

# **Metaphysical Paradigms in African, Chinese and Western Philosophies**

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## **Abstract**

Although philosophy as a deliberate investigation of fundamental truths through the method of logical reasoning may be universal, there are significant conceptual and categorical differences that should be taken into account when analyzing or interpreting philosophical discourses emanating from vastly different socio-cultural milieus. This paper presents some features of metaphysics in African, Chinese and Western philosophies with a view to leading the reader to identifying and appreciating some of the ways in which metaphysical paradigms differ from one philosophical tradition to another. The study posits that a particular culture can have a philosophic concept or category that may not be applicable to other cultural contexts. Such differences, the paper argues, could be deployed to promote inter-cultural understanding; it should not be used by one culture to denigrate the uniqueness and authenticity of another culture by labelling its entire philosophic contribution as ethnophilosophy.

*Keywords:* African philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Western philosophy, metaphysics, ontology

## **Introduction**

African, Chinese and Western philosophies, though similar or equivalent in some respects, have certain fundamental differences that must be understood to avoid the risk of interpreting the philosophical discourse of one socio-cultural entity with the philosophical paradigms of another, usually more prominent, philosophical thought (Wong 140-159, Nussbaum). Philosophy as a logical quest to understand the nature of existence, reality, knowledge, values, individuals and their relationships with each other and the world or the ideas and principles that govern these (Sellars 40), may be said to be universal. However, there is need to recognise and acknowledge that conceptual approaches towards realising this quest, even among professional philosophers, can significantly differ from one distinct cultural context to another (Littlejohn).

The Slovene sinologist and intercultural researcher, Jana Rošker, has underscored this point in her in-depth study of epistemology in Chinese philosophy vis-à-vis Western philosophy where she remarked that the concepts and categories used in Chinese philosophy cannot be easily transferred from one socio-cultural context into another, and it is often difficult to understand this philosophy through the lens of traditional Western thought. The exclusive application of Western methods can thus lead to severe misunderstandings and false interpretations of Chinese discourses. It is therefore important to use caution so as not to diminish the richness and depth of Chinese thought or turn it into a weak version of Western philosophical thought.

The main goal of this paper is to highlight some key elements of metaphysics in African, Chinese and Western philosophies in the hope that understanding the unique metaphysical thought of each tradition would minimize the tendency “to diminish the richness and depth” of any given philosophical heritage by denying its relevance or forcing it to assume another culture’s philosophical form.

It has been noted that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between philosophy and culture, and that philosophy springs up in defence of or in opposition to aspects of cultural beliefs and systems. This basically accounts for why the philosophy of one culture may not align with the philosophical concepts of another culture. According to Takov and Tosam, there exists a close relation between philosophy and culture. Philosophy is “so related and depended on its cultural universe that each genuine philosophy would have to grow and evolve from its particular culture.” No philosophy or philosophical tradition develops from a vacuum; each philosophy is a critical self-examination of a particular culture.

Beyond the issue of differences in cultural backdrops and analytical methods, there is also the challenge of translation. In his translation of Temple’s *Bantu Philosophy*, originally written in Dutch, Colin King in Tempels (9) observed that “There are inevitable difficulties in translating Bantu philosophy into European terminology... There are often linguistic problems of terminology.” This is true but I think the most basic problem is that of failure to understand the conceptual pillars of philosophies rooted in totally different cultures and the exploratory methods used by philosophers from those cultures.

This study, to a modest extent, intends to contribute to the bridging of this gap by presenting key aspects of metaphysics in African, Chinese and Western philosophies to enable the reader to note and appreciate the different viewpoints of each tradition. I have chosen to concentrate on metaphysics because it deals with “first causes and the principles of things” (Aristotle) and is considered by many as the foundation of philosophy:

Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy involves a speculative way of thinking about world realities to imprint on oneself some transcendental principles that constitute their foundations. It could rightly be seen as the philosophy of causality in the sense that the metaphysician thinks to affirm the nature of reality and its primordial cause (Ayeni 166).

Even at that, our discussion shall be brief as it is merely intended to stimulate interest in intercultural studies of this nature and to promote the need to acknowledge and respect other philosophical viewpoints, no matter how incommensurable (Wong 140-159) they might be with one's own.

Summarizing Wong's "view of the ways in which philosophical traditions may be incommensurable", Littlejohn states:

One kind of incommensurability involves the inability to translate some concepts in one tradition into meaning and reference in some other tradition. A second sort is that some philosophical models differ from others in such fundamental ways as to make it impossible for the advocates to understand each other.... The third version of incommensurability is that the traditions differ on what counts as evidence and grounds for decidability, thus making it impossible to make a judgment between them. There is no common or objective decision criterion justifying the preference for one set of claims over another, much less one tradition in its entirety over another. Wong proposes learning about the other tradition as a remedy.

It is important to point out from the onset that this is not necessarily a study in comparative philosophy; neither is it an attempt to canvass for the necessity of forging a common ground among diverse philosophical traditions nor an indirect call for the development of some form of world philosophy. This study is also not inclined towards making value judgements regarding the conceptual or methodical standpoints of any tradition. The goal of this paper is to showcase some striking elements of the theoretical frameworks of each of these three philosophies in the area of metaphysics in order to enhance understanding and appreciation of the peculiarities of each of these philosophical heritages and, by extension, any other.

### **Metaphysics in African Philosophy**

There is a collective philosophy that can be identified as African philosophy (Tempels 21) and this philosophy is based on fixed principles. Deacon (90) quotes Kagame in Hountondji (39) as saying that "Philosophical principles ... are invariable: since the nature of beings must always remain what it is, their profoundest explanation is inevitably immutable". How was African philosophy conceived and preserved? Okafor (251–267) believes that African philosophy "was not conceived and did not develop as a separate discipline in isolation from

life, but was embodied in particular forms of practice and beliefs”. Implicit in this viewpoint and a corollary to it is the generally accepted notion that, unlike some other philosophies, African philosophy was originally not conceptualized or outlined as written text. Jinadu (180-181) sees it differently:

We want to argue that both Western and African philosophies started with mythology. The origin of whichever philosophy started from experience. For instance, to philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to some fundamental questions. A man takes a reflective look at himself or the world around him, he is filled with “wonder”, and some fundamental questions arise in his mind. Like African philosophy which derived its origin from myths, folktales, proverbs, western philosophy began with wonders. No philosophy began with any documents.

As noted above, Africa’s “philosophical categories can be identified through language, culture and metaphysical attributes of their lives” (Nkulu-N’Sengha). C. S Momoh in Okoro (114) defines metaphysics as “the philosophical corporate name for cosmology (the structure of what exists), cosmogony (the origin of what exists) and ontology (the constituents of what exists)”. The problem of existence, therefore, is at the core of metaphysics and here we would look at the ways in which African philosophers culturally view and respond to metaphysical questions.

We will concentrate our exploration of metaphysics in African philosophy by looking at its concept of being. Although African philosophers are divided over what constitutes “being” within the African universe, the notion of being as some form of force or energy, regardless of the name or interpretation given to this force, appears to be dominant. The principles one could derive from the views of African philosophers (or philosophers grounded in African philosophy) who share this notion of “being” can be itemized as follows:

- i. African philosophy rests on African ontology; the African’s notion of “being” molds his thought and behaviour.
- ii. “Being”, for the African, is conceptualized in terms of “force”. Force is the character of being, though not just in terms of physical force.
- iii. Beings can be grouped based on the way they act on other beings.
- iv. “Being” consists of animate, inanimate and supernatural forces each of which has different attributes; for example, while the human being can reason, the inanimate being cannot reason.
- v. These forces, which are immanent in all aspects of existence, are interrelated and hierarchically ordered.
- vi. “Being” does not exist alone but is a fusion of its essence and attribute.

- vii. In the natural world, the human being is the most dominant of all other beings.
- viii. Everything in the universe owes its beingness or existence (its force) to God who is the ultimate force.

We need to recognise that, among African philosophers, there are divergent views in relation to the above ontological principles. In his book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hountondji analysed Kagame's work, *La Philosophie Bantou-Ruandaise de l'etre*, his major contribution to African ontology. Though Kagame accedes to some of Tempels' postulations, they differ in certain areas, particularly in methodology of extracting what constitutes Bantu or African philosophy.

In Tempels' view, the dynamic nature of the African's notion of being contrasts sharply with Western Aristotelian canon on the issue of substance and accident. While the latter separates the essence of being from its attributes, the African sees them as being intrinsically linked, thereby projecting a dynamic concept of being that runs contrary to the static notion dominant in the Western world. This is why Tempels, an expatriate who lived with and studied the lifestyle of a group of Bantu-speaking Africans, insists that it is wrong to say, in reference to Africa's concept of being, "being is that which possesses force". As he puts it:

Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force. When we think in terms of the concept "being", they use the concept "force". Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that "beings" are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that "forces" differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material or mineral forces (35).

According to him, "in the category of visible things", the African differentiates between "that which is perceived by the senses and the 'thing in itself'. By the 'thing in itself' they indicate its individual inner nature, or, more precisely, the force of the thing. (36)"

Kagame disagrees with Tempels on his core theory of vital force, replacing it with his own linguistically-derived framework:

Kagame's main dissatisfaction with Tempels' ideas on Bantu philosophy pertains to the notion of vital force. Kagame thus abandons the category of "force", and proposes, in its place, the positing of a relationship between language and philosophy. It is Kagame's contention that a philosophy can be deduced through a dissection and scrutiny of language.... Kagame employs an exhaustive linguistic technique, analysing thoroughly the

vocabulary and syntax of the language in question (Deacon 90-91).

Kagame is also opposed to Tempels on the issue of the “static” character of European philosophy vis-à-vis the “dynamic” quality of African thought, insisting, as Deacon (91) puts it, that “in all philosophical thought, aspects of dynamism and stasis are to be found”.

Kagame prefers to present Bantu philosophy as a system of linguistic categories. A word in Bantu languages consists of four parts: prefix, determinative, radical and suffix. The determinative is so named because it plays a key role in ascertaining the essence of a word; using it, Kagame identified four categories of African philosophy: *muntu* – humans (the living and the dead); *kintu* – things and objects; *hantu* – place and location; and *kuntu* – forms of existence. Clarifying this view, Jahnhein Janz in Deacon (92) states that "Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu are the four 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."

Interestingly, both Tempels and Kagame classify being based on how they act; *Muntu* or the human being is deemed to be intelligent by both of them because he acts intelligently. Both of them agree that the essence of a being and its properties are inseparable, which is why, for Kagame, the dead human is still as essentially *muntu* as the living human being is. Deacon (92) notes Janz's observation that Tempels' notion of forces might be a more embracing tag than Kagame's *-ntu* categories:

Jahn expresses the notion that everything subsumed in the above categories should not be considered as "substance", but rather in the Tempelsian notion of "force". As such, humans, objects, time, place and modalities are forces, each related in one way or another to each other (Jahn, 1961:100). The essential relationship of the forces can be recognised in the root "-ntu", which is found in each of the four categories. "... [T]he ntu is somehow a sign of a universal similitude. Its presence in beings brings them to life and attests to both their individual value and to the measure of their integration in the dialectic of vital energy.

Other philosophers who proffered notable concepts in the sphere of African ontology include Innocent Asouzu, whose paper “*Ibuanyidanda* and the Philosophy of Essence”, propounds a complementarity theory in which all beings in the ontological system play mutually supportive roles, and Mogobe Ramose, whose “ubuntu” thesis, in spite of its association with the term “ntu”, is different from and more limited than Kagame's Bantu ontology. As Ngangah has noted:

One should add that Ramosa's “ubuntu” concept makes sense only when

narrowed to a specific being – the human being (“umuntu”) – for the word, “ubuntu” literally means “humanity”. Since not all beings are human beings, this cannot be an all-inclusive meaning of “being”.

We conclude this section by noting that not every African philosopher subscribes to the idea of African “philosophy”. Hountondji, a major critic of it, describes the idea of a collective African philosophy as “an ideological myth” (Deacon 94). The fact, however, remains, as we shall see shortly in this study, that Africans culturally philosophize in certain ways that the Chinese and Westerners do not.

### **Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy**

Metaphysics or what the Chinese call 形而上學 – “the study of what is above forms” (Perkins) – has been a feature of Chinese philosophy for many millenia. While metaphysics in Chinese philosophy, like any other, is concerned with reality (its origin, constituents, and patterns of change), the questions Chinese philosophers deal with are different from those that seize the attention of Western philosophers. Metaphysics in the West, generally speaking, appears to concentrate on probing the relationships that exist between or among things whereas metaphysics in Chinese thought tends to focus more on what distinguishes one form of reality from another. This is not to say that the Chinese are unaware of the linkages between diverse aspects of reality, all of which are believed to originate from *dao* (道), an immanent but intangible force.

The point is that Chinese metaphysics goes beyond this cosmogonical unity to highlight the ontological distinctiveness of diverse beings while acknowledging the balancing order stabilized by sets of metaphysical opposites. Such dualisms as *tian* 天 (heaven) and *ming* 命 (fate), *you* 有 (being) and *wu* 無 (non-being), and *yin* 陰 (feminine) and *yang* 陽 (masculine) indicate that growth and creativity are engendered by the interaction of opposites. Thus, while underscoring the individuation of beings, the necessity of their interface in causing and perpetuating change is not overlooked. Change results into diverse forms and Chinese metaphysics explores the existent nature of these forms.

Understanding the term “forms” is fundamental in gaining insight into the nature of Chinese thought. Perkins explains:

The distinction between what is above forms and what is below forms has a vague resemblance to the distinction between metaphysics and physics, but it is more specific (Zheng 2017; Wang 2015). The contrast is between the formed and the formless. Both were taken to be immanent in the world. They are two aspects of the processes of nature and would not be taken as distinct areas of inquiry. The implications of this view will appear across a range of metaphysical issues.

Nature is perpetually forming things as well as rendering some things formless. While this entails a consistent pattern and process, and while differentiation between various beings is acknowledged, their individuation can be subject to change as the opposite forces of reality, earlier noted, and the elements act upon them across the cyclical energy of the seasons.

An often-mentioned ancient Chinese philosopher is Confucius, the father of Confucianism, whose followers, known as Confucians, constitute a notable group in Chinese philosophy. Other key schools in Chinese philosophy include Taoism, Legalism, Buddhism and Mohism (China Culture). Confucians played and still play a critical role in shaping the nature of Chinese metaphysics. They offer an interesting distinction between a thing and how a thing responds to environmental stimulus. They call the latter *xing* 性 which, in human beings, expresses itself as *qing* (yearnings and feelings). *Xing* gives rise to *qi* 氣, the specific energies (sadness and joy, pain and pleasure, etc) that we see in humans. *Qi*, as “vital energy”, manifests in all beings, animate and inanimate, and is used to explain their structures and configurations.

There is a sense in which *Qi*, as “vital energy”, is analogous to the Tempelsian concept of “vital force” in African metaphysics. Just as, according to Tempels, “Force is the nature of being” (Tempels 35) in African metaphysics, energy is the character or driving force of existence in Chinese metaphysics. This energy or force, in both thought traditions, is deemed to be vital because it configures the natural order of existence.

To reinforce the point that *qi*, as vital energy, shares some conceptual affinity with Tempels’ vital force, here are two definitions of the Confucian doctrine of *qi*:

*qi*, (Chinese: “steam,” “breath,” “vital energy,” “vital force,” “material force,” “matter-energy,” “organic material energy,” or “pneuma”) Wade-Giles romanization *ch'i*, in Chinese philosophy, medicine, and religion, the psychophysical energies that permeate the universe (Encyclopedia Britannica).

*Qi* - One of the more recognizable words from Confucianism, *qi* refers to the vital psychophysical stuff, or pneuma, present in everyone. Zhu Xi believed that everything in the world was composed of *qi* and *li* (principle). Principle governs the universe and maintains order, but is moderated by *qi*. When people make immoral choices, it is because their *qi* obscures their perfect moral nature. As such, the goal of moral self-cultivation is to cultivate one's *qi* so that it is clear and balanced (Wilson).

It is interesting to note from the first definition that “vital force” and “vital energy” are used synonymously. In fact, Tempels, in his *Bantu Philosophy*, also talked about “vital energy”: “Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man” (Tempels 32).

The second definition goes beyond this to link qi (vital force, vital energy) with the question of moral values, thereby bringing an axiological connection to its metaphysical attributes. Tempelsian vital force is similarly correlated with values; talking about the African subjects of his study, Tempels says:

The philosophy of forces seems to them to inhere in their knowledge as a whole.... Their philosophy directs all their activities and their inactivities. All consciously, their human behaviour is conditioned by their knowledge of being as force (59).

So, African and Chinese metaphysics, to some degree, share certain things in common. Given the cultural variables and the fact that written metaphysical postulations began in China several centuries ago, and only a few decades ago in Africa, one must expect a huge difference in their metaphysical thought. The next section of this study would enable us to see how both metaphysics differ from metaphysics in Western philosophy.

### **Metaphysics in Western Philosophy**

The term, “metaphysics”, was not coined by Aristotle but the huge impact of his work, posthumously titled *Metaphysics*, is a major reason he is generally considered the father of metaphysics in Western philosophy. Aristotle’s metaphysics dealt with “the first causes and the principles of things”; it concerned itself with “knowledge about certain principles and causes” – about things which do not change. Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy has become wider since Aristotle:

One might almost say that in the seventeenth century metaphysics began to be a catch-all category, a repository of philosophical problems that could not be otherwise classified as epistemology, logic, ethics or other branches of philosophy. (It was at about that time that the word ‘ontology’ was invented—to be a name for the science of being as such.... (van Inwagen and Sullivan).

However, the topics that were of primary importance to Aristotle, particularly the nature of being and the problem of universals, remain core metaphysical topics today.

Metaphysics in Western philosophy seemed to have developed through the succession of theses and counter theses put forward by various philosophers, many of whom tried to differ from previous thinkers. Before the emergence of

Socrates and the Sophists in the second half of the fifth century B.C., we had Heraclitus with his theory of becoming or continuous change that dismissed as illusory the idea of being or permanence. This view was later challenged by Parmenides who saw a contradiction in Heraclitus' thesis of becoming – something cannot simultaneously be and be not – and asserted the reality of being.

The Sophists grappled with the problem of knowledge and concluded that reality could not be truly known; but Socrates posited that, via dialectical enquiry, knowledge about reality could be conceptualized. Socrates' student, Plato (circa 420-340 BC), took the issue of being and reality, the problem of universals, to a higher pedestal with his Theory of Forms. Plato's Theory of Forms asserts that the things we see in our world of experience are imperfect reflections of ideal forms or essences in a transcendent world. According to Plato, it would take our rational mind, rather than our senses, to know this ideal world. Thus, in Plato's metaphysics there are two realms: the spiritual realm of forms and the physical realm.

Aristotle's metaphysics is built upon his rejection of Plato's ideal world of forms. For Aristotle, forms exist in the things we see in our world of experience, not in a transcendent world. He posits that knowledge is abstracted through our senses and intellect. He maintains that universal ideas in our mind match the essences we see in things and that the substances of natural bodies have attributes or accidents, such as their quality, quantity or size. In medieval times, after the onset of Christianity, some philosophers, especially St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, injected Christian ideas into Plato's metaphysics.

Unlike earlier metaphysicians whose philosophizing was inspired by objects, the philosophical enquiries of latter metaphysicians, especially those of the rationalists and the empiricists, are mostly inspired by subjects. Among the rationalists are René Descartes, whose metaphysical system has three categories – substance, attributes and modes – and Benedict Spinoza, whose pantheistic monism asserts that God is the only substance while matter and mind are two of His infinite attributes.

While the rationalists take off with consideration of innate ideas, the empiricists, the most notable of whom are John Locke and David Hume (who considers substance a meaningless idea), start with sense impressions as objects of knowledge. Immanuel Kant revolutionized thinking in this regard with his "twelve categories of understanding" thesis that includes substance and causality as two distinct categories. Contemporary Western metaphysicians, such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, have under various shades of philosophical concepts agreed with or reacted against Kant's metaphysics. Alfred North Whitehead's "metaphysics of becoming"(Cloots) should be regarded as an exception here. Whitehead, jettisoning Aristotle's long-standing

thesis, maintains that reality is interconnected and is composed by activity and transition rather than by substance and permanence.

## Conclusion

From our brief review of metaphysics in African, Chinese, and Western philosophies, it is clear that each philosophical tradition tends to focus on different ontological questions or on different aspects of the same question. This is not surprising since these three traditions spring from different cultural foundations. In spite of this, it should not be the case that one viewpoint should be considered right or wrong or that one philosophical tradition should be regarded as ethnic philosophy while another is deemed to be universal. There is an “ethnic” element or taproot to all philosophies, and no philosophical tradition holds the ultimate universal truth. Every metaphysical position universalizes the concept of being or reality from the standpoint of its geo-social realities. As King in Tempels (9) puts it, “the true philosophy is that which both accepts and rejects all philosophies; but, in regard to peoples, rejects none: accepting all as they are and as they will become”.

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