

THE MIND BODY PROBLEM: THE HERMENEUTICS OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Philosophers of different ages, epochs and ideological orientations have engaged themselves in a heated debate on the issue of the mind- body interaction. Indeed, there are two different but interactive entities in man with different modes of action yet interacting in the most subtle manner as to produce in a man , a mind able to have effects on his body and vice versa. The mind body problem is all about the nature and extent of interaction of these two entities. When a person experiences a mental event, is there any relation between the mental event and the person's body? Western philosophers generally situate this problem on the platform of substance, the central concern of metaphysics whose speculative arguments and the static conception of reality have rent asunder the train of Western philosophy. Thus many Western philosophers approached the duality of experience by assuming that the subject and object are two separate and independent realities. For the mind-body problem two theories were advocated by the West: monistic and dualistic theories. The African on the other hand conceives all that is as 'force', which is the cosmic universal force, and only modern, rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. This dynamic view of reality among Africans rejects the Cartesian picture, the source of the notorious mind-body problem, which continues to haunt scholars of Western philosophy. This paper adopts the method of analysis and hermeneutics to investigate the African conception of the problem vis-à-vis the Western conception and the conclusion is that dualism is basic in explaining the composition of the human person but not in the duality of dualism

and conception of reality as being or substance.

Keywords

Mind, Body, Substance, Hermeneutics, African Philosophy

Introduction

Cartesian dualism is a logical or discursive rejection of the interdependability between mind and body, and the implication is that there is mutual exclusion of classes: there is no ground for causal interconnection; reality (the world of things) is of two opposite classes not that they are necessarily contradictory¹ or necessarily antagonistic; and that mind and body are separately independent. Thus when we say that Descartes is the father of modern mind- body problem, we mean that the implications of this dualism have had enormous consequences on subsequent philosophy of mind. To achieve roundly the aim of this paper, however, the parting ways of the African and Western schemes of mind –body interaction have to be adumbrated. This will be followed by concise exposition of the Western schemes of mind-body interaction; while the next step will articulate the African conception of the interaction which will also anticipate a holistic comparism of the two schemes of thought. We will then wind up our discourse with the African response to the mind- body problem. This will be followed by a concluding reflection. But we must not hesitate to mention *ab initio* that the Kantian epigram today remains indisputable that is to say that:

*To be human means to be a dualist, to live in two metaphysically distinct worlds... the **natural** world of objects that are governed by physical laws. That natural world includes not only the starry heavens above, but also our species of vertebrate metazoans that biologists designate as **Homo sapiens**. The other world is the **supernatural** world of subjects who are governed by the moral law within them.*

*That supernatural world is composed of persons. It is in this existential sense of mankind living in two worlds that dualism, which most ... philosophers regard as a long-deceased doctrine... but likely to be with us as long as there are people around who live as social beings.*²

Again that:

*The person's body is endowed with **naturalistic** properties shared with the bodies of the beasts. By contrast, the person's mind is endowed with a set of **super naturalistic** properties, such as uniqueness, irreplaceability, sacredness, or being an end in itself, and, above all, with free will. The mind shares these super naturalistic properties, which are beyond the reach of scientific study, with God rather than with the beasts.*³

Consequently we must settle with a kind of dualism in the mind-body problem because we have no choice other than to consider the beastly and the divine the natural and the supernatural, as complementary aspects of the person whether these two worlds are understood in the Stent sense of the natural and the supernatural or in the Kantian sense of the phenomenal and the noumenal or intelligible worlds the important thesis is that 'substance dualism' of Descartes must be rejected or at most modified. Needless to propound the anti-dualist doctrine of monism advocated by Aristotle according to which mental phenomena are nothing other than bodily functions because Francis Crick referred to it not long ago as 'the astonishing hypothesis' and it fails to fathom the ontological depth of the mind-body problem.

The Nature of the Mind

Something has to be said about the nature of the mind for clarity of ideas. I submit that no new insight is gained by the appellation since Aristotle since his conception of the mind both in *De Anima* and in the *Metaphysics* as “*a process in which the potential realizes or*

actualizes itself".⁴ And for Sheldon "by mind most people mean consciousness. As examples of the mental, they would take pleasures and pain, loves and hates, purposes, memories, and desires".⁵ For David Hodgson, it is an abstract noun referring collectively to each person's mental events. Descartes had put forward the substance dualism when he conceived the mind to be a non-material substance – '*res cogitans*'.

The Western and African Conception of Reality: Points of Divergence

To begin this part of our paper let us bear in mind the immortal admonition of Kwasi Wiredu who exhorted us (Africans) "*not to philosophize in exclusivity since it would be extremely injudicious to try to philosophize in self imposed isolation from all modern currents of thought*".⁶ For Wiredu, therefore, as for many other philosophers of his ilk, "*the African must acquaint himself with the philosophies of all the peoples of the world, compare, contrast critically assess them and make use of whatever of value he may find in them*".⁷ Hence, it is with a sincere attitude of philosophic mind that we proceed to make a summary comparative reflection on both the Western and the African modes of conceptualization of reality; mind and body as well as their interaction an interaction that exemplifies man's relationship with the multiplicity of being or forces in the universe respectively. The clear distinction between the conceptualization of reality; the mind- body relation in Western philosophy and in African philosophy stems from three basic factors:

The West makes bid to conquer the elements of nature, with the hope that by so doing they would be of benefit to him, but the African seeks a unitized bond with the elements. It is not difficult to see that this divisive attitude of the West has led the philosophers therein to argue about the separateness and sharp distinctiveness between the soul and the body. The African, on the other hand, equipped with holistic conceptual schemes finds no reason why the mind (soul) should be said at all to be sharply separated from the body. For the

African, it is not only that the body and soul are co-functional; they are substantially independent, with their distinct substantiality remaining intact. The mind-body interdependence in the African conceptual scheme is ontologically founded since the vital force diffuses two-directionally between the mind and the body.

The law of physics, as on the philosophy of physics, is that energy is dynamic, that is, something that can diffuse or be transposed from one part to the other. The acts of man are basically of the mind and body as a unity-substantial and energetic. The foregoing, no doubt, suggests the necessity for outlining and enunciating the African response to the mind-body problem – a problem that the West has, perhaps inadvertently tended to ossify. We shall begin with the Western itemization of the critical problem in what follows below.

The Genesis and Core Solutions to the Mind-Body Problem in Western Philosophy

In the Western philosophical tradition the mind-body problem has generated heated debate and “*is as ancient as it is yet to be totally solved in philosophy and in actual life*”.⁸ This is because of their dualist and monist's conceptions of the nature of the human person and this stems “from the ancient Greeks' conception to Plato's speculative philosophy of man as a composite being down to Rene Descartes through his “methodic doubt” in the meditations “*has brought this problem at the forefront of philosophical analysis*”.⁹ The mind-body problem is all about the nature and extent of interaction of these two entities; and because, according to the West “*the Mind has a mental character while the body on the other hand is constructed under the underlying laws of physics and its components obey the well enumerated laws of physiology. So it is this characteristic difference between these two, mind and body that led to the mind-body problem*”.¹⁰

As we stated above, that over the years Western philosophers have been divided based on their orientation and convictions, there are two major camps namely the dualist school and the monist school, that is, those who saw the mind and body as two different or

independent realities and those who explain it as one principle or entity. Philosophically and theologically one agrees with Stent that:

The announcement of the death of dualism is premature. Its obituary notices merely reflect the failure of the aficionados of monism to fathom the ontological dept of the mind body problem. However incisive and illuminating may have been the neurobiological progress made during the present Decade of the Brain proclaimed by President George Bush, monism remains the ontologically unsatisfactory solution of the mind- body problem that it has always been ... While monism may be an adequate, or maybe even the only, way to deal with mind as a natural phenomenon, it cannot give a satisfactory account of mind as a moral phenomenon. For such an ontological satisfying account, dualism has to be invoked.¹¹

Much has been written by the West to proffer solutions to the problem ranging from “*idealist solution, stating that there is only mind and as such body/matter is merely a manifestation of the mind. The greatest proponent of this idealist ideology is Berkeley.... This position however hits some rock when one considers how the mind alone could have created the beautiful subtlety of the unification, the nuclear energy, and the electromagnetic and radioactive forces of nature*”.¹² “*This problem persisted until it became a concern of metaphysicians in modern era in the history of western philosophy. And the tallest figure during this time was Rene Descartes...His views in this regard resulted to a dualistic thesis called Cartesian Dualism ...which created a clear dichotomy between the soul and the body*”.¹³ This conceptual scheme of mind body interactions, the “*most notorious*” of all dualist solutions to the mind –body problem styled “*substance dualism put forward by Rene Descartes in the mid-seventeenth century. He proposed that the world is composed of two distinct substances –the res extensa of matter and the non-material res cogitans of mind*”.¹⁴ This was borrowed by his disciples

namely Arnold Geulinx and Nicholas Malebranch but with a slight modification in the sense that “they followed his dualism and conceived the mind and the body to be two separate distinct substances”, but differed on the manner of interaction which Descartes explanation offered which compounded the problem'. They sought solution to the problem by:

Taking a theological dimension, they argued that the mind cannot move the body contrary to Cartesian postulation because the two has distinct ontological status. They attributed the experience of the mind and the body to God. For them only God moves the body to conform to the will of the mind, for the soul is united with God and not with the body, so it cannot move the body.¹⁵

When these dualist philosophers failed to use the dualistic principles in explaining the mind –body problem due to deep seated criticisms from the group of philosophers who held that the interaction is not liable to observation, many theories were advanced by philosophers ranging from Behaviorist doctrine which in order to solve the dichotomy caused by the dualists averred that “*mind is sensational disposition of the individual to identity theories which contend rather that each and every mental state is identical with some state in the brain*”.¹⁶ By so doing they cast overboard the structures like correlation or co-occurrence or correspondence but asserted identity in their stead. The west also floated a recent theory, functionalism and George Henry Lewes was its prominent proponent and their central thesis is that, “*on the empirical evidence, mental states are realized only by physical states*”.¹⁷

The mind – body problem in the west is primarily founded on the disparity of the natures of mind and body. The mind has the nature of spirituality while the body has the nature of materiality with its attendant problem of how could spirituality and materiality interacts? The problem assumed a more difficult dimension with

Descartes' conceptual scheme of the mind as a spiritual substance, the body a material one; while the former is characterized by thought the latter by extension and both are in mutual exclusive classes thereby formulating the mind- body problem on a higher ground. Today, therefore Western philosophers generally situate this problem on the platform of substance which is basically a metaphysical subject- matter since for *them* “*the central concern of metaphysics is the study of substance, the essential nature of a thing*”.¹⁸ and the determinant point in any case, is what this substance is which is the central point of departure and division among western philosophers. This is not so with African conceptual schemes and interpretation of reality. Rather the African approaches the mind –body problem very formidably and with adequate schematic tools; rather than the Western substance, the vital force is the basic thing in all existents. This makes a sharp contrast and provides an adequate tool for resolving the critical problem, nature and mind body relation.

Mind – Body Problem: the African Response

In this section of our paper, we shall expose the ideas of some African researchers and philosophers who busied themselves in critical investigation of the nature of man and the mind – body relation. The examination of such will reveal to us the material for the understanding of the African response to the mind – body problem. We are therefore going to sketch the philosophical systems of the Akan people by Kwame Gyekye; the Igbo by Metuh; and the Bantu by Placide Tempels. This will be followed by the system of African conceptualization of mind – body relation. This is because, these systems apart from revealing to us the material for and the possibility of seeking their common denominator, are valid not only for the Akan and the Igbo and the Bantu, and not only for African traditional philosophy but for African philosophy in general.

Indeed, their contributions will serve as a kind of background for our concluding reflections on the African response to the mind-

body problem in African philosophy. But before we begin let us reiterate that African philosophy is peculiarly marked by the dynamic relation and interplay of the elements of reality as a whole. This relationship, this interaction, is made feasible in the medium of vital force that is the life force of things animate and inanimate. Since this vital force is an ontological entity, it forms the basis for this interplay of forces among all there is.

Ikenga Metuh: Igbo Constitution of the human Person and the Mind – Body Relationship

On the relationship between mind and body, a question the author did not, as such, busy himself with; he made certain relevant or poignant remarks. First of all, that *Mmuo* is not a part of man, but the “real self”. What becomes of the body, then? The answer is not that the body is irrelevant to *Mmadu* or *mmandu* (man, the beauty of creation), but that it is only an abode of the spirit considered as the real man or person and nothing was said that is capable of vitiating the body's substantiality. In other words, a person, the individual substance of a rational nature, can reincarnate from one body to the other without losing his personhood since he could only be undergoing these reincarnations in order to fulfill his mission on earth.

To understand Igbo mind – body relation in the framework of Metuh's interpretation, “*we should equally note that Obi is man's animating principle and the seat of affection and volition*”.¹⁹ Thus the mind – body relation is clearly interactionist since the promptings of the *Chi*, the characters of the *Eke* and the affections and volitions of the *Obi* are all communicated to, and through the body. On the other hand, whatever affects the body equally affects or influences man's interior constitution. Hence, though Metuh did not set out to work on mind- body relation whether among the Igbo or any other tribes, we can unmistakably pinpoint his interactionist contours in spite of their faintness. Nevertheless, the central point is that the soul is “*conceived as a vivifying principle, a life-force in the universe*”.²⁰ it is within this dynamic mode, that the trajectory of

man's relationship with the world is depicted, traced and his place in it equally enunciated.

Since the soul of man, that is to say, the real man is a force while other beings are forces as well; man's interaction with the plenitude of beings is demystified. Man makes use of the subhuman species as palliatives or additives to increase his vital force; and he can equally manipulate these forces to diminish the other person's vital force. Man, too, can influence the deities and spirits through sacrifices, prayers and spells. Conversely, the deities can intervene in human affairs to bring order and blessings or they can upset the human order whenever their laws are not obeyed. And all these chain of relationships bear on man's vital force, and as it were conducive themselves into factors of the increase or diminution of vital force as the case may be. Thus the vital force is man's channel of fundamental relationship with the other. In fact, there is a continuous exchange between all the beings in the Igbo world view irrespective of the class of being (visible and invisible) to which they belong.

Placide Tempels' Mind – Body Relation in Bantu Ontology

Tempels' formidable study of Bantu Ontology presents us with a typical African conception of beings and their mode of interaction. And with this Bantu framework, the mind and the body assume a unique mode of the interaction, one that attempts very closely to resolve the Western mind body dichotomy.

Within ontological structure of the vital force, what becomes of man who is spoken of as the strongest being of all creation? What becomes of his soul and body and how do they interact? Now, the Bantu distinguish in man, the body, the shadow and the breath. The breath “*is the assumed manifestation, the evident sign of life, though it is mortal and in no way corresponds with what we understand by the soul, especially the soul as subsisting after death*”.²¹ The body is the physical, visible and tangible physiological base of life. The Bantu, however, regard the principle of life, the soul, not as part of man, but as 'man himself or the little man' “*who was formally*

hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man of the 'Muntu', which at death, has left the living".²²

To tackle the mind – body problem, Tempels observed that Africans conceive beings as living forces. Being is always active, dynamic, and not static. Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. “The world of forces” Tempels observed, “is held like a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network”. Since being is a living force, interaction between beings may lead to the reinforcement of the power of beings, or its diminution. Hence, the Belgian priest, Tempels, cognizant of the Western causal schemes and psychical causal interaction rightly understood the Bantu's conception of the interaction of forces or beings as transcending the confines of Western science and philosophy wherein beings are understood as static, that is to say of forces with forces». This is an ontological causal interaction following from the nature of beings as forces in relatedness. One force will reinforce or weaken another. Within this sort of relationship, where man has a great deal of determinative power, the interaction takes place in the natural plane. The *bintu* are things which the Bantu see as forces not endowed with reason, not living.

These material and immaterial powers are basically the organic functions of the respective vital forces (of the component parts). The material body and the immaterial soul are thus in the chain of dynamic organic relatedness. The powers of the mind are therefore made manifest in the activities of the body and the action, function, disposition in the African parlance, the body's vital force is reflected in the mind and can either augment its respective vital force or vitiate it. The unifying movement of the vital force from the soul, the principle of life, to the body and vice versa, all the more constitutes man as a unity.

Thus, the mind, which is the substratum of consciousness and experience, makes for man not only an epistemic repertoire of reality but also the interplay of relationship thereof. It follows that not only do the mind and body, but the only the whole man and the

rest of reality interrelate not just in the medium of the vital force but equally on the front of man's 'ontological complementary consciousness' as Asouzu would call it. Here, intentionality and consciousness coalesce, not at all in the monistic sense, but in the integral and integrating fashion.

Kwame Gyekye's Mind – body Relation: The Akan Response

Concerning the subject of our philosophical investigation, Kwame Gyekye of Ghana made a thorough going research among his people, the Akan people and came up with an illuminating response on the nature of man and the relationship that exists among its various components. He actually set out to “*interpret, reconstruct and sort out in a more sophisticated way the elements of the Akan collective thought on the nature of a person*”,²³ and offered the vital force as the dynamic channel of the mind body relation.

On the constitution of a person, for the Akan, man is composed of *okra*, (soul) *sunsum*, (spirit) and *nipadua* (body). Gyekye is of the view that the proper representation of the Akan conception of a person is that he is composed essentially of mind and body rather than the Akan tripartite view, namely soul, mind and body as the earlier anthropologists took it to be. He therefore confirms his new interpretation of the essential elements of a person when he observes that “*what happens to the soul (okra) takes effect or reflects on the condition of the body. Similarly, what happens to the body reflects on the condition of the soul*”.²⁴ For Gyekye, the soul is synonymous with the mind, that is to say he used the term mind and the soul as one. On mind body relation among the Akan Gyekye offered the vital force as the dynamic channel of mind body relation. Since mind and body are forces, they interpenetrate and compenentrate each other and are also bonded together such that Nkemkia rightly concurs with Gyekye that “*the mind is conceptualized as... inseparable from the body and ... as the faculty, which characterizes human activity and is not located in space in the human body, but is an integral part of man*”.²⁵ The conclusion from Gyekye's arguments is obvious, that “*where the soul and the*

*body are no longer independent forces but are forces that intermingle and interpenetrate each other the relationship between the body and the soul constitute no problem”.*²⁶

Concluding Reflections

In order to make an articulate and detailed presentation of the African response to the mind-body problem, we opt; first of all, to re-outline sketchily the labyrinths of the problem as the work compounded it, beginning with its basic problematic. The mind-body problem is primarily founded on the disparity of the natures of the mind and body. The mind has a nature of spirituality while the body has the nature of materiality. How could spirituality and materiality interact? But the problem did not stop at this; with the coming of Descartes, the problem assumed a different, more difficult, horizon; the problems, as it were, set on a different plane, though in a similar fashion. By 'substance', Descartes meant 'that which has an independent existence'. God first, mind and body, secondarily. While the mind is a spiritual substance, the body is a material substance; the former is characterized by thought whereas the latter is characterized by extension. Both are therefore in mutual exclusive classes. Thus the question of mind- body relation was formulated on a higher ground, whether solid or not.

Now, the African approaches the mind-problem very formidably and with adequate schematic tools. As already said, the vital force, rather than the Western substance, is the basic thing in all existents. This vital force that constitutes the soul is not the vital force that constitutes the body, but since they are all forces, having been created by God and encapsulated in the singular unitized man, they have their common denominator, so to speak, as the vital energy. Thus the African mind- body dualism and interactionism, very far from the Western brand is only, fundamentally, a matter of two dimensional diffusion of life energy. The ontological basis of all mind- body interactions is the transference of the vital energy; something a Karl Jungian would like to call *elan* mental decisions would not be possible without the transfer of the vital force from bodily images of the mind. The body is a congenial ontological

receptive of the mind's vital energy and vice versa because both are all energies.

The barrier of the Cartesian substance is not encountered since the African considers such apparatus inadequate for the task. The Western mind- body problem is a building of a system in an unclear ground, thereby creating a problem within a problem, a method that is obviously unsatisfactory. Also, we can see that scientism at worst, or at best, unguarded empiricism, has led the Western mind to unprepared solutions to the complex problems like the mind- body one. Descartes, a clear religious thinker, was markedly influenced over duly by his mathematical intercourse with mere materials and this made him to found his mind-body theory on the notion of substance which he experimented with.

The fact of insignificant variations among African peoples is not unaccepted provided we note that *“the general conception of man as a unit and a life-force in vital relationship with other life-forces in the universe is a characteristic feature”*.²⁷ Hence, within the spheres of man's relationship with other beings, a concern entailed by the mind- body question, we find out that man is fundamentally in the ontological strand linking all beings. For the African, man, who is a unity of mind and body is bound to the spiritual or supernatural realm by his soul and to the physical realm by his body but the basic ontological strand; the vital force fills up the entity called man. Vitalism is the African systemic. Western philosophy, in its bid to answer the mind- body question has veered off the track, stumped distinctively by Descartes' notion and understanding of substance. However, the idea of substance is a meaningful one only that its explanation has been, for the West, vagary and wooly.

Thus, it is not surprising to find in Western philosophy very divergent views on the question of substance. Those Western philosophers who doubt the existence of substance, in the form of matter, for instance, are thus so likely to be floating, at least, apparently in their discourse on mind- body relation. This is precisely because they either abandon Descartes' system entirely, and by entirely here we mean along with his correct implicit

“belief”,²⁸ or they employ the service of his inadequate apparatus, not minding the inadequacy. Hence, on both ways, though not inevitably, Western philosophy has offered a lot of none—convincing theses on the mind–body problem.

While African philosophers have not claimed that they have solved the mind-body problem absolutely, we can, at least, demonstrate the unity of their system and the holistic approach to the issue, an approach that has been very gainful, very formidable and no longer distant from the answer. The word 'holistic', here, stands for two distinct and independent, though, convergent things. It stands for the African organismic system which is equally vitalistic, a system where all parts play insignificant roles that are integrated and unified in a singular being. The word equally means the African method of approaching things in their wholes and not demarcating them unnecessarily, and more importantly conceiving them as dynamic. For the African, it is not only that man is a unity of mind and body, also, the constituent of man not only stem from a basic denominator but equally converge in the same vital force. Force is that central point of thought at which everything in the African universe are no longer conceived as contradictory; a central point from where creation flows, from where there is a formula for everything that can be conceived of. All essences, all things, in whatever form it is conceived, can be subsumed under this term, force.

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