of change (Metaph, 101).

Summarily, it can be state that causality is the principle that every event or every occurrence has a cause. In other words, all events and occurrences are causally related to some immediate or remote causes. Causality is understood and defended in such a way that what is produced is either something new or new change, or simply a change in some property of a given substance.

### **The concept of African Metaphysics**

The question of the nature of African metaphysics has engaged the minds of African philosophers for decades. This has been the pre-occupation of philosophers like Tempels, Jahn, Mbiti, Gyeke, Edeh, Oruka, Iroegbu, Masolo, Houtoundji, Odhuambo, etc.

It is worth nothing here that the issue about the nature of African philosophy and particularly metaphysics became recurrent in the reflections of contemporary scholars for the fact that, for long time, it lacked indigenous written philosophical tradition in Africa. Thus, while such question of unwritten traditions are very evident in discourses on African metaphysics, they are completely absent in Western, Chinese and Japanese philosophy because of long tradition of writing linked to their cultural and historical experience.

The above position had led to the negative perception and popular Western portrayal of Africa in books by ethnologists and historians. This bastardized and negative image raised the question of

whether Africans could develop a philosophy or even metaphysics of their own. They are said to be incapable of philosophy and that any claim to the contrary is non-scientific was to denigrate African metaphysics thoughts. Summarily, while there may be elements of truth in Western notion of African philosophy, particularly in areas of biased orientations.

When African philosophy is discussed from the angle of African philosophers, it lends itself to three major philosophical orientations of ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, and nationalist ideology. Ethnophilosophy conceives of African philosophy as involving critical reflections and activities associated with African folklores, traditions, culture, and beliefs. Philosophic sagacity emphasizes the critical analysis and discourse on the wise sayings and ideas or thoughts of sages in various African societies or communities. Nationalist ideology contents that African philosophy exist in the form of analysis of ideological positions of African nationalists whose ideologies prevailed in the independence era of African states.

Our working definition and concept of African philosophy is an eclectic one that combines ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity and nationalist ideology. A combination or a synopsis of the above three orientation gives us a better and comprehensive understanding of African philosophy. Given the fact of the reality of African philosophy, it follows, by relevant extension and implication that African metaphysics, just as every other branches of philosophy also exist. The raising of fundamental questions and the quest to offer plausible explanation to the problem of ultimate reality following the African thought-patterns could be summed up as African metaphysics.

### **Causality in African Metaphysics**

The concept of African metaphysics is best understood from Ozumba's position where he contended that:

African metaphysics should be seen as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions, among beings, and reality in general. It is the totality of the African's perception of reality. African metaphysics will therefore include systematization of African perspective as it relates to being and existences. This will embrace the holistic conception of reality with its appurtenance of relations, qualities. Characterizations, being and its subtleties universals, particular, idea, minds, culture, logic, moral, theories and presuppositions. African metaphysics is holistic and interrelated. The logic, of their metaphysics underpins their standard and expectations. The issue and the problem of causality is viewed from a this-worldly standpoint within the ambit of Western metaphysics. In fact, causality is seen as a physical order of reality which is perceptible and can be rationalized. On the other hand African metaphysical notion of causality is agentic. Ancient Africans viewed causality from other-worldly perspective. The traditionally African understanding of causality is religious, supernatural, spiritual mystical and mythical. Making an evaluation of the concept of cause and chance among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Sodipo opines that:

The traditional African was not particularly concerned with cognitive problems, but with religious and mythical ones. In essence, the African is not after the satisfaction of his emotional needs nor is he interested in the physical questions of causality as in discovering motives and motivating and motivated agents (who are held responsible for an event and why they do it). Even in the game of pure chance, nine Africans out of ten would attribute their luck or misfortune to a god or the gods” (12)

The above point is further buttressed by Anyanwu who maintained that: contrary to the Sartrean (Western) notion that man is the creative drive or force behind his own freedom, in the African view, whatever force he (man) acquires is given to him by a superior being who already possesses this force, just as any diminution of his force is the result of some evil-intentioned agent capable of destroying one’s force. Hence it can be said that the African conception (of causality) is essentially religious” (49).

For traditional Africans Force is not communicated or reduced primarily by some form of physical causality, because force does not belong to the physical order. It is metaphysical. It is therefore not accessible to scientific or empirical verification. It belongs to the order of invisible entities which cannot be known but believed in; which cannot be rationally proved, but only revealed by tradition; which cannot be coaxed into action by exercising a direct causal influence on them but only by symbolic and ritual (quasi-sentimental) form of causality.

The life-line of African metaphysics is that causality cannot be rationally and empirically perceived or conceived, but only spiritually intuited through the consultation of the supernatural. Thus, the world of aesthetic quality and aesthetic continuum imply the transmutation and transformation forces. In such a world the form of entities is altered by the animating and de-animating dynamic of spirit or force. What the West regards as lifeless or inert is to the African alive, energized by spirit. This explains why witches can affect one psychically. This also explains why, for instance, hunters appease the spirits of their hunting tools. The same reason can be said to account for how it is possible for sorcerers to use objects as vessels for executing their evil intentions, and it also explains why Africans appease the spirits of the land in order to ensure social and spiritual balance. When we say that traditional African metaphysical notion of causality is religious, mystical and spiritual we do not intend in any way to denigrate African metaphysics. This point has been severally reiterated by African philosophers at different periods. These philosophers, among who are Idoniboye, John Mbiti and Placid Tempels, join their voices to those of Sodipo and Anyanwu to buttress the supernatural and anthropocentric nature of African metaphysics. For example, Idoniboye captures the spiritual nature of African metaphysics in the following words ‘the ontology of any distinctively African worldview is replete with spirits. Spirits are the one entity that remains constant in all African belief systems (83). In simple terms, spiritual metaphysics takes spirit to be the primordial form or primary idea of all entities in the world. It regards spirit as having primacy over matter. For this reason, one who operates within the ambit of spiritual ontology and epistemology sees the world as organic and the entities in it as sacred. This kind of world-outlook stems from the fact that the spiritual metaphysician or epistemologist

believes that everything in the world is endowed with life-force and might in actual fact perceive the life-forces of these entities. This explains why the spiritual primacist conceives of a symbiosis of life-forces. Africans are very aware of an unseen world of spirits, powers, and forces. In anthropology, philosophy and theology this view is commonly referred to as 'animism' even though the definitions vary from discipline to discipline. Philosophy sees it as; 'A perspective on the world that sees spiritual powers or forces as residing in and controlling all of the natural world' (Evans, 10).

The spiritual nature of African metaphysics stems from the fact that "Africans regard spirits as part of the furniture of the World, not merely as local constructions out of certain unaccountable manifestations. It follows then that the cardinal point of African metaphysics is spirituality. Idoniboye captures this more succinctly when he says:

Spirit is real. It is as real as matter. Its reality is primordial and it is, if not superior, at least as primary as that of matter... Spirit is the animating sustaining creative life-force of the universe. It is what gives anything its individuality (84).

Perhaps the most ardent proponent of the concept of vital force is Laurenti Magesa. His hook on African religion is centred on that concept. Magesa writes:

In African Religion the centrality of the human person in the universal order is indicated by the religious practice it fosters ... This is why all life forces, that is, all creation, are intended to serve and enhance the life force, of the human person and society... Universal order can be maintained only if this plan of the interaction of vital forces for the sake of the enhancement of the vital force of humanity is adhered to and observed (51).

Further, John Mbiti who describes the African as unrepentantly and notoriously religious characterizes African ontology as religious and anthropocentric. According to Mbiti:

Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology and to understand their religions we must penetrate their ontology... this anthropocentric ontology is a complete unity or solidarity which nothing can break up or destroy (15).

The spirits are, in the main, the ancestors and the forces of nature: the powers behind storm, rain, rivers, seas, lakes, wells, hills, rocks. They are not just the water or the rock for they are spiritual powers capable of manifesting themselves in many places.

Taking a more philosophical approach to the African ontological understanding of reality than Mbiti, Jahn, in building on the works of Tempels and Kagame, proposes four categories of reality.

Jahn identifies them as:

- (i) Muntu = 'human being'
- (ii) Kintu: 'thing'
- (iii) Hantu = 'place and time'
- (iv) Kuntu = 'modality'

Muntu Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu are the four basic categories of African philosophy. All being, all essence, in whatever form it is conceived, can be subsumed under one of these categories. Nothing can be conceived outside them. Everything there is must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance but as force (100).

By the term anthropocentric Mbiti implies that African metaphysics though. Spiritual, is nevertheless man-centered in which case African metaphysics is intended for the attainment of spiritual harmony and social cohesion and solidarity, intended to attune the individual towards the attainment of mental and emotional balance. The anthropocentric nature of African metaphysics stems from the hierarchicization and interpenetrability of forces. Man and the society 'are the centre point of gravity, the coordinating points between the higher spiritual realm of God, divinities and ancestors, and the lower spiritual realm of animals, plants and mineral resources. This explains why Tempels compares the African cosmos to the network system of the spiders web of which the vibration of a string shakes up the whole edifice that is, causes social and spiritual imbalance. Apart from being alien to African cultural system, the empirical notion of causality of the Western tradition was not considered profound enough to offer complete satisfaction. This led to the giving up on the search for empirical causal explanations even of causal relations between natural phenomena or events and to resort to supernatural causation.

The existence of natural laws and the search for causation when those laws are violated are important elements in the traditional African worldview. As stated previously, Mbiti writes that order in the universe is seen as operating on several levels: 'first, there is order in the laws of nature. These function everywhere, and give a sense of security and certainty to the universe (36).' However, Africans do not believe that the natural laws govern absolutely. When the natural laws are violated the principle of causality does govern absolutely and the cause must be found. Nyamiti states: 'The connection between cause (supernatural) and effect is immediate; secondary causes are either not admitted or considered negligible (65).' An event that brings good fortune is considered to be ultimately caused by God and an event that brings bad fortune is considered to be caused by a spiritual force and ultimately allowed by God (Mrnkus, 93), Seeking the causes of bad events is the reason for much of the religious activity of the Africans. Mudimbe, in writing about how the life Forces of different beings on earth can directly reinforce or diminish the life forces of other beings, calls it the 'general laws of vital causality (139).' Magesa confirms that this relationship between and among created vital forces just as that existing between God and creation is therefore essential as well. It is also causal, Causation flows all directions to maintain life in the universe. Thus every event is seen to have a cause, Jahn writes thus for everything that happens in the world for fertility and drought, for sickness and its cure, for happiness and unhappiness, some muntu [being] or other is responsible, whether living man, departed or orisha spirit (126) Fundamental to African causal theory is the conception of an orderly universe in which all events are caused and potentially explicable.

### **Critical Summary**

The foregoing analyses had shown that causality apart from being the foundation of African philosophy, has also been shown to explain and give meaning to African metaphysical thoughts. Causality is the context from which African metaphysics sprung.

The African metaphysical thought is a re-affirmation of dynamism and vitalism that does not limit causation to the empirical world but freely blends and relates empirical causation with supernatural causation.

Apart from presenting and explaining a form of dynamism between the spirit world and the physico-material, the discourse clearly brought to the fore the cosmo-ontological background for causal explanation in African metaphysics. In the final analysis, the main thrust of the paper is shown to be that the phenomenon of causality permeates and penetrates the whole stretch of African metaphysics, in such a way that we cannot conceive of African metaphysics without recourse to causality as its foundation.

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