

Edmond BOELAERT, *The "Bantu Philosophy" according to E.P. TEMPELS*

In Zaire, 1 (1947) 4, p. 387-398 –

Translation from Dutch to English & Editor: Herman LODEWYCKX, March 12, 2022

THE BANTU PHILOSOPHY "
according to
E. P. TEMPELS

In the Kongolese magazine *Band* 1945-1946, E. P. Tempels had a study published, which was soon translated into French and published in book form. Shortly thereafter, it appeared - revised, improved and updated - as the original text in the Kongo-Overzee Library: *Bantu Philosophy*, De Sikkel, Antwerp. The quotations indicated here refer to the pages of this latter book.

I. - Main Theses of the Writer

1. The Bantu have their own ideal of life.

" The Bantu place the very highest value in their lives on life strength, strengthening of life " (20). "The whole endeavor of the Bantu is aimed at life strength" (23). "To increase or preserve the life force is the reason and the sense of all their practices" (109). " The Bantu soul yearns yearningly for life force enhancement " (109). " One high exalted reality is worth pursuing with all its powers: the intense life force " (109). " The attitude to life of the Bantu is interestedly concentrated around a single value: life strength " (20).

2. That own ideal rests on its own concept of being.

" We have a static concept of being, theirs is dynamic. For them force is inseparable from, being as such and therefore these concepts are also inseparable in the determination of being " (25). " For them force itself is more than a necessary accident: for them it is in the nature of being to have force, to " be " force. "To be power "is the nature of being as such" (25). "For the Bantu, being is something that is strength" (26). " Being, according to the Bantu, is force. The force is not distinct from the being " (29).

"They do have a concept of being as good as we do, but their concept of being already includes the concept of force, is already dynamic because they see reality dynamically.... Their concept of existing reality is simply

different from ours, the idea of force is already in the concept of being, as it is, according to them, in the nature of being to be force " (26).

3. The existing forces or beings are ordered according to life rank and first-born.

First comes God, who has power through Himself (33).

Under God come the firstborn among men, the upper link between God and humanity (33).

According to first-born status, all other descendants of the tribe are ranked after those progenitors. They make up the line of life (33).

Below that then come the living people.... again arranged in their being selves according to first-bornness and rank of life (33).

The first-born in a human group is the link between the ancestors and his people, and all the lower, i. e. vegetative or organic (*sic*) life forces, which exist on his soil, live or grow in the service of his people (33).

Yet even within each of these lower force classes, there is a ranking according to life force, life rank, or first-born status (34).

4. Every being (= every force) is essentially dependent on its predecessors.

" In the view of the Bantu, the created beings, more or less corporeal Creator and creature, stand in inner essence relation to each other " (31). " The individual forces do not stand alone but are and remain essentially dependent on first-born beings " (40). " The living human being stands in inner being relation to God, to his ancestry, to his clanmates, housemates and children, to his property, his ground, to all that grows or lives on it, to all that, above or below his ground can be found " (59).

And " that life influence remains all through life, since it is in the being itself " (66) = *puisque'elle est constitutive de l'essence même de l'être*, says the French translation (88). " The Bantu cannot imagine man as an independent, self-contained being " (64).

5. The forces of creation, thus forged together, can interact according to general, fixed, unchanging, metaphysical laws (37).

" In the Bantu view, the created beings, more or less like Creator and creature, stand in inner being relationship to each other. According to them, from being to being, from force to force, influences can emanate, creature influences, which are neither mechanical, nor

chemical, nor psychic. In the created forces the Bantu assume a causality of one force on the inner nature, on the very nature of another force or being. One force can strengthen or weaken another internally. This causality in beings is not a supernatural causality, which would exceed the powers of the creature. It is a causality, which results from the very nature of the creatures, and those influences, life influences, are very natural influences " (31)

" Those laws are the laws of creature effects; we would say of causality or causality; until now they called it magic " (61).

6. Here are the laws of causation according to writer (37)

1° Man - living or dead - can directly strengthen or diminish another man's being.

Such life influence is possible, and has, necessary effect from first-born or stronger human life force on after-born or less strong human life force.

When that life influence has no effect, it is because the influenced has stronger life force through himself or through an outside stronger life force, God included.

2° Human life force can directly influence lower (animal, vegetative or mineral) forces in their being.

3° A reasonable being (spirit, deceased or living human) can influence another reasonable being indirectly by exerting life influence on a lower force (animate, vegetative or material) and by causing that force to act on the other reasonable being.

This influence, too, will necessarily work unless the other reasonable being is himself stronger, is strengthened by a stronger reasonable being, or protects himself by lower life forces which are stronger than those used by the enemy.

7. The fixed and immutable laws of cognition for the Bantu are the criteria of likeness, togetherness or mimicry.

These are " the knowing principles of natural forces " (46), the " principles of natural science " (47), " the general laws of Bantu physics " (81) (60). But, according to the Bantu, " the human mind cannot acquire knowledge of beings through itself " (40). " It is handed down by the first born and learned by means of divination " (42). For " the knowledge of the concrete is the domain of uncertainty, conjecture and assumption " (81).

II. - Criticism

1. Do the Bantu have their own ideal of life?

Writer claims, that the words " strength ", " life ", " life strength " constantly recur in the mouth of the Bantu, that they wish each other strength, that they pray for strength, that in all their doing they are most deeply concerned to strengthen and safeguard their lives.

But if this is the proof of an ideal of life of the Bantu, on which their whole attitude to life and philosophy is based, what difference is there between the ideal of the Bantu and ours? Do we not constantly wish each other health, strength and long life? Here too the healthy eat and the sick fast to preserve or strengthen their lives. We too wear medals or mascots for this purpose.

With them as with us, the first instinct of all will probably be that of life preservation. Is life something else than the internal capacity for self-protection and self-development? For them as for us, life is instinctively the first good. And where black and white instinctively protect life, we necessarily strive for the same goal: perfection and happiness, or happiness in perfection of our being or our life.

Black may express this in his own way: even with us the word perfection is not a " peasant word ", but does he really mean something else? Is " his yearning nostalgia " for life strength something else than the *irrequietum cor*, the restless heart, of the West?

2. Do the Bantu have their own concept of being?

Here writer commits two fundamental errors, which radically undermine all of his philosophical argument, nullifying his affirmation of a Bantu ontology of his own.

For all of Western Christian philosophy, according to writer, force is an adjunct of being, where for the Bantu, being is force by nature.

He does warn us very carefully, however, not to stumble over the possible inadequacy of his own terminology (17). But his intention is very clear; he means, his thesis purely philosophical: for us it is not in the nature of the being to be force, for the Bantu it is.

He also warns us not to stumble over the terminology of the Bantu themselves: 'This general term of force is not used by the Bantu: they think very philosophically but speak concretely' (27). Yet elsewhere he claims that this is precisely how they speak " ontologically " (59).

Well, for the whole of our philosophy, being is indeed a force, it is precisely the nature of being, of every being to be a force, a principle of activity, as Mgr Cleire the writer observed (26, n.): the nature of a being is that being as *principium operationis*. For the whole of the *philosophia perennis* the principle applies: *ens et actus convertuntur, esse et agere convertuntur*. For us, as well as for the Bantu, "force is inseparably connected with being as such," "force is not an accident of being, it is even more than a necessary accident. It is in the nature of being to have power, to be power. Being power is the nature of being as such" (25). For us, as well as for the Bantu "being is something that is strength" (26).

The second fundamental error of writer consists in confusing concept and being. Since the existing being is a force, the concept of "being" is not yet the same as the concept of "force". For our philosophy every being is one, true and good, but therefore the concept of "good" is not yet locked in the concept of "one" or "being". To claim that this is the case for the Bantu is simply to ascribe to them a different mind from ours, a completely different mind. A faculty of thought from which, after all, "being" as a ground would be excluded from all judgment.

St. Thomas says it very clearly "*bonum et ens sunt idem secundum rem*" (I, q. 5, a. 1 c.). But "*Ens secundum rationem est prius quam bonum. Ratio enim significata per nomen est id quod concipit intellectus de re, et significat illud per vocem. Illud autem est prius secundum rationem, quod prius cadit in conceptione intellectus*" (I, q. 5, a. 2 c.): 'goodness and being are one in the object', but 'in knowledge the being goes before the goodness. For the understanding indicated by the name is that which the mind grasps about the object. In knowledge, therefore, what is first grasped by the mind comes first'.

But this question is not one of mere Thomism; it goes much deeper; it touches the very foundations of human cognition. Writer denies the first evidences of reason. Nor, for that matter, does he himself attempt to adduce any evidence for his thesis.

It is also inappropriate to say, that writer is only reproducing the theory of the Bantu, without judging whether they are mistaken or not. The Bantu have no "theory" about the cognitive faculty or the cognitive object, and the writer explicitly says that they think this way.

But in their whole way of speaking, we see the Bantu speaking and thinking just like us. For them, too, the adage of knowledge applies: "*agere sequitur esse*" = the concept of force follows the concept of being.

3. Clanic world order.

About this third point of writer there is not much to say. It is only natural that the Bantu orders its surrounding beings on the model of the family and the clans. Even we, who speak of "empires", are still familiar with families in nature. This proof of order among the Bantu is still very imperfect and far from complete, especially when we look at the kingdom of plants and minerals. This whole order has very little to do with the theory of force or with ontology, and in the Bantu creation stories we see God take very little account of it. The writer, however, needed this arrangement in order to arrive at his theory of the influences on life, which will be discussed further."

4. The same could be said of his fourth thesis about the essential, permanent dependence of beings on each other, were it not for the fact that much more important philosophical concepts are involved here, such as personality and responsibility. One can indeed assume that the Bantu have no clear notions of independence, but not that they have such false notions as are freely attributed to them here. At least I have not yet heard a black person claim that a banana bush or a turtle is directly dependent on, and therefore only lives by, the strength of a clan leader.

The author's claim here makes every higher being a *causa prima* by attributing to it divine power. The only example which he cites as proof of his explanation seems to be that of 'rebirth', although his explanation itself does not shed much light on the matter: 'It is through the profound influence of death on the offspring that the offspring becomes individualized' (66).

5, 6. What are creature influences?

According to the author, the Bantu philosophy teaches that beings influence each other from essence to essence, in a way that is neither mechanical nor chemical nor psychic. Those in he calls creature influences, or rather life influences, since all ultimately serve to strengthen the human life force.

For a philosophical discourse, the writer is here vague and smooth in his wording. However, if one honestly " checks the logical coherence of the ontological system" (4), which he elaborates for the Bantu, one comes to the following amazing claims:

1° All activity of beings is a life influence: "Every illness, every wound, every setback, all suffering, exhaustion, fatigue, every injustice or failure, everything is considered by the Bantu as a reduction of being, a reduction of life strength" (22). "Every gain in everything above or below

him is, in the Bantu view, a strengthening of life, an inner growth of man himself. Every encroachment... of all that is his, of all that is inwardly related to his life force, is a reduction of man himself " (59). Every action of any animal, plant or natural force is therefore an influence on life.

2° Every influence on life happens only through man. Man is *causa efficiens* of everything that animals, plants, minerals do or suffer. For "these forces exist in themselves" (32), yet "they work only thanks to the life influence of the stronger living man" (53). "All that happens to such a force, good or bad, can - according to the Bantu - only be attributed to the conscious or unconscious life influence of a human being" (90, n.).

Writer actually goes much further, where he himself asserts of men among themselves, that a subject cannot inflict pain or sorrow on his superior, unless he is made stronger by a stronger life force " (22). The human mind itself cannot gain knowledge of beings from itself (40), but only through firstborns and soothsayers (42). For " according to the conception of beings of the Bantu, it is metaphysically impossible that less life would diminish higher life " (91).

One wonders in vain, what it can possibly mean, that the lower beings are forces, principles of activity, if they cannot act themselves?

3° Every life influence happens unphysically. The author sometimes uses the word "magical," although he finds it ill-chosen. The intention is that every life influence, therefore every action, happens from inner being to inner being, from essence to essence, without the help of physical means, through a causality somewhat like that of God on the creature (31).

One is not tempted by the words " direct " and " indirect " used in the formulation of the laws of causation. Apparently, those there only mean " without or with a detour " A can enhance a plant supra-physically. That is direct life influence. If he then directs that amplified plant supra-physically to B, the effect of A on B is " indirect ". "Bwanga has no direct therapeutic effect on a wound, for example, but directly strengthens our self, our life force" (21).

All physical causality is thus eliminated here. Self as instrumental causality, because what we would call physical means, for the Bantu of writer are not " means ", but only criteria of knowledge.

The Bantu must be extraordinarily illogical people if, with such a theory, they still eat, drink, 'build houses, construct gardens or do any other material work. After all, these are not means of protecting or strengthening their lives. For that, their mere will to power is necessary

and sufficient.... Or would those Bantu judge differently after all than Writer wants to portray it? Would they perhaps assume after all, that they can hurt someone with an arrow, and that they need a knife to cut, a house to shelter in, food to feed themselves?

However, the writer is very formal on this point: " They have no other world view than that of the philosophy of forces " (102). "The knowledge of the Bantu is not twofold. There is with them no philosophy of forces apart from a domain of critical cognition " (102). " We conclude to causality according to our knowledge of beings, the blacks according to philosophy of forces and influences of beings " (102).

7. How do the Bantu know?

Again, writer is vague and confused. First, he attempts to incorporate his theory of knowledge into his general theory of force: " the Bantu does have the power to know " (40) but only under the influence of firstborns (40). " Without the elders, the young would not be able to gain any knowledge of beings, any ontological insight into the nature of beings " (40). This knowledge of beings is handed down to them by the firstborn and taught to them by means of divination " (42).

The young adopt this philosophy on the authority of the elders (external credibility) and because they daily sense the hidden forces of nature, which sometimes work and sometimes do not " (42-43).

When it comes to knowing which particular force has acted or is necessary to exert an influence on life, one comes, according to the author, to natural science. And here there are "some general laws, some principles" (46) "general laws of their physics, of their physics, criteria for knowing the nature and influence of certain forces" (48).

These general criteria are equality, contact and gesture. If one sees that a force resembles another, or is related to another, then one knows, that this force is useful. A gesture tells me, that life force is being exerted (46-47).

But these criteria are not sufficient for the ordinary, normal Bantu, to know which force has acted or should act in a particular case. " That is where divination comes in " (48).

So, all the philosophical and physical (?) knowledge of the Bantu is tradition and divination, according to writer.

We can now refute their natural science (9), but this does not touch their philosophy (9), because for the Bantu there remains the real question of the true, the ontological cause" (10) of the facts, says the writer. Perhaps he means here the moral cause, which is also asked for by us, when one asks why all this suffering has to affect someone, or when one claims that war comes upon us because of our sins. It is the cause which Jonah referred to when he said to the sailors: "Cast me into the sea and the storm will go away from you, for I know that this great tempest has come upon you because of me". But then he takes us from one order of causes to another.

III. - Final reflections.

What writer wanted and achieved.

Writer wanted to give us " the full account of the philosophy of the Bantu " (19), and " prove, that that philosophy really controls and explains all the doings of the Bantu " (19). He wanted to know (6) and judge (7)) that philosophy, to preserve from it what is good, to Christianize it as the strong weapon against magic " (9, n.).

That the Bantu are said to have a philosophy remains to be seen here. In any case, writer has not provided any evidence for it: he has not cited any philosophical assertion or reasoning by any Bantu philosopher.

He summarized the philosophical system, which he himself tried to build up from their doings, in the fundamental concept of "life force" and the corresponding concepts of "life grade, life growth and life influence" (72). He himself judges this system very strictly.

All that is " magic ", life influence, he calls " wrong inferences " (112), " wrong applications " (104), " abuses " (99), " degenerations and deviations " (109), " degenerate Bantu wisdom " (108).

In his eyes only " the earlier, more correct, healthier philosophy, which did not accept the influences of life " (42), finds grace. He himself contrasts this earlier philosophy with the contemporary philosophy of the Bantu (42) and sometimes seems to claim that this earlier philosophy was similar to ours: "The Bantu today have a different philosophy from ours" (17). Elsewhere, however, he seems to assume that "the inner growth of beings" is the "only foundation of possible evolution" (106), "the only thing that makes them human and that can serve as the basis for a genuine, higher civilization of their own" (108).

But this inner growth ability of beings is not a philosophy, not a complete philosophy of life, is it?

And as a core, on which the only true Bantu civilization (6) must be built, this assertion is also very uncertain. The writer himself calls it " in the natural, rational scientific order a mere hypothesis " (113), " a chimera " (112).

So, one rightly wonders, what writer actually accomplished.

His whole argument rests on a supposed contradiction between Western and primitive conceptions of being " Here lies, I think, the great difference between Western conceptions and those of the Bantu and primitives " (24) he says, referring to the " dynamic understanding " that the Bantu would have of being.

And the whole argument develops further as an exclusive explanation of the magical practices and beliefs of the Bantu, as if these really constituted the whole of Bantu life and mind.

No one will doubt the fact, that the Bantu are very superstitious and " in moments of adversity, danger or suffering easily resort to magical practices " (2), but writer assumes what he should have proved, where he says that this logical general human action of the primitives postulates a logical human thought (3), a deep, comprehensive philosophy, a clear, full, positive, intellectual conception of the universe " (3). All the views and actions of the primitive are not magical. If he were really convinced that a "remedy" is not a remedy, but a mere *signum*, or that such a remedy does not work physically, he would no longer bind a wound, put the axe to the root, take shelter under a roof, put food in his mouth, or strike to hurt.

If he were really convinced that a single will is enough to influence life and tried for one hour to live by it, he would have lost his last mind. No, the primitives can live on, in spite of their magic, because the overgrowth of superstition has not eclipsed their natural reason.

While the author claims that "with the theory of the forces everything becomes clear, simple and logical" (34), the opposite is true. Depriving the Bantu of their magic is not "spiritual, general murder" (8), but salvation.

Magic belief is imagination product, firmly anchored and reinforced by mass psychology and tradition. The laws of imagination, as described in experimental psychology, are precisely

the laws, which writer indicates as the criteria of Bantu knowledge. Knowledge of being and logic are intellectual work.

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