

Being and Force: An Exploration in Classical and African Metaphysics

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Abstract

Contemporary discussions in African metaphysics or ontology seem to be indifferent to the place of force in the African thought. This is the case because of two reasons, viz, the rejection of or indifference to ethnophilosophy and the misrepresentation of force ontology by Placide Tempels, by equating force in African thought with being in classical Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. In this essay, I examine the relation between being and force in the African worldview by exploring the conception of being according to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and Tempels's conception of force in Bantu ontology. Contrary to Tempels's claim that being and force are equivalent or identical in African ontology, I argue that what is called "being" in classical metaphysics is best rendered as "thing" in most African languages. As such, being is that which subsists in itself and cannot be identical with force, which inheres in things. Hence, I affirm that force is a key attribute of being or thing and so is a transcendental property of being since force is a positive attribute of all beings, whether animate or inanimate. My approach in this essay is both exploratory and explanatory.

Keywords: African metaphysics; being; force; thing; transcendental property; attribute

Introduction

Since the publication of Placide Tempels's work, *Bantu Philosophy* (1996), which is arguably considered a seminal work in African philosophy or at least in African ethnophilosophy, there have been various reactions or attitudes towards his claim about African ontology. The three dominant responses are: 1) a rejection of ethnophilosophy in general or African ethnophilosophical research by expatriates (Appiah 1992; Boulaga 1968; Hountondji 1996; cf. Masolo 1995); 2) sympathetic acceptance of Tempels's

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position (Nkemnkia 1999); and 3) an attitude of indifference. Those who reject Tempels's position either argue that ethnophilosophy is not philosophy properly understood, or that Tempels's work is a misrepresentation of Bantu (African) reality, or that his work is a tool for missionary proselytism and colonialism. On the one hand, those who give some credit to Tempels do so on the ground that vital "force" is equivalent to "being" in Western thinking, as Tempels claims, or that vital force in African thought ranks higher than being. Following Tempels's lead, Nkemnkia (1999, 169) claims that life or vital force has priority over being in the African worldview. The indifferentists—on their part—either take a position that is similar to that of the logical positivists by ignoring the question of African metaphysics, and concentrate on ethics and politics, or limit African metaphysics to personhood and African communitarianism.

The three attitudes towards Tempels's position on African ontology seem to me inadequate, since Tempels's position about Bantu ontology always comes up in any introductory course in African philosophy. Hence, in this essay I examine Tempels's claim that vital force in Bantu-African thought is equivalent to being in Western thought. Tempels makes the claim by asserting: "We must insist once again that 'force' is not for Bantu a necessary, irreducible attribute of being: no, the notion of 'force' takes for them the place of the notion 'being' in our philosophy" (Tempels 1969, 52). I argue that Tempels's conclusion is a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the relationship between force and being in African thought. I aver that though there is a relation between force and being, it is not that of equivalence. Rather I claim that force is a transcendental property of being just like other transcendental properties such as one (unity), truth, and good. Force, as a property of being, is similar to the position of neo-Thomists that action is a transcendental property of being (Clarke 1994; 2001; Blanchette 2003).

It is important for me to note from the outset that the classical tradition of philosophical understanding of being that I will consider, is the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in which being qua being is the subject-matter of metaphysics.

In order to defend the two claims that I make in this essay, firstly, that Tempels's claim that vital force in African ontology is equivalent to being in Western ontology is a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the relationship between force and being; and secondly, that force is a transcendental property of being, I will begin by outlining the conception of being in classical Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in the first section. In the second section, I will outline and critically examine Tempels's claim. In the last section, I will explore my position.

The Notion of Being in Classical Metaphysics.

The philosophical investigation of being could remotely be traced to the pre-Socratic philosophers' quest for the primary stuff. Notwithstanding that the investigation of being is implicit in the search for the primary stuff by the pre-Socratic natural

philosophers, a direct question of being is found in the fragments of Parmenides who claims that being is one because that which is, “is” and that which is not, “is not” and so there is no possibility for change. This position is in contrast with the Heraclitan position that affirms the multiplicity of being and avers that everything is in a constant state of flux (Nahm 1964). The antithetical positions that are taken by Parmenides and Heraclitus lead to the metaphysical problem of permanence and change, or the problem of the one and the many. This dilemma influenced Plato’s metaphysics of being and his epistemology, as evidenced in his exploration of the doctrine of forms and the divided line respectively in the *Republic* (Plato 1997). Although different ancient philosophers directly or indirectly investigated the question of being, it was Aristotle who most significantly addressed the question of being in his first philosophy, which was later known as metaphysics (Aristotle 1984; 1998; 2001).

Aristotle’s Conception of Being

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is dedicated to the question of being as he defines metaphysics as the “science whose remit is being qua being and the things pertaining to that which is *per se*” (Aristotle 1998, 79). From this definition, it could be inferred that in the understanding of Aristotle, being is that which is. Although Aristotle was clear about what the subject matter of metaphysics is, he was aware that resolving the question: what is being? is not very simple. This is manifest in the contradictory positions that Heraclitus and Parmenides defended with regard to being. The first difficulty that arises, is—since it is evident that there is a multiplicity of beings—is the term “being” univocal, equivocal or analogous? In the view of Aristotle, being is neither univocal nor equivocal. It is analogous. He writes in the second chapter of Book Gamma of *Metaphysics*: “There are many senses in which a thing may be said to ‘be’, but they are related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and are not homonymous”¹ (Aristotle 1984, 3411, *Metaphysics* 1003a^{34–35}). The terms that Aristotle uses to express analogy is *pros hen* (πρός ἓν), which means in reference to one thing. While Aristotle is unequivocal that being is neither univocal nor equivocal, the examples—health and medical—he uses to explain what he means by analogy do not properly account for the analogy of being because his examples indicate analogy of extrinsic attribution. Drawing a parallel with health and medical to show that being is indeed analogous, Aristotle argues that being refers principally to a single principle such as substances but that being also refers to other things because of their relation to substance, that is, “because they are a process towards substance, or destructions or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance, or of things which are relative to substance, or negations of some of these things or of substance itself” (Aristotle 1984, 3411).

1 The translation by Hugh Lawson-Tancred reads: “Now that which is is indeed spoken of in many ways. But it is spoken of with regard to one thing and a single kind of nature. It is *not* spoken of by homonymy.”

Bearing in mind that every analogous term primarily refers to one thing, which is the primary analogate, in relation to which the secondary analogates are thus referred, Aristotle averred that the primary analogate of being is substance. He writes: “Now, given that that which is is spoken of in as many ways as this, it is patently the case that the primary thing-that-is is what something is, which picks out substance” (Aristotle 1998, 167). Having concluded that substance is the primary analogate of being, Aristotle affirms that the question, “What is being?” is the same as the question, “What is substance?” (Aristotle 1998, 168). For this reason, he devoted the major part of his *Metaphysics* to exploring what substance is and how many kinds of substances (perishable, imperishable and eternal) there are; since in his understanding, when these questions are settled, the question of being is attended to. Aristotle’s emphasis on substance in his quest for the exposition of the meaning of being is informed by his belief that, for there to be an adequate understanding of an analogous concept, proper attention should be paid to the primary analogate as the central point. Oliva Blanchette expresses the important role of the primary analogate for an adequate understanding of analogy thus:

We cannot properly think of analogy apart from an analogand or a primary analogate. It is from this analogand that the meaning of the analogous term begins to develop. Other things, or what we shall also call *secondary analogates*, come under the analogous term by the extension of the original meaning according to some relation or order that is seen between the secondary analogate and the primary analogate. (Blanchette 2003, 124)

Considering that Aristotle’s conception of substance primarily explores what something is, his metaphysics is considered an essentialist metaphysics since he explicitly explores the “what” question while he takes the “whether it is” question (that is, the question of actual existence) for granted. Even though it might seem that the question of being is simply resolved by the equation of being with substance, it is not so. Aristotle argues the substance itself is an analogous term and offers at least four analogates of substance, viz; “that which it was to be that thing [or essence], the universal, the genus and the subject [substratum]” and argues that the subject is the primary analogate of substance (Aristotle 1998, 174). Regardless of the fact that Aristotle is convinced that substance is an analogous term and favours the substratum as the primary analogate of substance, he is sometimes ambiguous while exploring substance by referring to the subject or to essence (form) interchangeably. Notwithstanding some instances of equivocation in Aristotle’s use of substance, it can be argued that Aristotle’s position is that the subject or the thing which exists in itself is substance primarily while the secondary analogates of substance—essences, universal and genus—are substance because of their relation to the subject. A criticism that could be raised against Aristotle’s equation of being with substance concerns how to reconcile the analogy of being and the analogy of substance. This is because substance is a category, whereas being is transcategorical or a transcendental, as some mediaeval philosophers like Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus argue. Saying that being is a transcendental means that being cannot be limited to any class or genus. Leo Elders captures the transcendentality of being thus: “Anything which

is real, from a stone to an impression, from a colour to a certain place in the universe, is a being. Being is not one class of things: all things, whatever class they belong to, are beings” (Elders 1993, 35).

If substance is a category, but being is beyond all categories or genera, then the analogy of being is not the same as the analogy of substance. Blanchette is of the view that while analogy of being and analogy of substance are not the same, the standpoint for proper understanding of Aristotle’s analogy of substance is that of a metaphysician and not of a logician. He avers:

[W]e should note that the notion of substance itself is not analogous in the same way as being is analogous. Substance was for Aristotle a category, the first of the categories to which all the other nine categories were related as “accidental,” or as going with (*sumbebekotos*). Aristotle was using his scheme of the categories to illustrate the analogy of being as centering on some primary analogate. In doing so he was not thinking only as a logician, that is, as one concerned only with meaning, but more as a metaphysician, that is, as one concerned with the question of being. As a category, “substance” is not analogous. It is univocal according to meaning in the same way that “body” is univocal according to meaning. (Blanchette 2003, 131)

Irrespective of some limitations in Aristotle’s account of being and his equation of being with substance, two important points that Aristotle makes, which we must bear in mind, are: 1) that being is analogous; and 2) substance understood as that which subsists in itself (and not the qualities or attributes) is that to which being primarily refers to. These two points will be essential in our exploration of the relation between being and force.

Aquinas’s Conception of Being

Aquinas understands being (*ens*) as that which is, that which really exists. Although his conception of being has its origin in the Aristotelian tradition and he insists, just like Aristotle, that being is analogous, his understanding of analogy is more profound than that of Aristotle. So, it would be a gross misrepresentation to claim that Aquinas’s view is merely an interpretation of Aristotle. According to St Thomas Aquinas, being is that which the intellect first grasps. “*Being* means that-which-is, or exists (*esse habens*)” (Aquinas 1997, 21). It is important to point out from the outset that in the view of Aquinas, there cannot be a being without actual existence. This is the basis of the distinction that Aquinas makes between being (*ens*) and thing (*res*). *Ens* is that which has the act of being, that which actually exists, while *res* is that which only has essence without actual existence. In this sense, what are generally called abstract entities and beings of reason or mental beings, are things but not beings in the understanding of Aquinas. Essence or form *per se* is not equivalent to being. So, while the human person is being, unicorn and centaur are things. Aquinas articulates his position thus:

The word *being* (*ens*) is imposed from the very act of existing, as Avicenna remarks, whereas the word *thing* (*res*) is imposed from the essence or quiddity. *Being* properly signifies: something-existing-in-act. *Being* means that-which-has-existence-in-act.

Now, this is substance, which subsists. The act of existing (*esse*) is that by which substance is given the name of being (*ens*). This is the actuality of every form or nature. (Aquinas 1997, 22)

Aquinas accounts for the difference between being (*ens*) and thing (*res*) by the analysis of the meaning of being as that-which-is. “That which” accounts for the whatness or essence of an entity and answers the what question, *Quid sit?* (What is it?) whereas “is” accounts for the isness or act of being or actual existence of an entity. It answers the question, *An sit?* (Is it?). The what question leads to understanding while the “Is it?” question leads to the affirmation of real existence. We can understand that which does not actually exist and even define it. Aquinas’s metaphysical distinction between thing (*res*) and being (*ens*) has an epistemological equivalence, viz, understanding and knowing. Understanding and knowing result from the question for intelligence (What is it?) and question for reflection (Is it so?) respectively (Lonergan 1992, 297, 304).

If one acknowledges that the “what” and “is it” questions are not interchangeable and that they are irreducible to one, then it becomes evident why Aquinas distinguishes between being and thing. The distinction might seem unnecessary for contemporary thinkers since we use being and thing as equivalent. A possible objection to Aquinas’s distinction is to argue that an acknowledgment of the two distinct questions does not warrant the conclusion that being implies actual existence of a thing, while “thing” refers to the essence. An objector might even argue that to conclude that the “is” in “that-which-is” means the affirmation of actual existence or act of being, is to overvalue the “is.” Such an objection only arises if “is” is taken to be a copula. But it is only a logician who would think that “is” is merely a copula. For a metaphysician, “is” primarily affirms actual existence. This is because “is” (to be) has two connotations and functions. The principal connotation of “is” is existential and the secondary connotation is copulative or compositional, as Aquinas terms it. The copulative or non-existential meaning of “is” is used in the joining of terms as subject and predicate or “chiefly in defining the meaning of terms, e.g., ‘A bachelor is (means) an unmarried man’” (Clarke 2001, 25).

In order to justify the existential connotation of “is” in his distinction between being (*ens*) and thing (*res*), Aquinas asserts:

The verb *is* *consignifies* composition, because it does not signify this principally but secondarily. *Is* signifies primarily that which the intellect apprehends as being absolutely actual, for in the absolute sense *is* means to be in act, and thus its mode of signification is that of a verb. But, since the actuality which *is* principally signifies is universally the actuality of every form, whether substantial or accidental, when we wish to signify that any form or any act whatever actually exists in a subject, we express that fact by this verb *is*. (Aquinas 1997, 21–22)

Aquinas’s distinction between being and thing is informed by his conviction that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in contingent beings (cf. Feser 2014).

His basic argument is that whatever “is not contained in our understanding of essence must be something extraneous added on to it” (Aquinas 1999,104). And since our understanding of the essence or “whatness” of any contingent thing does not include knowing whether it exists or not, it means that essence and existence are really distinct. It is important to note that the real distinction between essence and existence does not imply separation. This position is contrary to the views of Duns Scotus and Francisco Suarez who defended formal and virtual distinction respectively (cf. Feser 2014, 36–37. 242). Scotus’s denial of real distinction and his defence of formal distinction between essence and existence led him to argue that being is univocal and not analogous (Scotus 1987, 7). Suarez, on his part, because of his view that there is only virtual distinction between essence and existence held that *ens ut nomen*, being as noun, that is, formal essence rather than *ens ut participium*, being as participle, that is, actual being, is the object of metaphysics (cf. Aertsen 2012, 559).²

Because of the emphasis on the act of being or actual existence in his conception of being, Aquinas’s metaphysics is referred to as existential metaphysics. Although Aquinas was explicit in his distinction between being (*res*) and thing (*res*), in modern terms being, in his view, is interchangeable with existing entity, real thing and actual substance. This is why he argues that “being is used in a primary unqualified sense of substances, and in a secondary qualified sense of incidental properties” (Aquinas 1999, 92).

A question that seems necessary is: Why is an explicit exploration of existence essential in Aquinas’s conception of being, while Aristotle only assumed existence in his account of being? My view is that the difference arose because of their understanding of potency and act relation. According to Aristotle, the potency and act relation is that of matter to form, in that matter is potency to be actualised by form. And so, in his view, form is the principle of being. This is the foundation of Aristotelian hylemorphism, which he explores in *Metaphysics* Book nine. Lawrence Dewan refers to Aristotle’s hylemorphic doctrine as “hylomorphic ontology” (Dewan 2006, 24). However, in Aquinas, matter and form, that is, essence of composite substances, are potency while *esse* (to be) or existence is the act. In this sense, essence (whether as composite of matter and form or as pure form) without being actualised by existence does not give rise to an actual substance.

Another important element of Aquinas’s conception of being is that being is an analogous term. In his view, an adequate understanding of the analogy of proper proportionality is crucial for a proper understanding of being. The analogy of being is pivotal in his understanding, that is why Aquinas insists that all that exist are beings,

2 Although I support real distinction, I am not going to the detailed implication of formal and virtual distinction here because it will take us away from our focus. However, I would note that the positions of Scotus and Suarez influenced subsequent modern metaphysics beginning from Christian Wolff who defined “metaphysics as the science of possibles in so far as they can be” (Quoted in Blanchette 2003, 21).

while at the same time contends that being is neither univocal nor equivocal. He accepts Aristotle's understanding of analogy, which is principally analogy of extrinsic attribution in which being refers primarily to that which subsists in itself—that is, substance—but is attributed extrinsically to the principle of subsisting being—that is form, affections and qualities of substance, privation and negation, because of their relation to substance (Aristotle 1984, 1411, Aristotle 1998, 81, *Metaph* 1003^b 5-10; Aquinas 1997, 25). Though Aquinas accepts the analogy of extrinsic attribution as explored by Aristotle, his emphasis is not on the analogy of extrinsic attribution. It is on the analogy of proper proportionality, in which being is attributed intrinsically and literally to its analogates. In this case, being refers to that which subsists in itself, that which actually exists, or substance properly understood. This is why the term can be attributed to God, angels, humans, animals, trees and rocks without it being univocal or equivocal. It is important to show how analogy of proper proportionality is applicable to the notion of being because it is analogy correctly understood “in the proper and full sense” (Clarke 2001, 51). According to Clarke, being is the metaphysical concept that is analogous in the full and proper sense because “it is the broadest in scope of all concepts, signifying the fundamental bond of unity underlying all other unities and differences between all real beings, and so cannot be univocal” (Clarke 2001, 51).

How then does Aquinas account for the similarity and dissimilarity, partly same and partly different, or what Blanchette (2003,123) calls “totally same” and “totally different,” that are characteristic of analogy? To answer this question, it is important that we recall that being (*ens*) as *that which is*, in the view of Aquinas, has two co-principles: essence and act of being. So, in accounting for the analogy of being, the dissimilarity arises from the difference of essence of various beings as the essence of some beings is composed of matter and form, while the essence of immaterial substance is pure form. Put differently, the dissimilarity or part difference that is characteristic of analogy arises from the what question, *Quid sit?* The similarity, on the other hand, arises from a similar act or activity that is performed by the various beings or entities and in this case, it is the act of existing or the act of being (cf. Clarke 2001, 51). So, the similarity or part sameness results from the *An sit* (Is it?) question. Clarke articulates the analogy of being in Aquinas's conception of being thus:

[T]he Thomistic notion of *being*, when unpacked fully, signifies precisely a *proportional similarity*, the ultimate one, namely, 1) some particular essence or nature, some *what*, as subject; 2) owing and exercising the act of existence; 3) each in its own distinctive way. Or, to condense the proportion into a more convenient duality: a real being = 1) a particular nature or essence, in its own distinctive way, 2) exercising the act of existence or active self-presentation common to all real existents. The difference in each case derives from the first side of the proportion, that of essence; the similarity from the second, or act of existing (standing out of nothing), though both the sameness and the difference permeate the entire being in an indissoluble union—*this-being*. (Clarke 2001, 51–52)

An inevitable conclusion that one must draw from St Thomas's conception of being, is that being properly understood: 1) is substance, that is, that which actually subsists in itself and not that which inheres in another as a quality or an attribute; 2) that being is an analogous concept; and 3) that being is not limited to any genus and so it is transcendental. This conclusion is essential in considering the relation between being and force. However, before considering the relation, I will critically outline Tempels's view about Bantu (African) ontology.

Tempels' s Understanding of African Ontology and his Ontology of Force

While my focus is on Tempels's ontology of force or his claims about the core of Bantu (African) metaphysics, it important for me to begin this section by mentioning the context of his work. An exploration of Tempels's context is vital because it had undeniable influence on his work. Tempels's work *Bantu Philosophy* is a product of his missionary experience in the Belgian Congo. It was principally written for his fellow European missionary (and possibly for European colonisers) to facilitate their missionary activities (and possibly colonial activities) since his major preoccupation was to "use philosophical terminology accessible to the European reader" (Tempels 1969, 39). Because of the context of Tempels's work one can argue that *Bantu Philosophy* is not a disinterested academic research. In fact, Tempels's assumption is obvious at the beginning of the second chapter that deals with Bantu ontology. His unstated view is that Bantu ontology is inferior to Western metaphysics. He writes: "As the thought of the Bantu is foreign to ours, we shall call theirs provisionally 'the philosophy of magic,' though our terminology will not perhaps, fully cover their thought" (Tempels 1969, 3, 9). A question immediately comes to mind: Is Bantu philosophy "the philosophy of magic" just because it is foreign to Europeans or is there any other reason? I will not pursue this question since Tempels's motivations have been critiqued (Boulaga 1968; Masolo 1995; Matolino 2014). That concludes the context of Tempels's work.

To show that Bantu or African metaphysics is different or inferior to Western metaphysics, Tempels equates being with force in Bantu thought. I shall argue that his position is a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the African conception of being and the relation between being and force in African thought and worldview. How then does Tempels arrive at his conclusion that what is known to the Westerners as being, is known as force in African thought? The starting point of Tempels's analysis is his observation of the behaviour and the language of the Bantu (Baluba), which he claims is centred on a single value, vital force (Masolo 1995, 4, 8; Tempels 1969, 44). Arguing that the supreme value of the Bantu is "*life, force, to live strongly, or vital force,*" he concludes: "The Bantu say, in respect of a number of strange practices in which we see neither rime nor reason that their purpose is to acquire *life, strength or vital force, to live strongly*, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity" (Tempels 1969, 44–45).

One would ask, is it possible to arrive at Tempels's conclusion through the analysis of the observation of the behaviour and the language of a people, especially when it is a second or even a third language that one does not really master as would have been the case with Tempels? Anyone who has learnt a second language is aware of how it is possible to misinterpret native speakers when what is said is not meant literally and univocally but symbolic or, more importantly, analogously. Hence, I would agree with Ruch that "Tempels made the mistake, which is all too common among people dealing with African philosophy, of taking univocally a term which should have been understood analogically or even metaphorically" (Ruch and Anyanwu 1984, 154–155).

Tempels seems to interchange life, vital force and force, which makes his rendering of Bantu worldview confusing. Because of his lack of proper understanding of the language he was analysing, he avers:

In the minds of the Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: humans, animals, vegetable, or inanimate. Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man. (Tempels 1969, 46)

It would be ridiculous and at best strange to think that inanimate objects have life or vital force in African thought. Definitely they do have existential or ontological force, but not vital force. Existential or ontological force is the force that all beings (entities) have by the very fact that they do actually exist, while vital force is a superadded perfection that only animate things have. By superadded perfection is meant the qualities or properties that are possessed by particular kinds of beings, for instance, life for all living things, feeling for all sentient beings, and rationality or capacity for reasoning for rational beings. Lack of proper distinction between existential or ontological force and vital force (ontological force and the "principle of life," as Alexis Kagame calls them, see Ruch and Anyanwu 1984, 154), contributes to Tempels's equation of being with force in Bantu ontology.

To defend his thesis, Tempels (1969, 49) argues that the "fundamental notion under which being is conceived lies within the category of forces." He continues to assert that in Bantu ontology "*the concept 'force' is bound to the concept 'being' even in the most abstract thinking upon the notion of being*" since "*being is that which has force*" (Tempels 1969, 51) [emphasis in the original]. I would readily admit that affirming that being and force are fundamentally related is not problematic. However, the problem arises when one tries to articulate how they are related. The possible kinds of relation between being and force are: 1) a relation of identity, that is, where being and force are equivalent. In this situation, being and force are terms that are used to refer to the same thing or the same phenomenon. 2) Essential relation, that is, the relation between a thing and its essence as in the case of definition. In this case to say "being is force," is to say that force is the essence of being. This is similar to the Aristotelian definition of the human person "as a rational animal." Here humanness as essence of the human person is understood as rational animality. 3) Attributive relation, that is, the relation between

a thing and its property or attribute. In this case, saying that being is force means that force is a property or an attribute of being. Here, there is the possibility of convertibility or co-extensivity between being and force, which does not imply identity but highlights that being is a transcendental and its properties are transcendentals. This is the position I defend.

Which of these three possible relations does Tempels subscribe to? Tempels seems to oscillate between the first two kinds of relation. Sometimes he gives the impression that by saying that being is force, he means that force is the essence of being. He opines:

I believe that we should most faithfully render the Bantu thought in European language by saying that Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them beings were forces. Force is not for them adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of being: *Force is the nature of being, force is being, and being is force.* (Tempels 1969, 51) [emphasis in original]

In the paragraphs that immediately follow the passage in which he argues that for the Bantu, force is the nature (or essence) of being, Tempels defends the relation of identity between being and force in Bantu ontology. He writes:

When we [Europeans] think in terms of the concept “being,” they [the Bantu] use the concept “force.” When we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that “beings” are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that “forces” differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material and mineral forces. (Tempels 1969, 52)

One would easily notice that Tempels’s knowledge of Kiluba is limited for him to claim that what the Bantu see are concrete forces. He does not seem to realise the difference between literal, figurative, metaphorical and analogous use of language in Africa and that is why he makes a strange claim that Baluba see concrete forces. Definitely, Africans do not see concrete forces but concrete objects or things—people, animals, trees, rocks, etc. To say that such objects have forces does not entail that they *are* forces in the literal sense, but rather that force is their attribute or property.

While it might seem obvious that force is an attribute of being or thing in African metaphysics, Tempels insists that what Western philosophy calls being, is regarded as force among the Bantu and he denies that force is an attribute of being. As a final defence of his position, Tempels asserts:

[I]n contradistinction to our definition of being as “that which is,” or the thing insofar as it is,” the Bantu definition reads, “that which is force,” or “the thing insofar as it is force,” or “an existent force.” We must insist once again that “force” is not for Bantu a necessary, irreducible attribute of being: no, the notion of “force” takes for them the place of the notion “being” in our philosophy. Just as we have, so have they a

transcendental, elemental simple concept: with them “force,” with us “being.” (Tempels 1969, 52) [emphasis in original]

The quoted passage seems like a pontification of a dogma. Nonetheless, irrespective of the number of years Tempels engaged in observing the behaviour of the Baluba and how intensive his analysis of Kiluba was, force in African thought is not identical with being, as that which is. From his definition of being, it is clear that he is familiar with the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical tradition. As I have argued above in my exposition of the Aristotelian and Thomistic conceptions of being, being as that which is, refers to actual subsisting substance, that is, a thing that exists in reality. Force in African metaphysics is that which inheres in an existing thing and so is a property or an attribute. If it is the case that the term for being in most African languages is “thing,” then it becomes evident that being is not equivalent to or identical with force. A simple indication of this is that most African languages have different terms for thing (being) and force. For instance, in Korring, thing is *oyong* and force is *kuyeng*; in IsiZulu, being is *ukuba*, thing is *into* and force is *ukuphoqelela*; in Ndebele, thing is *into* and force is *amandla/udlame*; in Sesotho, thing is *ke hoba* and force is *ke matla*; and in Bemba, thing is *ukuba* and force is *amaka*. So, it is strange for Tempels to argue that the relation between being and force is that of identity. Matolino (2014, 38) also points out the problem with Tempels’s equation of being in Western thought with force in African thought, while he at the same time insists that force is an attribute of being in Western thought. The basic problem is whether there is some equivocation. In other words, the problem is whether the concept “force,” understood as an attribute of being in Western philosophy, is the same as “force” understood as being, according to Tempels, in Bantu thought. To argue that force as an attribute of being and force as being are the same (or have the same referent), is contradictory.

It is noteworthy to emphasise that arguing that being and force are not identical in Bantu thought in particular and African thought(s) in general, does not imply a rejection of any kind of relation between being and force. There is an intrinsic relation between the two but it is not a relation of identity or equivalence. Neither is it a relation of a thing to its essence or nature. It is the relation of a thing and its property or attribute. Nonetheless, before I account for force as a property or an attribute of being, let us examine why Tempels insistently held that force is not an attribute of being in African thought. Tempels’s text suggests that the rationale for his denial that force is an attribute of being in African metaphysics is due to his motivation and in order to achieve his goal for writing *Bantu Philosophy*. The goal is to show his fellow Europeans that African thought is different (and probably inferior) to Western thought. He writes:

Herein is to be seen the fundamental difference between Western thought and that of the Bantu and other primitive people. (I compare only systems which have inspired widespread “civilizations.”) We can conceive the transcendental notion of “being” by separating it from its attribute, “Force,” but the Bantu cannot. “Force,” in his thought is a necessary element in “being,” and the concept “force” is inseparable from the definition of “being.” There is no idea among Bantu of “being” divorced from the idea

of “force.” Without the element of “force,” “being” cannot be conceived. (Tempels 1969, 50–51)

Does Tempels’s view as quoted reflect the African worldview? No. To argue that the Bantu or the African cannot differentiate between being and its attribute “force” is a false claim. As I have shown, Africans do distinguish between “being” or “thing” and its attribute “force”; and that is why there are different terms for thing and force in African languages. So, Tempels’s claim is unfounded. At best, it manifests his inadequate understanding of Kiluba. Africans do not need to separate being from force to show that they do understand the difference between them, since distinguishing does not necessarily imply separating. In fact, the implication of Tempels’s assertion that being is a transcendental, is that its attributes are transcendental properties and this entails that being can be distinguished but not separated from its properties. This is why it is argued that the transcendental properties of being do not add anything positive to being that is not contained implicitly in the notion of being. Joseph Koterski avers that transcendental properties “are inherent in the being of all things and thus only intentionally distinct from a given thing’s being” (Koterski 2009, 111). Since it is crucial to the understanding of the transcendental properties of being that they do not add anything extrinsic that is not intrinsic to the notion of being, to move from supposed incapacity of the Bantu to separate or divorce force from being to conclude that they do not know that force is an attribute of being, is an *ignoratio elenchi*. Despite some obvious misrepresentation of the African conception of force (or vital force) in Tempels’s work, it has some influence on how some African thinkers understand the relation between force (or vital force) and being. I will examine a case in which such influence is evident.

As I mentioned in the introduction, while some philosophers like Hountondji and Boulaga are very critical of Tempels’s project, some—for instance, Alexis Kagame, E. A. Ruch, K. C. Anyanwu and Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia—are sympathetic towards his African philosophical project, even though they are moderately critical of Tempels’s claims. The influence of Tempels’s emphasis on vital force is evident, if not overtly but at least covertly, in the title of Nkemnkia’s work *African Vitalogy*. The Tempelsian influence is most evident in chapter six, also titled “African Vitalogy.” In this chapter he equates the African soul with the vital force. He writes: “Not only is the African soul at the roots of this principle of vital force, but we can safely affirm that the African soul is this vital force itself, the principle of every life” (Nkemnkia 1999, 166). The major problem with the position is that Nkemnkia does not even explain what he means by the African soul, which he equates with vital force. In a similar fashion, in which Tempels confuses existential or ontological force with vital force, Nkemnkia confuses existence with vital force or life, as he sometimes calls it. He does not properly distinguish between the two. An example of the passage in which the two concepts are confused reads: “we can affirm in an absolute way that in the beginning there is Life common to all creation, identical in all human beings and in all created things. All things having existence live a life of their own, proportional to the species and genus to which they

belong” (Nkemnkia 1999, 166). It seems strange to claim that everything that exists, has life. What exactly does it mean to claim that inanimate things have life? There is no doubt that rocks and stones exist, but to claim that they live a life of their own is disputable and requires an explanation. Without an explanation, to say that the inanimate has life is a contradiction in terms. There is no doubt that inanimate things subsist in themselves, but that does not entail that they have life. A possible objection to my position that to say that inanimate beings have vital force is a contradiction in terms, is to refer to the so-called animism in African traditional religious practice³ since those who defend African animism claim that all things are animated. My response to such objection is two-fold. First, Nkemnkia does not intend his position about African vitality to be a defence of animism, since his consideration of vital force or life is from a metaphysical perspective, while animism is a religious doctrine. Secondly, animism is itself a misrepresentation of traditional African religious practices. While traditional African religions would acknowledge that some inanimate things have force, it does not entail that they have vital force. The key to clearly expressing the difference is by distinguishing between ontological force and vital force. Both terms, “animate” and “animism” are derived from the Latin word *anima*, which is translated into English as the soul, that is, the principle of life. One could conclude that to claim that inanimate things have principle of life, as animism claims, is a contradiction because if they have the principle of life, it means that they are animate.

Consequent upon his equation of the African soul with vital force or life, Nkemnkia claims that life or vital force has priority over being in African thought. The foundation of his claim is Tempels’s position that in Bantu ontology, force is identical with being, that unlike in the West, the Bantu is incapable of separating being from its attribute, force and that force is an essential element for the definition of being among the Bantu.⁴ Tempels’s conception of African ontology is, according to Nkemnkia, the foundation of African vitality. Commenting on Tempels’s assertion that “force is being and being is force,” he writes: “Tempels placed on the same level the being of the West and the vital force of the Africans. In light of the non-contradictory principle, we must say that an attribute cannot contain both the subject and the object that serves as its attribute, since in every subject or object there are many attributes” (Nkemnkia 1999, 168). While Nkemnkia’s comment is apt, his conclusion that being is an attribute of force is unjustifiable, or at least unjustified. He draws such a conclusion because of his claim that life comes before being. He articulates his position thus: “As we have already said, Life precedes Being which is a determining factor to it. In this lies the reversal of values. For the African, ‘Being’ is an attribute of the ‘vital force,’ of Life itself, thus it is created. We consider Being as the first entity in the order of creation” (Nkemnkia 1999, 168).

It is not actually clear what Nkemnkia means by saying that “vital force or life” precedes (or has priority over) being, since vital force or life is always that of some being,

3 I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to animism.

4 I have already quoted the passages and commented on them. So, I am not repeating myself.

implying that vital force or life is an attribute of some being or entity. His use of life is vague or, at best, equivocal. Does life refer to an uncreated being? If that is the case, then life is just a name of a being (the Supreme Being or God) and in that case it is not the question of the priority of vital force or life over being, but the question of hierarchy of beings. On the other hand, when life is understood as a “superadded perfection” or a characteristic feature, it cannot precede being because it is just a characteristic of some beings. So, life or vital force would be an attribute of some beings, that is, of only animate beings. In this case, existential force and vital force are not identical. This is because, while existential force is a transcategorical or a transcendental property of being, vital force is an attribute of animate beings. Contrary to Nkemnkia’s view that life precedes being or that “life is superior to entity or to being, as a notion and in order of time” (Nkemnkia 1999, 169), I defend the position that being has ontological and chronological priority over life simply because life is an attribute of some beings.

Having rejected both Tempels’s and Nkemnkia’s positions that force is identical with being in Bantu thought, and that being is an attribute of vital force in African thought respectively, I will explore my position that force is a transcendental property of being.

Force as a Transcendental Property of Being

A property is a transcendental if it is not confined to any genus or kind but is a property of all real beings or things. It is “a positive attribute that can be predicated of every real being, so that it is convertible with being itself” (Clarke 2001, 290). So, in saying that force is a transcendental property of being, it implies that just as being does not belong to any genus, so also force (existential or ontological force) is a property or an attribute of every real being. A transcendental property is different from other properties or attributes like life, heavy, light, small, big, tall, short, etc., that belong to some beings but not to all. So, force as a property of being is differentiated from all other attributes that are not universal to all real beings. Force as a property of being is a transcendental just like one (unity), true (truth), and good (goodness)—the three undisputed transcendental properties of being among mediaeval philosophers and theologians; beauty—the disputed transcendental (cf. Aertsen 1996; 2012; Blanchette 2003; Clarke 2001; Elders 1993) and more importantly, force as transcendental property should be viewed as an equivalent to active or action as defended by Neo-Thomists (Blanchette 2003; Clarke 1994; 2001). Thus, whatever is said of active or action could be said of force in relation to being. Hence, I hold that to say “being is force” is equivalent to saying that “being is active.”

When we understand equivalence of the expressions “being is force” and “being is active” it becomes evident that being and force are not identical, contrary to the claim of Tempels, and also that being is not an attribute of force as Nkemnkia contends. Rather, force (just like action) is the means by which any being manifests and communicates itself (Clarke 1994; 2001). When the African says that being is force, it does not imply that the two notions are equivalent or identical, but that it is through force that that which actually exists manifests itself and also has the potentiality to

influence other beings. Put differently, to say that force is an attribute of every being means that there is no existing being, whether inanimate or animate, that is purely and completely inert. In the spirit of the mediaeval axiom, “*agere sequitur esse*” (to act follows to be, action follows being) one could say in African worldview, “force follows being.” It is important to note that in arguing that force follows being, what is emphasised is that ontological force is a transcendental property of being. This position is different from Tempels’s position, which claims that in African thought, force is not an attribute of being but that it is equivalent to “being” as it is understood in Western philosophy. At the same time, the position that is defended in this essay is different from that of Nkemnkia (1999,168), who claims that life precedes being and that “being is an attribute of vital force.”

When ontological force is understood as an attribute of being, what Clarke says of action as an attribute of being in Thomistic thought, could be said of force in African thought. Arguing that we cannot think of real being without taking action as its property into consideration, he writes: “To be, in the strong sense of to be real or actually existing, is seen to be ambiguous, incomplete, empty of evidential grounding, unless it includes, as natural corollary, *active presence*, that which *presents* itself positively to others through some mode of action” (Clarke 1994, 47). When this is translated into African thought in relation to force, one can argue that it is practicably inconceivable to think of any being or thing in the African context without acknowledging that every being has an inherent force through which it encounters other beings in the universe of beings. Nonetheless, arguing that there is inseparability between being (thing) and force in African thought does not imply indistinguishability, nor does it mean that Africans believe that force is not an attribute of being.

Furthermore, force is central to the African conception of being because there is inherent force in all things. Due to the presence of inherent force in all beings, different beings are capable of relating with one another as a community of beings. So, saying that “being is force” highlights that beings in African worldview are not purely independent monads without interconnectedness. One could argue that because beings in African thought reveal themselves through force, it means that force is at the core of African communitarianism since “[t]o be is to be actively co-present to the community of existents, of other active presences” (Clarke 1994, 47). Therefore, force is central to African metaphysics not because it is identical with being or that it is higher than being, but because it is a key attribute of every real being.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have engaged in an investigation into classical and African metaphysics by exploring the relation between being and force. I argued that although there is an intrinsic relation between being and force in African metaphysics, it is not a relation of equivalence or identity as Tempels claims, nor is being an attribute of force as Nkemnkia opines. Contra both Tempels and Nkemnkia, I hold that force is an attribute of being and precisely, that it is a transcendental property of being similar to active or

action as transcendental property of being in Neo-Thomistic thought. To arrive at my conclusion that being and force are not equivalent in African thought, I began by exploring the conception of being in the classical metaphysics of Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas. Both thinkers were in agreement that being is an analogous term, but insisted that the primary analogate of being is substance, understood as that which actually exists; since substance, in their understanding, primarily refers to that which subsists in itself. The implication of their understanding of being is that being is equivalent to “thing” in modern and contemporary understanding. Another important element of Aquinas’s conception of being, is that being is a transcendental. In other words, being cannot be classified into any category, genus or kind because all that exist are being.

After exploring the conceptions of being according to Aristotle and Aquinas, I examined Tempels’s ontology of force as the core of Bantu (African) metaphysics. Following my discussion on classical metaphysics, I contended that being and force are not equivalent in African thought, contrary to Tempels’s position. I maintained rather that force is an attribute or property of being and, therefore, cannot be equivalent to being. I also argued that what is called “being” in Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics, is best rendered as “thing” in African languages. This is because a thing is that which subsists in itself, while force inheres in a thing.

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