

Personal Identity and “Life-Here-After Poetics”: A Critique of Maduabuchi Dukor’s Metaphysics

Francis Offor

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
Email: offor66@yahoo.com

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This essay examines Maduabuchi Dukor’s perspective on the African conception of man, personal identity and “life-here-after”. This is with a view to showing that although, Dukor’s views represent what obtain among some ethnic nationalities in Africa, this nevertheless does not provide a basis for generalising across the whole of Africa, as there are countless number of ethnic groups in Africa to which Dukor’s general claims may not be applicable. Given the varieties of metaphysical conceptions of man and destiny in Africa which we are yet to fully explore, and given also the inherent contradictions in some of these conceptions, which calls into questioning, the veracity of claims made therein, it will amount to a major logical error to make sweeping generalisations that would be representative of the whole of Africa. Such generalisations would remain a non-holistic, but partial representation of the African conception of man and human destiny.

Keywords: Metaphysics; Personal Identity; Destiny; Man; Africa

Introduction

In his *Theistic humanism of African philosophy* (Dukor, 2010a) and *African philosophy in the global village* (Dukor, 2010b), Maduabuchi Dukor takes a sloop at two fundamental aspects of African metaphysics. These have to do with the African conception of man and of personal identity, as well as the issue of “life-here-after”, otherwise known as “destiny”. Among the claims made by Dukor are that there is a monolithic conception of man across the whole of Africa and that “if there were any variation from one ethnic to another, it would be only in nomenclature and not in substance” (Dukor, 2010a).

To demonstrate this, Dukor itemised the various elements with which man is identified in Western ontology and gave their corresponding equivalents in the thought systems of the Igbo and Yoruba groups of Nigeria, the Akan and Ewa groups of Ghana and the Kotokali language group of Togo. The aim here is to show that the different interpretations adequately represent the African conception of man. Dukor extends this thesis further by presenting a generalisable position on the issue of personal identity and of “life-here-after”. As far as Dukor is concerned, the issues he raised, with regards to the questions of “personal identity” and “life-here-after”, “are generalisable on grounds that whatever obtains in two or more ethnic groups in black Africa, roughly obtains in the whole of black Africa (Dukor, 2010a).

This essay attempts to respond to this “Dukorian” perspective on the African conception of man and of the problem of personal identity and “life-here-after”. This is with a view to showing that although, Dukor’s findings corroborate what obtain among some ethnic nationalities in Africa, this nevertheless does not provide a basis for generalising across the whole of Africa, as there are countless number of ethnic groups in Africa to whom some of these claims may not be applicable. Given the varieties of metaphysical conceptions of man and destiny in

Africa which we are yet to fully explore, and given also the inherent contradictions in some of these conceptions, which calls into questioning the veracity of claims made therein, it will amount to a major logical error to make sweeping generalisations that would be representative of the whole of Africa. Such generalisations would remain a non-holistic, but partial representation of the African conception of man and human destiny.

Conceptions of Person

In Western ontology, a person is conceived from both the dualist and monist perspectives. Dualist philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche and Geunilix hold that a person is made up of two principal substances, one spiritual and the other physical or material. Monist philosophers like Ryle, Schelling, Smart, Hegel, Armstrong and Place, hold that a person is made of a single substance. For some, such as the materialists, it is pure matter, whereas for others like the idealists, the human essence is purely immaterial. For most dualist philosophers such as Descartes, Plato and Pythagoras, it is the soul that constitutes the identity of a person on account of its destructible, immutable and changeless nature. But for the monists, the identity of a man is determined by that which they hold to be the real essence of the human person. Following this conception of a person in Western ontology, the challenges of the problem of “life-here-after” dissolve quickly into oblivion. This is because if man’s identity is necessarily dependent on bodily continuity as claimed by the materialists, then there will be no sense in which man’s conscious self could be said to exist after the disintegration of the body at death. If on the other hand, we uphold the argument of some dualist and idealist philosophers, that the mind or soul is the real essence of the human person and that it can continue to exist after the death of the physical body, then the fundamental objection to the problem of “life-here-after”

becomes unsustainable.

In many parts of Africa, a person is conceived to be made up of two principal substances, one physical, corporeal and extended, and the other spiritual, incorporeal and unextended. Of these substances, one survives the death of the other. According to Dukor, “death in African theistic panpsychic universe is a transmigration kind of transition to the world beyond ... Life therefore is a continuous process from this world to the world beyond” (Dukor, 2010b). By this, Dukor means that life for the African is continuous, and that the death of the physical body does not mean the cessation of life. This assertion by Dukor is based on his analysis of how man is conceived in some African thought systems.

Generally, the conception of man in many parts of Africa is such that he is said to be made up of certain constituent parts (Dukor, 2010a). For instance, among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, a person is believed to be made up of three important parts. These are the “Ara” which is the material body, including the internal organs of a person; the “Emi” which is the life giving element and the “Ori” which is the individuality element that is responsible for a person’s personality (Oladipo, 1992).

In Akan ontology, a person is also made up of three parts namely the “Okra”, the “Sunsum” and the “Honam” or “Nipadua”, representing the soul (or life giving entity), the spirit that gives a personality its force and body respectively (Wiredu, 1983). For the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, a person is an embodiment of the “Chi” (the personality soul), the “Ndu” (the animating spirit) and the “Ahu” the physical body. Among the Bini of southern Nigeria, a person is conceived as consisting of the “Egbe” (body), the “Ehi” (personality spirit or guardian self) and the “Orion” (animating spirit or soul). The “Ehi” is responsible for one’s personality and its fortune is not tied to what happens to the physical body. It is the bearer and transmitter of one’s destiny, and the one that receives the account of how one lived while on earth, in order to ascertain whether one conformed to the earlier received destiny from “Osanobua” (the Supreme Being). The “Orion” is the life principle and the animating spirit that is capable of reincarnation and of bearing the consequences of one’s actions or inactions while on earth. The “Orion” is the most critical constituent of the human person and its departure signifies death for the body.

Apart from the “Orion” and the “Ehi”, there is yet another element which plays a significant role in the Bini conception of a person. It is called “Ekho”. Paradoxically, Ekho has both a spiritual and a material status. As a spiritual substance, Ekho is linked to the mind and it is the seat of passion. In admonishing a person to change his disposition or character, the Bini would say “*fi ekhoe werie*” which means “change your mind or thinking”. As a material substance, Ekho translates as heart (*Udu*) which is part of the physical body (*Egbe*). This is the reason the Bini would entreat someone who is agitated to calm the nerves of his heart “*Yo obo wie ekhoe*”, which translates as “rub your hands down your heart”. Someone who understands the Bini language would simply respond by rubbing his hands down the side of his chest that houses the heart. So, whereas the “Ehi” and the “Orion” are both immaterial spiritual substances, the Ekho is both spiritual and material. However, the Egbe (body) is believed to house both the Ekho and the Orion which animates it.

At the level of the physical, there is hardly any serious variation among the Yoruba, Akan, Igbo and Bini conceptions, as

they all agree that a person is made up of the physical body with all biological organs playing certain interconnected roles to ensure the survival of the human being (Oyeshile, 2002).

Also, all the conceptions are in agreement that the material aspect of a person is not self sufficient and self enclosed. They all suppose a symmetrical functional relationship between the material aspect of a person and the non-material invisible aspect, with complimentary implications for the human person.

At the non physical level also, all the conceptions share a belief in some animating spirit called the “Emi” in Yoruba, “Sunsum” in Akan, “Ndu” in Igbo and “Orion” in Bini. The Yoruba, Akan, Igbo and Bini also believe in the inner head or personality soul which derives from God or the Supreme Being. This inner head is largely responsible for human destiny (Oyeshile, 2002) and it is called “Ori” in Yoruba, “Okra” in Akan, “Chi” in Igbo and “Ehi” in Bini.

On the strength of the foregoing apparent overlaps, one begins to see the point in Dukor’s generalisation “that whatever obtains in two or more ethnic groups in black Africa obtains in the whole of black Africa” and that if there were any variation from one ethnic group to another, it would be only in nomenclature and not in substance (Dukor, 2010a).

Personal Identity and “Life-Here-After”

There is a truism in science that all the cells in a person’s body are completely replaced after every seven years and that the human body is continually changing through the process of nutriment and waste, to the extent that no individual may be said to possess the same body after seven years. In the same way, it is believed that a person’s mind, that is, mode of thinking, changes continually with the passage of time (Omeregbe, 2001).

So, whether from the materialist or idealist perspective, a person changes with the passage of time, for as Copi once remarked, “... the mind grows old as well as the body” (Copi, 1982). Maduabuchi Dukor alluded to this, when he stated that:

There is no such thing as a person or a proper part of a person, her ego, self or mind’s “I” that is exactly the same overtime (Dukor, 2010b).

If therefore man is continually changing, what then is it that constitutes a person’s individuality and identity, such that in spite of a lapse of time and the changes the person may have gone through, the person in question still remains the same as we knew before? This question describes what has come to be known in philosophy as the problem of personal identity. Philosophers of Western extraction have responded to this problem in several ways.

In his “theory of matter and form”, Aristotle postulated that everything is composed of two elements-substance and accidents. Whereas “accidents” or “matter” undergo change, the “substance” or “form” does not, and this for Aristotle is what constitutes the identity of a thing. When we covet this theory to explain the position of dualist philosophers with regards to the human person, the “matter” then becomes the body while the “form” is the soul. Whereas the body changes, the soul does not change but remains the same in spite of tremendous changes in the body from birth to old age. Hence, the soul or mind is the real essence of the human person.

For some others like Hume and Russell however, there is nothing like the soul or mind conceived as an unchanging entity,

apart from series of inner perceptions or observable psychological experiences, which are themselves distinct and disjointed. These different perceptions, which are usually in succession, cannot be brought together to form one continuous perception. What we have instead is a mere succession of perceptions which is now being mistaken for continuity and personal identity (Omoregbe, 2001).

The various conceptions of person in many African thought systems not only provide a satisfactory analysis of the concept of man but of his destination as well. So destiny remains a common feature in the various conceptions of persons among the African peoples (Oyeshile, 2002). But an account of man's destination would remain vacuous, unless the problem of personal identity has been adequately addressed. This is the reason the various conceptions of man in Africa are in agreement that "man possesses a kind of transcendental self, which though invisible, (yet) is real" (Oyeshile, 2002). In this respect, Dukor also concurs that:

Death in Africa theistic panpsychic animistic universe is a transmigration kind of transition to the world beyond [and that] life therefore is a continuous process from this world to the world within or beyond (Dukor, 2010b).

Dukor's claim that life for the African is a continuous process from this world to the world within or beyond finds expression in the thought systems of most groups in Africa, but this same generalisation cannot be extended to his claim that "death in Africa ... is a transmigration kind of transition". Elaborating further on what he meant by this, Dukor writes:

Man in panpsychic animistic universe in African metaphysics is undergirded and circumscribed by panpsychic forces, as it were, he is convertible or transmigratable into any of the forms of panpsychic force, spirits and powers, which are also symbolic of man, animals, snakes, lions, bulls, leopards, cattle, lizards etc. Death as a transmigration could also mean a man dying to enter the animals or big trees like iroko as the animating spirit (Dukor, 2010b).

In order to give strength to his claim, Dukor cited some beliefs among Africans supported mainly by mythologies, that "in African theistic panpsychic animism, there are animals or trees that are held sacred and untouchable because they have human but animistic spirit, consequent upon transmigration from earthly life to life after death" (Dukor, 2010b).

It is true that we have sacred animals and trees believed to have been inhabited by human spirits in many parts of Africa. But the question Dukor left unattended to, is whether humans actually inhabited such trees or animals after their physical death, or whether as suggested by most African mythologies, they do such while alive in order to gain immortality in the present world. In any case, reducing the metaphysical issue of man's destination after death to "a transmigratable kind of transition" would betray an attempt to super impose the Pythagorean category on the Africa thought system, and this would have both logical and ontological consequences.

Conclusion: The Onto-Logical Implications of Dukor's Generalisations

Dukor's generalisations may indeed be supported on the strength of the logical principles of Existential and Universal Generalisation, and the interchange between them, made possi-

ble by the principle of Quantifier Exchange. According to the principle of Existential Generalisation, what is required to generalise a position to cover a few more instances is the occurrence of a single instance of that phenomenon. According to this principle, from a statement containing the occurrence of a single instance of a phenomenon, we can obtain a general principle whose form is derived by replacing the "constant" with a "variable" that will be representative of some of the occurrences of the "constant" or phenomenon to be generalised. Schematically, the principle is represented thus:

$$\begin{array}{l} Pa \\ \therefore (\exists x)Px \end{array}$$

where "a" is the individual occurrence or constant, "x" is the variable that serves to indicate where individual occurrences can be slotted to produce a kind of generalisation describing the occurrence of the phenomenon, "p" is the predicate term and $(\exists x)$ is the Existential Quantifier sign (Offor, 2010).

The principle of universal generalisation on the other hand is to the effect that one can come up with a general statement that will be representative of all occurrences of a phenomenon in an entire class merely from a statement describing an individual occurrence of that phenomenon. The schematic representation of this principle is as stated below:

$$\begin{array}{l} Oa \\ \therefore (\forall x)Ox \end{array}$$

where "a" is the individual occurrence (constant), "x" is the variable, "O" is the predicate term and $(\forall x)$ is the Universal Quantifier sign.

The transition from generalisations about part of a class to the whole class is achieved through the interchange between the principles of Existential Generalisation and that of Universal Generalisation, made possible by the rule of Quantifier Exchange. This rule merely serves to develop some relationships among general statements by replacing statements that generalise about part of a class with their equivalents that generalise about an entire class. For example, "some things are composed of matter" is a statement that generalise about part of a class and is symbolised as $(\exists x)Cx$. However, to say that "some things are composed of matter" is logically the same as saying "it is not the case that all things are not composed of matter", symbolised as $\sim(\forall x)\sim Cx$.

Given the benefits of hindsight from the foregoing logical principles, one begins to see the point in Dukor's generalisable assertions on the metaphysical conception of man and human destiny in Africa. However, a closely knitted survey of the various African conceptions would show that the overlaps that prompted Dukor's generalisation are not as simplistic as he presented them. In fact, there are rigid variations among these conceptions that would make their generalisation as African conception logically faulty.

Olatunji Oyeshile, in his comparative study of the concept of person in Yoruba, Akan and Igbo thoughts noted such rigid variations when he pointed to the very "many ... overlaps in Akan conception of a person which are not so common in Yoruba and Igbo conception, and the fact that "both Igbo and Akan have a conception of soul in the manner of Western philosophy, whereas the Yoruba have no such conception of soul" (Oyeshile, 2002).

Also, some of the generalisations made by Dukor not only do

not hold for many groups in Africa, some of these claims have deeper ontological meanings which when properly explored would render Dukor's generalisations about them baseless. For instance, the claim by Dukor that in African thought system, the human shadow will cease to exist the moment the personality soul disappears at death and that consequently, corpses can cast no shadow, not only fails the litmus test of science, it also does not accord with the belief of the Bini people. The claim that dead bodies don't cast shadow is indefensible, going by the experiment of rarefaction in Physics. All bodies are opaque, whether death or alive! By the experiment of rarefaction, light particles travelling on a straight line and hitting the bodies that are opaque, cause rarefaction and consequently, the shadow. Certainly, if a man commits suicide by hanging himself on a tree, he will surely cast shadows, for the simple fact that the body is opaque and depending also on the direction of the sun. This expression, "that dead bodies don't cast shadow" has deeper ontological meanings in the various African thought systems which Dukor failed to explore.

Again, Dukor's claim that "that circle of life in Africa commences from the conception of a child and ends at death" (Dukor, 2010a), does not align with the idea of life circle among the Bini people. For the Bini people, the circle of life predates biological conception, starting from the world beyond, continuing through the processes of birth, puberty, marriage, death and then back to the world beyond. These adjoining processes are mere episodes in one's life circle. The circle is only completed, according to the Bini, after a man has gone round it fourteen times.

Finally, Dukor's general claim that "the soul and the guardian self severally and collectively constitute the mind in African traditional thought system" (Dukor, 2010a) cannot be said to accurately represent what obtains in many parts of Africa. Among the Bini people for instance, the guardian self is "Ehi", the animating spirit or soul is "Orion" while the mind is "Ekho". The "Ehi" is not housed by the physical body. It is signified by the shadow and only disappears when the body is interred. The "Ekho" (mind) and the "Orion" (animating spirit or soul) are housed by the physical body but they perform different functions. The "Ekho" (mind) is the seat of passion and thought, while the "Orion" is the life principle that animates the body, hence, its departure from the body signals death. It is clear then that the soul and guardian self do not together constitute the mind in Bini and perhaps in many other thought systems in Africa.

We are not trying to insinuate here that one conception of "life-here-after" in Africa is superior to any other, but to show the varieties of opinions on the metaphysical conception of man and destiny among the African peoples and how this should moderate the attempt by any scholar to make generalisations for the whole of Africa. The fact still remains that each thought system has its peculiar nuances and contradictions that would

call into question, the veracity of beliefs held by the people. The Bini for instance are ambivalent on the actual status of the "Orion" (the life principle) and its relationship with the body. At some point the Bini believe that whatever happens to the "Egbe" (body) does not affect the "Orion". In this sense, the physical disability of a man does not translate into disability of any form, for the "Orion". At another level however, the Bini believe that physical deformity can impact on the "Orion", hence their saying that "a one-handed man is never a stranger whenever he gets to the spirit world" (*Omwen obo okpa erorunwunyen vbe ogha se erhinmwin*). The understanding here is that the amputated arm would already be present in the spirit world before it is joined by the remaining parts of the man's body at death! The apparent contradiction here results from the fact that the Bini admit that it is the "Orion" (animating spirit) and not the "Egbe" (physical body), that survives man and takes abode in the world of the spirit.

The point of the foregoing is not to affirm the superiority of any one conception over another, or to dismiss any of the conceptions, but to expose the varieties of conceptions on the metaphysics of man in Africa and the sense in which this may help protect one from the danger of over generalisation. Given the varieties of metaphysical conceptions of man and destiny in Africa which we are yet to fully explore, and given also the inherent contradictions in some of these conceptions, which call into questioning the veracity of the claims made therein, it will amount to a major logical error to make sweeping generalisations that would be representative of the whole of Africa. Such generalisations would remain a non-holistic, but partial representation of the African conception of man and of human destiny.

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