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Thaddeus Metz
University of Johannesburg, Department of Philosophy,
B-Ring 7, PO Box 524, Auckland Park, ZA–2006 Johannesburg
tmetz@uj.ac.za

What is the Essence of an Essence?

Comparing Afro-Relational and Western-Individualist Ontologies

Abstract

The dominant view amongst contemporary Western philosophers about the essence of a natural object is that it is constituted by its intrinsic properties. The ontological approach salient in the African philosophical tradition, in contrast, accounts for a thing's essence by appeal to its relational properties. The Afro-relational ontology is under-developed, with the primary aim of this article being to help rectify that weakness. Specifically, this article's aims are: to articulate an African approach to understanding the essence of a concrete, natural thing in terms of its relationships; to illustrate the Afro-relational approach with the examples of the self and of water; to contrast the Afro-relational characterization of the essence of the self and of water with a typically Western construal in terms of their intrinsic properties; and finally to provide an initial defence of the Afro-relational approach, both by responding to some objections facing it and by providing some new, positive reasons to take it seriously.

Keywords

African metaphysics, essence, intrinsic properties, natures, ontology, personal identity, relational properties, self, water

1. Introducing African Relationality

Over the past ten years or so, work in the African tradition of moral and political philosophy has begun to appear routinely in books and journals with a global reach. It is not unusual these days to find African ethical perspectives in internationally influential textbooks, anthologies and collected volumes. However, the same is not true for African metaphysics and epistemology. Papers on these topics remain by and large restricted to national and regional fora, with the present special issue of *Synthesis philosophica* being an important step forward.

African ethics is characteristically relational in certain ways, roughly deeming ways of interacting between people either to merit pursuit as a final end or to be essential means towards some other important good. For instance, a certain kind of communitarianism (probably best called "communalism") is salient when discussing topics in interpersonal morality or institutional justice. A broadly similar approach is found in African metaphysics and epistemology. When it comes to knowledge, for example, it is common to encounter the view that to truly understand something, one must view it in terms of how it relates to an interdependent whole (e.g. Hamminga 2005; cf. Nisbett 2003). And, then, in terms of what exists, a recurrent theme is that a thing's nature is

constituted by such a contextualization, viz. by how it relates to a variety of forces, including imperceptible agents, that are all richly interconnected.

This article focuses on just one aspect of this conception of what is real, specifically, the appeal to certain relational properties when seeking to grasp the essence of representative natural objects. Specifically, this article's aims are to articulate a characteristically African approach to understanding the essence of a concrete, natural thing, roughly a spatiotemporal object that is not an artefact,[1] in terms of its relationships with more care than has been done before, to illustrate the Afro-relational approach with the examples of the self and of water, to contrast these examples with a typically Anglo-American, and more generally Western approach to them in terms of their intrinsic properties and, finally, to provide some defence of the Afro-relational approach, both by responding to objections facing it and by providing new, positive reasons to take it seriously.

In pursuing these aims, this article does not pursue others. For example, it presumes, for the sake of argument, that some concrete, natural things have an essence, roughly a nature that persists in all possible worlds in which they exist. It also assumes that not all of a thing's properties make up its essence, i.e. that some of a thing's properties are accidental or that things can survive change (or that you *can* step in the same river twice).

Furthermore, this article addresses only one metaphysical view commonly espoused by African philosophers, regarding the respect in which a thing's nature is necessarily constituted by its relational properties, and it sets aside other views. Thus, for example, it does not consider the claims that reality is an interdependent whole, that it is ultimately composed of forces, and that these include imperceptible agents such as God and ancestors. This author does not believe that it is necessary to accept these claims to make good sense of a relational approach to the natures of things that are not artefacts. If they are defensible, that is to be shown elsewhere.

The rest of the essay continues by providing some definitions of key terms, especially what is meant by "intrinsic" as opposed to "relational" properties, as well as what is meant by the claim that an appeal to the latter as essential to a thing is "African" as opposed to "Western" (section 2). Next, it advances the hypothesis, meant to refine suggestions from African metaphysicians, that the essence of a natural object is identical at least in part to its relational properties (section 3). It then illustrates this claim with the examples of the self and water, contrasting Afro-relational understandings of their natures with standard Western, intrinsic understandings of them, and it also provides arguments in favour of the former (section 4). Next, the article responds to some objections that would be natural to raise to Afro-relationalism and contends that they do not provide enough reason at this stage to reject it (section 5). Although the article does not conclude that the relational accounts of the essence of the self or water are correct, it does submit that they are worth taking seriously by philosophers around the world as rivals to the intrinsic views so prominent in the West (section 6).

2. Definitions of Key Terms

This point of this section is to clarify the central terms of the hypothesis that the essence of a natural object is not exhausted by its intrinsic properties, but also invariably includes relational ones, where the latter view is aptly

described as "African". The hypothesis itself, as well as illustrations of and defences of it, are discussed only in the following sections.

First off, by an "essence" of an object is meant those features of a thing without which it would not exist. A thing's essence is those properties it would have in any possible world in which it exists.

Such a fundamentally ontological, and specifically modal, construal of "essence" differs from other, more epistemological ones, for example, that essence is to be identified as whatever plays a certain explanatory role of best accounting for a thing's surface properties (e.g. Nozick 2001: 126, 347). By the present account, if a property of a thing best explained a wide array of its other properties, then that would be strong *evidence* that it is a thing's essence, but it would not necessarily be so (as, roughly, our explanations might not be good enough or could even be incorrect).

It is difficult to define properties that count as "intrinsic" as opposed to "relational" without controversy; the literature is contested and intricate, and furthermore, sometimes the way these terms are defined in contemporary English-speaking metaphysics begs the question from a more relational tradition such as the perspective of the African.[2] There are occasions when Anglo-American metaphysicians analyse intrinsic properties explicitly as essential properties or invoke examples of intrinsic properties that are contentious in the context of the cross-cultural debate. For one example, consider that the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction (Weatherson and Marshall 2012) uses being Obama as a purportedly clear example of an intrinsic property, while the entry on it in the *Blackwell Companion to Metaphysics* similarly uses being identical to Nixon (Garrett 2009: 258). However, one major aim of this article is to argue (section 4 and 5) that there are strong reasons to think that being a particular person such as Obama or Nixon, at least in large part, is a relational property.

The strategy this article uses to understand the meaning of "intrinsic" is not to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions or an analysis approximating that, since motivating one account as preferable to others would detract from achieving the essay's central aim and is, in any event, unnecessary to achieve it. Instead, this essay appeals to comparatively uncontested examples used in other fields and draws analogies with them.

For example, in ethics, intuitively intrinsic properties grounding moral status, i.e. the ability of a thing to be wronged, include having a soul, having the capacity for rational decision-making, being able to feel pleasure, exhibiting human DNA and being a living organism. These are individualist, as frequently distinguished from collectivist, features, in that they make no inherent reference to another being beyond the one with them, or do not conceptually involve interaction with another being. In epistemology and the philosophy of language, consider that properties frequently described as "internal", e.g. in relation to the content of propositional attitudes or linguistic terms, are more

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Where an artefact is roughly something other than an organism that has been intentionally fashioned by human beings, with a table and an artwork being representative examples (for those wanting a more fine-grained analysis of what an artefact is, see Hilpinen 2011). For many, a relational approach is intuitively apt for the natures of artefacts, on which see Losonsky (1987a). This article focuses on non-artefacts, and specifically natural objects, a relational approach towards which is prima facie more difficult to establish, in the absence of the supposition that they were created by supernatural beings.

2
And also the East Asian tradition, on which see Nisbett (2003).

or less brain states. Talk of an "intrinsic" property in this essay, as it pertains to the essence of a spatiotemporal object that is not an artefact, appeals to a feature that is similar to these examples.

What counts as a "relational" property of a thing, then, will roughly be one that is not intrinsic. More specifically, it will count as a feature of a thing insofar it involves interaction, normally causally but perhaps intensionally, with other, distinct things.[3] Returning to the previous examples, in ethics, relational properties that might ground moral status are being cared for by someone, being a member of a clan or having the capacity to relate communally with others, while in epistemology and the philosophy of language, externalism in respect of content is standardly taken to be constituted by what "just ain't in the head" (Putnam 1975: 227), viz. the composition of things in the society and broader environment with which one's brain interacts. A relational property of the self or water, the two cases addressed in this article, will be like these.

One might wonder about some of these examples. Specifically, it appears that to feel pleasure or exhibit brain states more generally one has to have had a body that has been interacting with society and nature. People need to have been socialised when they were young, and brains continue to need nutrients and oxygen. Does that dependence on other things mean that these conditions are in fact best understood as relational and not intrinsic, or does it mean that this distinction is not important (cf. the example of being six feet tall in Garrett 2009: 259)?

In reply, even if the existence of another thing, Y, has brought X about or even sustains it in this world, it does not follow that there is no point to thinking of X as distinct from Y, exhibiting features that are not a function of (at least) its contingent dependence on Y. The conceptual distinctions between individualism/collectivism in ethics and between internalism/externalism in the philosophy of language and epistemology have been useful for framing long-standing and important debates. One can expect a similar distinction to be useful when thinking about metaphysics.

It would be nice to have a subtle and thorough analysis of the intrinsic/relational distinction, but that is not essential to make headway on the topic of this article. The examples of intrinsic and relational properties in other fields, or features similar to them there, should be enough to fix the meanings of the terms.

Also, if one remains uncomfortable with the distinction, one could, in principle, move forward without using these particular terms. For example, one could frame the debate about the essence of water simply by asking whether it is identical to chemical composition or instead must include reference to things in an ecosystem with which it interacts. One could then, when seeking to generalize from the case of water to other natural objects, appeal to properties that are like a chemical composition or are like ecological interaction with other things. This author believes that it is easiest to speak of the former properties as "intrinsic" and the latter as "relational", and that it is revealing to do so given parallels with debates in other fields, and therefore invokes this terminology in what follows.

Below it is suggested that an appeal to relational properties to understand a natural thing's essence is "African", whereas it is "Western" to appeal merely to its intrinsic properties. What are these geographical labels meant to signify?

By "African" and similar words such as "Western" are meant features salient in a locale that differentiate it from many other locales.[4] They are properties that have been recurrent over a large range of space and a long period in an

area and that have not been in many other areas. This use of geographical labels, therefore, is consistent with the idea that something sensibly characterised as "African" might be encountered outside of Africa and that it also might not be found everywhere inside of Africa.

Thus, when calling relational accounts of natural essences "African", the claim is that they are salient in philosophies that have been expounded for a long time throughout much of Africa. At the very least, they have been common in post-independence English-speaking works described as "African philosophy", which are well known for being informed by traditional views held by many black peoples south of the Sahara Desert. Relational accounts are not "Western" insofar they have not been prominently held by philosophers from Europe, the United Kingdom and North America. Instead, what has been salient in their views are intrinsic accounts, even if there have been some exceptions (mentioned in what follows).

3. An Afro-Relational Hypothesis about the Essence of an Essence

This section begins with some quotations from African metaphysicians about how they understand the fundamental nature of reality, sometimes specifically the nature of the self. They do not always focus exclusively on the notion that relational properties are essential to a thing's existence, but only those remarks, in particular, are drawn on, setting aside other sorts of claims, with the aim of advancing a clear and circumscribed thesis about the nature of essence.

Consider the following passages from African metaphysicians, suggesting a relational approach to a thing's nature, particularly that of the self:[5]

> "In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. (…) Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties. (…) The individual can only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man." (Mbiti 1990: 106)

This passage, from the magisterial historian of African religions and philosophies from Kenya, John Mbiti, is one of the most frequently cited in African philosophy. One way to read Mbiti's point is weak, as merely pointing out that, for many traditional African peoples, an individual needs to be socialized in order to become a responsible adult. However, another reading is stronger, as contending that, for them, who an individual essentially is, i.e., roughly what makes her one person as numerically distinct from others, is a function of who has socialized her and how. The claim is apparently not merely that an individual can be produced only by a society, but that a society necessarily helps to constitute the identity of an individual.

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One might then usefully use the word "extrinsic" to mean something more inclusive, e.g. not only relational properties but also, say, symbolic ones, on which see Bradley (1998).

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For a more thorough exposition, as well as some defence, see Metz (2015).

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For similar claims, see Tempels (1959: esp. 103, 108); Shutte (2001: 22–23); Nasseem (2003: 306–307); Hamminga (2005: 62, 63, 68, 75); and Lajul (2016: 29, 31–32, 37, 43).

"African metaphysics or theory of reality differs significantly from that of Aristotle, for instance, with its individuated, discrete existences – 'substances' he called them – existing in and by themselves, separated from others (…). [T]he essence of the African's cosmic vision is that the universe is not something discrete but a series of interactions and interconnections. This is equally the category of understanding self (…). It is the community which makes the individual to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence (…). Our summary view of self in African Philosophy is essentially social. The African is not just a being but a being-with-others. Self, or 'I' as we have seen above, is defined in terms of 'we-existence' (…). Self in African philosophy (…) is almost totally viewed from the 'outside', in relation to other, and not from the 'inside' in relation to itself." (Okolo 2003: 251, 252)

This passage is from the Nigerian Chukwudum Okolo in a paper titled "Self as a Problem in African Philosophy" that was reprinted in *The African Philosophy Reader*. He most clearly draws the contrast between different metaphysical approaches that this article spells out. As Okolo points out, it is not just the self that is characteristically understood relationally by African philosophers, but also everything in the universe. At one point in this essay Okolo approvingly quotes two other philosophers working in the African tradition[6] who say:

"To exist means more than just 'being there.' It means standing in a particular relationship with all there is both visible and invisible." (Okolo 2003: 249)

While Okolo does not provide reason to favour this relational approach that he presents as characteristically African, this article aims to do so below.

"In African thinking the starting-point is social relations – selfhood is seen and accounted for from this relational perspective. Kuckertz (1996:62) puts it like this: 'African thought and philosophy on personhood and selfhood is that the 'I' belongs to the I-You-correspondence as a stream of lived experience without which it could not be thought and would not exist.'" (Teffo and Roux 2003: 204)

This final passage is from two South African philosophers, Lesiba Teffo and Abraham Roux, in an essay titled "Themes in African Metaphysics". In it they approvingly cite Heinz Kuckertz, who was an anthropologist based in South Africa and who for several years studied the Mpondo people from that country. That people's view, according to Kuckertz – and which Teffo and Roux deem to be representative of many other sub-Saharan peoples – is that relationships with others are essential to who one is.

Abstracting from the appeals to holism and an imperceptible realm of agents, here is a circumscribed hypothesis about the essence of natural objects: *the essence of any concrete, natural object is, at least in part, necessarily constituted by its relationships with elements of the world beyond the thing's intrinsic properties*.

Clarifying the proposal, note that it does not say that nothing exists except relationships. Instead, it implies there are relata, things that are related to each other, and suggests that part of what makes something a particular relatum, one distinct from others, are the ways it relates to other things. Also, note that the hypothesis is not that a thing's essence is solely a function of its relational properties and none of its intrinsic ones. Instead, it is consistent with the idea that part of what constitutes a thing's nature is its intrinsic properties, at bottom denying that these alone are sufficient for its identity.[7]

While this hypothesis focuses on what it is to be a particular thing, it would be natural to extend it to apply to what it is to be a certain kind of thing, and that is sometimes done below. For instance, instead of just indicating what it is to be a particular self as one that is numerically distinct from others or as one that is numerically the same over time, it could be applied to selfhood, i.e. what it is to be a self in general.

Both the hypothesis and its potential extension contrast sharply with the dominant views of analytic, and more generally Western, philosophers, according to which the essence of a concrete, natural thing (or type of thing as something inclusive of tokens) is merely its intrinsic properties, representative examples of which are discussed in the next two sections. Traditionally, the idea has been that these inherent and static features could be captured by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. However, even cluster or family resemblance models of what a thing is typically suppose that it can (and must) be captured solely by properties intrinsic to it.

Before considering what there is to be said in favour of an Afro-relational approach to ontology, it is worth pointing out how it differs from one of the better known relational approaches advanced by a Western philosopher, namely, Richard Rorty's (1999) view. Rorty famously rejects the existence of essences on the ground that there are no intrinsic properties and that there are instead only relational properties. Interestingly, he – like his opponents – supposes that essence is to be identified with intrinsic properties. In contrast, the hypothesis advanced here supposes that essences exist but it is the view that they are at least partially to be identified with relational properties.[8]

4. Motivating the Afro-Relational Approach

This section applies the hypothesis about the relational essence of non-artefactual objects to the two cases of the self and water, providing some detail about how plausibly to understand their essences. One aim is to illustrate the hypothesis, while another is to begin to defend it by providing some reason to think that the self and water are indeed relational in nature. Objections to the hypothesis are considered only in the following section.

4.1. A Relational Account of the Self

In the Anglo-American, and more broadly Western, philosophical tradition, the self or person is usually identified with something internal, either a soul that contains mental states, a brain that contains mental states or, most common these days, a chain of mental states themselves, some of which are self-aware. It is not just philosophers who think of the self in this way, but Western people more generally, some evidence for which is the fact that such a conception of the self is dominant in the field of English-speaking psychology (as pointed out by Markus, Kitayama and Heiman 1996).

6
They are E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu. The latter is a Nigerian epistemologist who published largely in the 1980s and is probably best known for his essay titled "The Idea of Art in African Philosophy", while the former is a philosopher originally from Europe who had relocated to southern Africa and taught at the National University of Lesotho in the 1970s. They co-authored *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), from which Okolo has taken the quotation.

7
Indeed, Okolo in a further passage denies that the self is entirely relational (2003: 253).

8
When giving a talk based on this essay, the author happened to meet a Western philosopher who has advanced a view, particularly of the identity of the self, similar to what is called "African" here, namely, Michael Losonsky (1987a, 1987b). However, Losonsky's view is not characteristically Western (on which see section 2 above).

The African psychologist Elias Mpofu (2002) and others[9] have complained that Western psychological research has presumed a contested, atomist perspective about the self's nature. As noted above, the self as typically construed by African thinkers is at least substantially relational, largely constituted by interaction with other persons (and the environment). This view, however, is broad, admitting of at least three distinct variants. This author has not encountered the following conceptions in the literature, but presents them as meriting consideration:

According to the *Origination Version*, a person is essentially who they are at least in part by the *initial* relationships they have had. Person X is numerically identical to person Y only if, and at least partially because, Y has the same initial relationships as X had. The initial relationships might have been the ones of genetic bequeathal, gestation, care or sense of togetherness.

By the *Contemporary Version*, a person is essentially who they are at least in part by the relationships they are in *now*. Person X is numerically identical to person Y only if, and partially because, Y is presently in the same relationships as X. These relationships might be cognitive, emotive and volitional, e.g., how one thinks about others and how they think of one, what one's attitudes are about others and what others' attitudes are about one, and how one's decisions affect others and how their decisions affect one.

The *Historical Version* is the view that a person is essentially who they are at least in part by the relationships they have been in over *time* until now. Person X is numerically identical to person Y only if, and partially because, Y has been in the same major relationships as X. The relationships, here, are plausibly the same as those intuitively relevant to the contemporary version.

These three views admit of a further, orthogonal distinction that grounds six possible views. Above all three were characterised *descriptively*, in terms of what the relationships have in fact been. However, there are those in the African tradition (one of whom is discussed below) who would instead (or also) opt for a *prescriptive* account. By this approach, who one essentially is in part is a function of how one *ought* to relate to others and how they ought to relate to one. Any of the above three versions could take a prescriptive form.

African philosophers are likely to find the prescriptive form appealing if they believe that part of what constitutes our identity is a destiny, roughly a purpose towards which one is aptly disposed to pursue. When the Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin remarks:

> "Persons are what they are in virtue of what they are destined to be, their character and the communal influence on them." (1991: 58);

he is plausibly understood as including normative-relational elements in his understanding of personal identity with the mention of "destiny"; for he also remarks that "destiny is construed as the meaning of a person – the purpose for which the individual exists" where "the purpose of individual existence is intricately linked with the purpose of social existence, and cannot be adequately grasped outside it" (1991: 58; see also Abraham 1962: 52, 59–60).

This article will not do the work of choosing between the various interpretations of the relational self, a fascinating project that merits systematic enquiry elsewhere. However, it will note that the Contemporary Version in its descriptive guise is probably the least plausible of the six options distinguished above. The Contemporary Version does have some things going for it. For one, it can make sense of the idea that changes of a name are appropriate upon major changes in a relationship, e.g. upon getting married, converting

to a new religion, changing gender, joining a society with a new language. For another, it captures "the Eastern conviction that one is a different person when interacting with different people" (Nisbett 2003: 53), an intuition that many readers (including this author) lack, but that Africans steeped in their indigenous culture might share. Consider:

> "European culture has taught us to see the self as something private, hidden *within* our bodies (…). The African image is very different: the self is *outside* the body, present and open to all. This is because the self is the result and expression of all the forces acting upon us. It is not a thing, but the sum total of all the interacting forces (…). [T]hese relationships are what it is." (Shutte 2001: 22, 23)

However, the Contemporary Version, at least in its descriptive form, risks being vulnerable to counterexamples when it comes to ascribing liability, which of course famously motivated John Locke's reflections on personal identity. It seems that you could avoid blame by killing off all parties related to you, for the Contemporary Version entails that you, the killer, would no longer exist by your relationships having radically changed. Having killed off everyone you knew, the present "you" is not the same as the past "you"; for there is, by that theory, now a new person in virtue of completely new relationships having been formed.

In reply, one might suggest the possibility that one would continue to be related to those whom one had killed. Traditionally speaking, African peoples tend to believe that one can survive the death of one's body, in the form of the "living-dead" (on which see, e.g. Mbiti 1975: 70–73). Also, it is intuitive to think that one continues to be related to one's departed grandfather, even on the supposition that there is no afterlife in which he has survived the death of his body.[10]

However, this article seeks to abstract from reliance on other facets of African metaphysics, and so does not invoke the idea of an imperceptible realm of persons without bodies. And as for the suggestion that one is still related to those who are dead (which does not include the living-dead), the implication would appear to be that one's relationships with others never end (and can only be added), which does not square well with the idea that the nature of the self varies as its relationships vary. Furthermore, the sense in which one is plausibly "related" to the dead, presumably principally by sharing some genetic material and by remembering them, appears to differ from the suggestion that the self is a function of the forces acting upon us.

In any event, to keep things simple, this article works with the (descriptive) Origination and Historical Versions in what follows. If arguments can be provided to take at least those views seriously, then reason will have been provided to doubt an intrinsic view such as an appeal to the chain of mental states.

Why believe the Origination or Historical Versions? None of the following considerations is decisive, but as a package, they provide some support for it.

First off, if a being spontaneously arose in a chemical-rich bog and happened to have a copy of my genetic make-up and the content of my memories, expe-

9
It has also been characteristically East Asian to understand personal identity in relational terms, on which see the philosopher Roger Ames (1994) and the Japanese psychologist Shinobu Kitayama in Markus, Kitayama and Heiman (1996: 860, 878–879, 884).

10
Jon McGinnis is responsible for this intriguing suggestion.

riences, desires and beliefs, it would not be me. It would be exactly like me, i.e., would be qualitatively me, but not numerically one and the same as me. I am essentially the one who was given birth to by a particular woman and reared in a particular family. Swamp-Metz would not have the same relational history as this Metz, which is one (not the only) plausible explanation of why it would not be me.

Second, recall Thomas Nagel's powerful objection to the Lockean/Parfitian stream of consciousness view, namely, that intuitively one could have been the same person and yet had substantially different mental content than one did. Of himself, Nagel remarks, "This would have happened, for example, if I had been adopted at birth and brought up in Argentina." (1986: 38). Nagel's brain theory of personal identity is one intrinsic account of how it would be possible for a given person to have had radically different awarenesses throughout his life (1986: 40–41). However, an appeal to relational history is another plausible explanation: I am identical to the one who, at least in large part, had a certain historical relationship with those who created me and gave birth to me.

Third, it is common to accept that one would not have existed had one's gamete donors or their donations been different (somewhat ironically here, given the discussion of water below, see e.g. Kripke 1980; less ironically, see especially Losonsky 1987a: 258). I would not have existed, had the sperm or egg from which I was generated been different. A broader way to capture this intuition is by appeal to relational history.

Fourth, and finally for now, consider an analogy with theories of the mind. Many theorists of the mind's nature accept multiple realisability and reject the identity theory that the mind is the same thing as the brain, even if it is, in this world, constituted by one. Similarly, a functionalist account of the mind, according to which the mind is characteristically caused by certain things and in turn characteristically causes certain effects, remains a live option. Now, what goes for the mind plausibly goes for a self – *perhaps* because a self *just is* a mind. A self is plausibly not to be identified with any particular substance composed of certain intrinsic properties (whether physical or spiritual), and instead is identical, at least in part, to certain historical-causal influences on it and by it.

4.2. A Relational Account of Water

This section extends the African approach to the self to natural objects more generally, using the example of water, famously prominent in the metaphysical discussions of Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke. For them, and a very large majority of Anglo-American (and more broadly Western) philosophers, water is identified entirely as a substance and as something intrinsic, specifically, the chemical composition H_2O. This section articulates and defends a contrasting view of water as something that is at least substantially (if not purely) relational.

From an Afro-relational perspective, water is largely constituted necessarily by interaction with other things in an environment. In particular, consider that water might be essentially what it is at least in part by virtue of the causal relationships it has with persons, animals, plants, rocks, gasses and other liquids. By this account, a certain kind of stuff X is identical to water only if and partially because X has the same effects on other things in the environment and they have the same effects on it.

Here are two major arguments for a relational account of water, using some familiar thought experiments. First, consider a version of twin earth, in which

two things that are chemically different are arguably the same sort of things, in virtue of playing the same role in an environmental system. Imagine that XYZ on another planet acts in precisely the same way that H_2O does here on earth, viz. it supports life, flows downhill, evaporates and so on. It would be reasonable to say that water on this other planet is composed of XYZ because the relational features of H_2O are identical. If earthlings landed on the planet with XYZ it would be sensible – both intelligible and pragmatically wise – for them to radio to their spaceship that they have encountered water on the planet.

Of course, Putnam (1975: 223–235; cf. 1990: 59) and Kripke (1980: 124, 128) have a famously opposing intuition. They would contend that, upon reflection, the earthlings should instead say that they found something water-like, and not actual water. However, it is not merely those in the African tradition who would question their intuition; there are some in the Western tradition who have questioned it, too (e.g., Salmon 1981: 95; Nozick 2001: 130, 346–347), where an appeal to relational essence is a plausible theoretical way to capture their dissent about this particular case.

The second thought experiment is the inverse of the first; now consider a version of not-so-twin earth in which two things that are chemically the same are arguably different sorts of things, in virtue of playing different roles in an environmental system. So, imagine H_2O acted radically differently on another planet, e.g. did not support life, did not flow downhill, did not evaporate, etc. It would be plausible for us earthlings to say, upon landing on not-so-twin earth, that water does not exist on this planet, because the relational features of H_2O have dramatically changed. It would be sensible – again, both intelligible and pragmatically wise – for people to report that humans should not move there since there is no water.

In one of his mid-to-late stage works, Putnam considers a similar case, and has a different intuition or, rather, the purported lack of an intuition altogether:

> "Perhaps one could tell a story about a world in which H_2O exists (…) but the laws are slightly different in such a way that what is a small difference in the *equations* produces a very large difference in the behavior of H_2O. Is it clear that we would call a (hypothetical) substance with quite different behavior *water* in these circumstances? I now think that the question, 'What is the necessary and sufficient condition for being water *in all possible worlds*?' makes no sense at all. And this means that I now reject 'metaphysical necessity.'" (Putnam 1990: 69–70)[11]

In reply, recall that this article is *supposing* that things have essences, which are best understood not only ontologically, but also in modal terms, and that it is trying to ascertain how best to understand their content. It is beyond its scope to argue that this concept of an essence applies to concrete, spatiotemporal objects that are not artefacts; rejecting the idea that this concept denotes something in the real world does not provide a reason to doubt that, supposing it did denote something in the real world, it would include relational properties.

5. Defending the Afro-Relational Approach from Objections

Whereas the previous section provided some positive reasons to believe that essences of natural objects are at least partially relational, this section aims to provide a negative defence of that claim. It seeks to rebut some objections that adherents to an intrinsic approach would naturally advance.

11
For a similar view of metaphysical necessity, see Nozick (2001: 133–141).

A familiar objection is that relations are metaphysically composed of relata that must have an intrinsic essence in order to be able to relate. "If there were not a hard, substantial autonomous table to stand in relation to (…) there would be nothing to get related and so no relations" (expressed but not accepted by Rorty 1999: 55) and "an object can be related to another object only if it is already individuated. If it isn't individuated, what is it that is entering into the relation?" (expressed but not accepted by Losonsky 1987b: 194). Applied to the self, the objection would be that any relationship between selves presupposes distinct ones composed essentially of intrinsic properties alone.

In reply, unlike Rorty, this article does not deny that there are intrinsic properties or even that they might be *partly* constitutive of the essences of non-artefactual objects such as selves and water. The hypothesis advanced here is instead that relational properties are invariably also at least partly constitutive of such essences, which would make adequate sense of the claim that relations are composed of relata – even though an admittedly fuller statement would *also* acknowledge that relata are partly composed out of relations.[12]

Another familiar objection is that epistemically identifying a particular object is metaphysically best explained by the idea that it has an intrinsic essence alone. We usually identify relations in terms of their relata, which, so the objection goes, has to be accounted for with the idea that relata are metaphysically independent of relations. How else *could* we pick out relationships except by having some independent conception of the things that are related to each other? Applied to the self, the objection would be that to identify a relationship between persons, we must first pick out the persons separately, and our ability to do so is best explained by their real separateness, i.e. having essences composed solely of intrinsic properties such as different brains or chains of mental states.

As an initial reply, consider that identifying a relationship by appeal to its relata is not particularly weighty evidence that the latter is utterly metaphysically independent of the former. One might specify a dollar bill, my hand, a widget and another person's hand to identify a financial exchange, but it hardly follows with any strength that the dollar bill, *qua* money, is not essentially relational. Similarly, you might be able to pick a person out from a crowd knowing something special about her brain, but it does not follow that she is exhausted by such properties.

A further reply is that sometimes we identify relata in terms of their relations, not solely the other way around. To identify me, you might plausibly invoke the fact that I am the guy who was born in Atlanta to parents of largely Germanic/Austrian descent, or you might appeal to the roles that I have played (or even, prescriptively, what roles I should have played, given my particular abilities). And to identify water, you might well appeal to its role in an ecosystem.[13]

A third objection is that explanatory fundamentality tracks intrinsic metaphysical essence. Some maintain that essence is probably whatever "deep structure" best explains a wide array of "surface properties" (Putnam 1975) or which "substance" best explains "appearances" (Kripke 1980). Applied to water, H_2O best explains topical features such as being a colourless, odourless liquid that is found down streams and through taps, and, for this reason, is the best candidate for being the essence of water.

However, there are many surface properties, particularly regarding how a self or water behaves, that are plausibly not due to their intrinsic features alone, but also to how other things in the world bear on them and how they bear on

other things. For example, why does water move downhill? The existence of gravity and the susceptibility of water to gravity are surely part of the explanation. Why does water not give off a taste? Part of the explanation involves something about our taste buds, and not merely the fact that water is H_2O.

The intrinsic theorist is likely to reply that it is the chemical composition of those other things, viz. of the hills and the taste buds, that best explains how water behaves (which Putnam 1990: 69 suggests). However, it could be other, law-like properties that best explain these behaviours, ones that are not reducible to chemical composition, say, because a *different* chemical composition would ground the *same* laws. And, then, note that gravity is not composed of chemicals at all (though admittedly the debate about whether it has an intrinsic nature continues amongst physicists).

Fourth, and finally for now, one might object that rigid referential designation entails an intrinsic essence. In the face of various criticisms, Putnam once remarked, "I still believe that a linguistic community can stipulate that 'water' is to designate whatever has the same chemical structure (…) even if it doesn't know, at the time it makes this stipulation, exactly what that chemical structure (…) is" (1990: 70; see also 59–60).

In reply, yes, a linguistic community *can* do that, but it does not follow that linguistic communities *always do* stipulate that "water" picks out only intrinsic properties such as chemical structures (or that intrinsic properties exhaust an essence). In light of cross-cultural investigation, it is likely that many African societies have used the term "water" to denote relational properties.[14]

6. Conclusion

As the sort of cross-cultural debate about metaphysics undertaken in this article has not been widespread, it is too soon to expect firm conclusions. This article's aims have been the weaker ones of articulating a characteristically African approach to understanding the essence of a natural object in terms of its relational features, illustrating the approach with two examples, contrasting it with standard Anglo-American approaches, noting some salient arguments that must be considered to choose between them, and providing some critical appraisal of these arguments with an eye to showing that the African view should not be dismissed. It is time to give much more of a global hearing to some facets of African ontology.[15]

12
For a bolder reply, see Losonsky (1987b: 194).

13
For yet another response, from Rorty (1999), consider that numbers probably lack intrinsic properties, but that we can distinguish them easily by different relations they have. Perhaps the same thing goes for physical things.

14
The same appears true of some East Asian societies, on which see Nisbett (2003).

15
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Thaddeus Metz

Što je bit neke biti?

Uspoređivanje afro-relacijskih i zapadno-individualističkih ontologija

Sažetak

Prevladavajući pogled među suvremenim filozofima Zapada po pitanju bîti jest da je utemeljuju intrinzična svojstva. Suprotno, istaknuti ontološki pristup u afričkoj filozofskoj tradiciji utvrđuje bit stvari prema njenim relacijskim svojstvima. Afro-relacijska ontologija je nedovoljno razvijena, stoga je prvi cilj članka pomoći u njenom razvoju. Specifično, ciljevi su rada sljedeći: artikulirati afrički pristup razumijevanju bîti konkretne, prirodne stvari u pogledu njenih relacija; ilustrirati afro-relacijski pristup primjerima sebstva i vode; kontrastirati afro-relacijsku karakterizaciju bîti sebstva i vode s tipičnim zapadnim konstruktima u pogledu intrinzičnih svojstava; te konačno ponuditi inicijalnu obranu afro-relacijskog pristupa podjednako odgovarajući na postojeće prigovore i pridodajući nove, pozitivne razloge da se ozbiljno uzme u obzir.

Ključne riječi

afrička metafizika, bit, intrinzična svojstva, narav, ontologija, osobni identitet, relacijska svojstva, sebstvo, voda

Thaddeus Metz

Was ist das Wesen eines Wesens?

Vergleich der afro-relationalen und westlich-individualistischen Ontologien

Zusammenfassung

Der überwiegende Blickwinkel unter den zeitgenössischen westlichen Philosophen bezüglich der Frage des Wesens ist die Tatsache, dass es auf inhärenten Eigenschaften beruht. Im Gegenteil dazu legt der ausgeprägte ontologische Ansatz in der afrikanischen philosophischen Tradition das Wesen eines Dings nach dessen Relationseigenschaften fest. Die afro-relationale Ontologie ist nicht ausreichend entwickelt, daher ist das erste Ziel des Artikels, deren Entwicklung anzutreiben. Spezifisch bestehen die Ziele der Arbeit darin, den afrikanischen Verstehensansatz zum Wesen des konkreten, natürlichen Dings bezüglich seiner Relationen zu artikulieren; den afro-relationalen Ansatz an Beispielen von Selbst und Wasser zu veranschaulichen; die afro-relationale Charakterisierung des Wesens von Selbst und Wasser mit typischen westlichen

Konstrukten hinsichtlich der intrinsischen Eigenschaften zu kontrastieren und schließlich die initiale Verteidigung des afro-relationalen Ansatzes zu unterbreiten, indem man gleichermaßen auf existierende Einwände reagiert und neue, positive Gründe hinzufügt, um das Bedeutsame in Erwägung zu ziehen.

Schlüsselwörter

afrikanische Metaphysik, Wesen, intrinsische Eigenschaften, Natur, Ontologie, eigene Identität, relationale Eigenschaften, Selbst, Wasser

Thaddeus Metz

Quelle est l'essence d'une certaine essence ?

Une comparaison des ontologies africaines relationalistes et occidentales individualistes

Résumé

L'idée prédominante parmi les philosophes contemporains occidentaux sur la question de l'essence est de lui attribuer des propriétés intrinsèques. Au contraire, le fait de souligner l'approche ontologique dans la tradition philosophique africaine permet d'interroger l'essence de la chose par rapport à ses propriétés relationnelles. L'ontologie africaine relationaliste n'étant pas suffisamment développée, le but premier de cet article est de l'aider dans son développement. De manière spécifique, les objectifs de ce travail sont les suivants : formuler l'approche africaine qui vise la compréhension de l'essence concrète, naturelle d'une chose par rapport à ses relations ; illustrer l'approche africaine relationaliste par le biais d'exemples qui portent sur le soi et l'eau ; nuancer la caractérisation africaine relationaliste de l'essence de soi et de l'eau en se servant de constructions typiquement occidentales eu égard aux propriétés intrinsèques ; enfin, présenter la défense initiale de l'approche africaine relationaliste tout en répondant aux critiques existantes et en amenant de nouvelles et positives raisons pour qu'elle soit sérieusement prise en considération.

Mots-clés

métaphysique africaine, essence, propriétés intrinsèques, nature, ontologie, identité personnelle, propriétés relationnelles, le soi, eau