THE HUMAN PERSON AND IMMORTALITY
IN IBO (AFRICAN) METAPHYSICS

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Summary
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The theme of the human person and immortality has currently and forcefully become an issue in the face of modern materialism and dehumanization. The purpose of this paper is to investigate some philosophical issues involved in this theme with reference to Ibo (African) metaphysics as a contribution in this area. The approach is partly interpretive and partly analytical of some cultural ideas of the Ibos. The Ibos are not total materialists in their fundamental views of reality, especially with regard to the human person of which they have high regard. An analysis of some of their primitive notions and traditions shows the transcendental or metaphysical aspect of the human person. By analyzing human presence metaphysically, it is shown that personhood (Thou) is a manifestation through the body. The person or Thou survives the decay of the body. The Ibo notion of death as a "passage," the cult of ancestors, belief in reincarnation and an analysis of some dreams indicate the native sense of personal immortality. In conclusion, a warning is given against imported materialism which poses a threat to the Ibo holistic view of man since the problem today is how to integrate modern scientific and technological achievements with the traditional values without losing sight of the vital transcendence of the human person.
The theme of the human person and immortality, though a watershed of philosophical discussions in the past, has currently and forcefully become an issue in the face of modern materialism and dehumanization. Most philosophical discussions on this theme have centered on western and eastern conceptions without touching on the African ideas in this area. I intend in this paper to make a contribution towards filling this gap by investigating the conception of the human person with reference to immortality in Ibo metaphysics as an example of African metaphysics and by addressing myself to the philosophical issues involved.\(^1\) While concentrating on the Ibo conception of the human person and immortality, I shall also make references to the ideas of other African peoples in this regard in order to show the depth of African wisdom in this matter. Since death is a passage from this life to the next according to the Ibos, a consideration of the conception of death is an important part of this investigation.

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* This is a revised version of the paper which I read at the East Central Conference of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, November 11, 1979, Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A.

\(^1\) It is important to note here, at the outset, that African thought, and specifically Ibo thought, on the human person and immortality has presuppositions that have metaphysical implications. Hence the justification of the title of the paper is in order. My approach will be partly interpretive and partly analytical of the cultural ideas in this context.

The comment of Reverend Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., Professor of Philosophy at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, U.S.A. on this paper when it was read at the East Central Conference of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, November 11, 1979 in Cincinnati is in order:

We can search for wisdom in any form--just as
The Human Person

The traditional African thought about the human person is more existential and practical than theoretical. It is based on the conviction that the metaphysical sphere is not abstractly divorced from concrete experience; for the physical and metaphysical are aspects of reality, and the transition from the one to the other is natural. In this regard, some writers have made derogatory remarks to the effect that Africans have no speculative bent; but this misrepresentation stems from ignorance of the true nature of their existential thinking. The Ibos are not total materialists in their fundamental views of reality, especially with regard to the human person.

An essential aspect or source of the human person is the soul (mkpuru obi), spirit (mmuq). The philosophical problem here is whether these are identifiable with the body. These primitive notions which are embedded in Ibo language and other African languages are not identified with the body.

intently as an African nomad searches for water in whatever creekbed, hole, or oasis he encounters. If so, we will be led back to that vital nerve of perennial philosophy's listening for Wisdom coming from any wise people and receiving it in THEIR way of refining it--be this through proverb or ritual, through Zen meditation or simply smiling in one's love of life. Onwuanibe offers us the great service of opening our minds to an incipient dialogue between North and South rather than letting us settle for an interchange merely between East and West.

2 This idea of the connection between the physical and metaphysical in African thought has been emphasized by John S. Mbiti when he said that "the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times, to draw the distinction or separate them," (African Religions and Philosophies, New York; Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 97) See also Placide Tempels' idea of Vital Force as the ontological medium of the physical and metaphysical (Bantu Philosophy, Paris Ve: Presence Africaine, 1969). It is important to note that the sense of "metaphysical" as "ontological" is in place here because the ontological is more than the concern with beings of a physical nature.
How is it that in virtually every language of the world, not only African languages, people say, "I have a body," "This is my body" or "This body is mine," and not "I am this body," --meaning by this, "I am totally this body."? It is absurd to identify oneself totally with one's body, for example, to say "I am totally identified with this body"; for one is prima facie aware that one is more than one's (this) body. One might object to the nonidentifiability of oneself totally with one's body by saying that when somebody pushes one, one could react by saying, "Don't push me." It seems that here one is identifying oneself with one's body which is pushed. However, within one's consciousness, this does not mean total identification of oneself with one's body but an identification of a relation of one's body to oneself. The seemingly complete identification of the expression, "Don't push me" is due to the vagueness of ordinary language. The possessive case phenomenologically and linguistically indicates that there is more to one than one's body.

The Ibo notions of soul (mkpuru obi) and spirit (mmuọ), as essential aspects of man, bear out the transcendence of the human person from the metaphysical point of view. When one says "O meturu m na mmuọ (It touches my spirit), one is acknowledging that what has happened, or is at stake, touches the deepest part of oneself. We shall see later on how this aspect of man is the vehicle of immortality.

The Ibo conception of the human person involves the notion of presence. High regard for the human person in terms of presence is displayed in everyday living in warm greetings. It is offensive not to be greeted. In Heideggerian terminology, man in-the-world is not merely ready-to-hand, that is, functionalized. Man's existence (dasein) transcends the level of a role to be played or used. In Ibo metaphysics, living is a form of participation in which a fundamental distinction is made between the ontological and the ontic, between humans and animals. To be said to be an animal is to be depersonalized. The distinction between humans and animals is shown in corresponding attitudes: for one does not greet animals even if they are highly regarded pets. Not to be greeted among the Ibos can be construed as a form of depersonalization. When one looks at you, one may see you as an object or a subject. Looked at as an object by another in terms of Sartre's notion of "gaze", you lose the transcendence of subjectivity. In Buber's terminology, the relation here is an I-It relation; but what the Ibos mean in greeting another person is an I-Thou relation. The greeting is genuine, and you can feel its authenticity through the concomitant smile of the one who greets you. A foreigner from the western world will be surprised at the shower of warm greetings he or she will receive when staying
in an Ibo community, and at the loud and warm conversations that go on among passengers in public vehicles. This is a contrast to the silence one often experiences among passengers in public vehicles in the western world. An American alone taking a bus from Cleveland to Washington D.C. will enter the bus, go straight to his seat, take up a paper to read, and most probably will not greet any fellow passengers. He or she is lonely in the midst of a crowd of passengers. He or she is not really a "fellow passenger"; for others in this case are not present. Silence or lack of communication constitutes an acute problem of alienation in the western world today.³

A metaphysical analysis of the presence of the human person shows the distinction of the human person as subject and not as object. Object-oriented thinking aims at controlling and exploiting the other, while subject-oriented thinking feels the demand of the freedom of the other. The human is not basically resolvable into physical data. The presence of a person as subject is not ultimately objectifiable. Even when one attempts to objectify the self which is the source of personhood in the process of introspection, one sees that the attempt is illusory in that the attempt to posit the self ultimately as an object is countered by a concomitant negation; for there is a dialectical movement of affirmation and negation in the process of introspection to save the transcendental aspect of the human self, that is, when one holds the self as an object of consciousness, there is always in the background the receding and incomplete self which negates ultimate objectification of the total self. This is a primitive movement that is amenable to metaphysical reflection. The self transcends the objective category. That is why in his philosophical reflection, Immanuel Kant indicates the self, in this case, Transcendental Ego, as pure subject, as Transcendental Apperception.⁴ And in his phenomenological investigations, Edmund Husserl criticized Descartes for not making a transcendental turn when Descartes posited the self as a "thinking thing". On the contrary, the self or personhood involves "no-thingness". For this reason, Sartre rejects the idea of a transcendental ego which he thought makes the self a transcendental something (it). He prefers to denote the self, For-Itself as Nothing as opposed to In-Itself which is a mass of being, an "It".

³ The problem of alienation constitutes a central theme among existentialist thinkers.

True personhood, as pure subject, is not something that can be analyzed into anything. Hence, for example, Kant could not get at himself as object of awareness; nor could Hume find his "self" either. Personhood is a manifestation or presence even through a body, but never identifiable with it. Since "person" is primitive, the inability to analyze person (qua subject or soul) is not an argument for its non-existence but for its "transcendence" or "no-thingness" ("Thou"). In Ibo greetings, the "Thou" is manifest and emphasized. Nobody greets a body but "what" is manifest through the body.

In Ibo philosophical reflection, the self deriving from the soul and spirit indicates the personhood. To talk of human-person makes sense only when to be human includes not only the physical aspects but also the transcendental aspect. Here the transcendental aspect includes the mental to a certain extent.

The essential greatness of a culture consists of the commitment to personhood, and to all that it stands for, viz., in terms of human rights; and conversely, a decline in the consideration of personhood is symptomatic of a decline of a culture. Periods of high culture, philosophical options included, give expression to the transcendence of the human person, for culture is not essentially materialistic. In Ibo culture the transcendence or subjectivity of the human person finds expression in egalitarian spirit. On the contrary, a culture which emphasizes materialistic attainments can achieve mechanical perfections without adequate idea of personhood.

While, on the one hand, what is empirical and objective carries a sense of clarity and comprehensibility; on the other hand, the subjective sphere is fraught with a certain opaqueness, incomprehensibility and mystery because the subjective domain cannot be totally subsumed under the categories of reason. Human existence is metaproblematic because it is not totally discoverable, and consequently, it allows for philosophical faith, which is not a denial of reason but a recognition of its limits.

Death

Since human existence embraces both physical and metaphysical aspects, death poses a problem. Is death an ultimate situation? The answer given to this question shows the adequacy or inadequacy of a person's view of the human person. Death carries a sense of mystery with it.
The Ibos express the inescapable nature of death by rhetorically asking "Onwere anya ebe onwu?" (Who has eyes that will not see death?) The conception of death as part of the human condition is universal. There is a certain fear attached to death because it is not totally known, and consequently, not wholly accepted. A spate of literature has now appeared on the literary scene, the upshot of which is to reconcile people to the acceptance of death; and this acceptance is considered by some writers as a source of personal growth. In the context of existential phenomenology, the acceptance of one's death is indicative of one's authenticity.

To a materialist death poses as man's ultimate situation which carries a sense of absurdity in man's total frame of reference; but to a mind imbued with human transcendence with regard to personhood, it is a passage to the world beyond.

In Ibo existential frame of reference, as in other African cultures, although death instills fear in the minds of men, its redeeming feature is that it is a "passage", a "going home" to the world beyond. Death does not destroy the tissue of human possibilities and aspirations because of the native sense of immortality. Just as a seed partly dies in the ground and springs to life, so does man die and take on refurbished life. This follows a kind of conservation law. However, the time of a person's death is an occasion of mourning, especially if he or she is young. The death of old people is regarded with mixed feelings of sadness and smouldering joy, in that the physical presence of the deceased is lost, and in that the deceased person is going home to be with the ancestors. The death of the young is not easily accepted, and it is considered "unnatural" in the sense that in the order of nature for a young person to die is not to follow in the natural order in which the old die first. This appears to be in accord with the traditional


6 See Martin Heidegger's ontological analysis of death in Being and Time, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, pp. 279-311. According to him, one of the basic structures of man as a tissue of possibilities is "Being-toward-death."

7 I have used "sense" to indicate this primitive awareness which is more than a belief.
universe in which the natural, moral, and metaphysical spheres blend into a system. The deceased have changed condition, and they are no longer in the company of the living as they used to be.

Immortality

A fundamental question to be asked is whether personal immortality is so elemental in man that it is based on a kind of intuition, and does not require rational justification by long argumentation. The universality of the belief in personal immortality in all cultures weighs in favor of the innate sense of personal immortality. But this does not nullify the quest for strong proofs by way of argumentation and scientific evidence.

Among the Ibos, personal immortality takes the form of continued existence in the world beyond and in reincarnation. The problem is knowing what survives the physical decay of the body. If the self or soul survives, is it totally disembodied or does it have a body of a certain kind since food, clothing, money, jewelry are put in the grave for the use of the departed? And in former times in the case of chiefs and Kings, slaves were killed to accompany and serve their masters in the other world. What emerges in this grey area of the physical and transcendent is that the departing being soul (self), spirit has a kind of body - a


9 In describing the complexity of human individuality, the Ibos distinguish the soul from breath with which it is associated; for breath is a sign of life. They also talk about shadow which is like breath. Both breath and shadow vanish at death and are generally thought not to continue in existence elsewhere. It is thought that corpses cast no shadow and this is a sign of a ghost.
spiritualized body - for the other world; and in the case of a reincarnated soul, the soul has the potentiality of its body purified from the bodily ills which were a bane in this life.\textsuperscript{10}

The deceased are said to go home. Immediately a person expires, some close relative announces the death aloud: Ole ole o la looo, ole ole o la looo! (Oh he/she has gone home). The deceased person is therefore a "living-dead". He is present in a different mode; and he is addressed personally to depart in peace and not to trouble the living relatives, especially children, to be propitious to them, and to bring harm to the person who may have caused his death. Here even in death the person is still addressed as present, as a "Thou" though there is a kind of fear surrounding this communication. The underlying idea in the native mind, as I have mentioned before, is that personhood is a manifestation, a presence that can shine through the body in the case of incarnate beings. The personhood, or "Thou", survives the decay of the physical body.

The Ibos do not bury their dead abroad. It is considered undignified to be buried abroad, away from home. Except in cases where a person dies of abominable disease, the dead are buried in graves around the home, even in the courtyard of the home; for the deceased members of the family, especially fathers, are said to be present, and are invoked on occasions especially in time of crisis.

The sense of the "presence" of personal immortality of the deceased members of the community is partly expressed in the cult of the ancestors (ndichie). The ancestors are guardians of the welfare of the community. As intercessors in the transcendental world, they are invoked to bring blessings and avert dangers from the family or community. Those who have recently passed to the other world are invoked by name to show their personal immortality, while those whose memories are lost in the long past or time

But the soul which carries the human personality continues to live on at death. Among the Bantu the soul or the departing being is called "the little man" (muntu) which lives on in the hereafter, or is reincarnated. For a good discussion of this point see Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy, (Paris: Presence Africaine), p. 55; John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophies, p. 209; Janheinz Jahn, Muntu (New York: Grove Press, Inc.) p.106.

\textsuperscript{10} The Ibos have a purification ceremony called iko ihe uwa.
immemorial are said to belong to the class of ancestors. The "living-dead" are said to be powerful.

Indications of the sense of immortality can be seen from analyses of some dreams. Death is like a dream. Some dreams are so vivid that one thinks that one's dreams are happening in waking life. In some dreams, one makes a journey to familiar or unknown places, encounters strange people, meets accidents, and sometimes sees and communicates with dead relatives and friends. While the body of the dreamer is stationary in sleep, some part of the dreamer, the soul, spirit, is active in dream "experiences." The natives hold that this active part with a "spiritualized body" is the immortal self.

One may argue that the content of dreams is nothing more than the concoctions of the imagination from the memory of waking experiences in real life; for in some dreams the impossible can happen; for example, I have dreamt that I was flying. However, the content of some dreams cannot easily be dismissed as concoctions of the fertile imagination. Some dreams are veridical. Some have dreamt of things that eventually came true in real life. We have heard of the Pharaoh's dreams about the famine which eventually scourged Egypt; of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams which Daniel interpreted. Some people have been inspired by supernatural powers in dreams; for example, in the New Testament, St. Joseph was inspired in his dream by an angel to take Mary back as his wife because she had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. In some dreams I "have seen" some dead relatives and played with them. However, this dream experience can be explained by saying that my imagination drew from my waking experience when these dead relatives were alive. Although most dream experiences of communicating with the dead can be explained this way, but not all. One striking example is a case in which a friend of mine told me about a certain widow. She saw her dead husband in a dream, who told her that he was lonely and wanted her to follow him. The wife agreed and prepared to follow the dead husband. She called her children and asked them not to cry for her because she was soon to follow her husband. A year later, she died exactly the same hour and day her husband died. This case points to the validity of maintaining that dreams can be ways of reaching out to the world beyond. Some dreams thus contain paranormal elements which are indicative of the world beyond, and the Ibos take these seriously.

The appearances of ghosts are paranormal, and philosophically, are open questions. There are many cases of ghostly apparition. Although they may not be conclusive evidence for personal immortality, they are indicative of it.
The world beyond is considered to be like this world, and the "living-dead" are said to conduct their life activities in ways similar to this life. This is why the dead are buried with material goods such as money, clothing, and jewelry for their use. The significance of the second burial is the reception of the deceased person by peers in the next world. There is thus a natural transition from the present life to the other.

In view of the fact that the Ibos believe in reincarnation (eye uwa) as a way of personal immortality, a philosophical problem arises in instances where a deceased member of a family is said to have been reincarnated and is still invoked among the ancestors. There appears to be a contradiction here. A solution of this apparent contradiction could be that the human being (soul) has a multiple personality: as a manifestation, "Thou", it is not restricted as an object. Hence, one personality could be reincarnated while the rest remain among the "living-dead" in the world beyond.

The Ibo expression "Inyi na-eje inyi na-ayo" (Many go, many return) epitomizes the metaphysical principles underpinning continuity in personal existence, immortality, especially reincarnation. Humans do not reincarnate as subhumans except as a form of punishment for evil lives. Belief in reincarnation is so strong that dying parents or relatives console their children or relatives that they will come back to them. The dying parents often tell the family what kind of life and personality they hope for when they reincarnate. There are instances where the predictions of dying relatives with regard to their reincarnation are said to have come true. An interesting case is one which my friend, Dr. Felix Ekechi, a professor at Kent State University, told me about a relative who reincarnated in his body. He said that those who knew this relative of his said that when this relative was about to die he told the

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11 These material goods also indicate the hope that the deceased person may return (reincarnate) well-to-do or be in a place of abundance.

12 The second burial takes place between two weeks to three years after the interment of the body of the deceased. It is an occasion of feasting and celebration surrounded with pomp. For further detail see P.A. Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria, Volume III, London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1969, p. 520ff.
family that when he reincarnated he would be intelligent, scholarly, and be born in the family of a relative who is well-to-do. When Dr. Ekechi was born and was growing up as a boy, he was said to resemble exactly the dead relative in gait and intelligence. Could this not be a case of genetic survival and not of personal immortality?

Reincarnation\(^\text{13}\) is in the realm of the paranormal, and conclusive evidence by way of empirical verification may not be reached. However, it would be fallacious to lump reincarnation in the limbo of superstition since its verification is still an open question. A crucial objection to reincarnation is that those who are supposed to have been reincarnated do not recall their previous life. Could we hope that one day a psychological technique will be found for unravelling the mystery of reincarnation? Personally, I do not believe in reincarnation, because I do not want to start life's struggle all over again. However, it can give somebody another chance to redeem an unfortunate life, and actualize more life potentials.

In dealing with the problem of immortality, I have not touched on it with reference to procreation. It is not necessary to treat it here since we are concerned with personal immortality. However, a person can become immortal in the memory of generations of descendants. This kind of immortality is recognized in Ibo philosophy, for there is a high premium on marriage and begetting of children. Sons are wanted more than daughters because sons succeed their fathers and carry on the family name and tradition. The status of daughters is now on the increase as they are given the opportunity to actualize their human potentials, and may be better than some boys in this respect.

The problem of the human person and immortality necessarily involves human transcendence. Man is part of nature, but also transcends it. This is an important presupposition of the Ibo view of the human person. This view avoids

\(^{13}\) Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston, ed., Reincarnation, New York: Warner Books, Inc., for a treatment of reincarnation from the perspectives of various descriptions. In this book, Dr. Ring, a psychologist in the University of Connecticut headed a study which examined "102 people who survived clinical death, or near-death experiences." The upshot of this investigation is the confirmation of life after physical death or another world beyond this side of the grave.
materialism as the fundamental basis of reality, and allows for the realm of the immaterial, of mystery and faith in a holistic conception of man. The realm of the immaterial, of mystery and faith, includes the divine, and metaphysics is not complete without the treatment of God, the highest Being and His relationship to lesser beings such as humans. Here metaphysics is complementary to theology. In the Ibo conception of man, man is oriented to the divine. This is the reason why most Ibo names express man's relation to God, specifically in terms of God's creation and providence. For example, popular names such as Chukwukere (God created), Chinyere (God has given), Chukwuemeka (God has done marvellously), Chinedu (God leads), Chiedozi (God preserves), Onyebuchi (Who is God? No man is God.) show man's orientation to God. This orientation of man to God constitutes an important facet of the human person and immortality because God (Chineke, Chukwu) who is immortal confers immortality. A major reason for the establishment and growth of Christianity among the Ibos is the fertile soil of the Ibo metaphysics of the human person which includes orientation to God, or connatural knowledge of God.

To conclude, the transcendence of the human person with reference to personal immortality is central to the Ibo holistic conception of man. Without human transcendence with regard to personal immortality, according to Ibo wisdom, life would not be fully meaningful. The danger facing the Ibo view of man today is imported materialism; and the problem is how to integrate modern scientific and technological achievements with the traditional values without losing sight of the vital transcendence of the human person.

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