

# Comparing some Traditional Western and African Conceptions of Personhood

Makotoka Kahaka and Wazha Maundeni

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the comparisons that have been made between traditional African and Western thoughts on the communitarian vis-à-vis individualistic conceptions of personhood where some dissimilarity between the two conceptions has been highlighted. While there has been a lot of emphasis on the dissimilarity that allegedly exists between the two camps, there has not been much discussion on the similarities or common features that may exist between the two camps regarding the concept of personhood. Focusing on a selected number of scholars, this paper discusses the comparisons that have been made between the traditional African and Western thoughts on the concept of personhood with a view to exploring if any similarities or areas of convergence exist between the two. The paper concludes that in addition to the differences in thought between the two camps on the concept of personhood, there are also some similarities that are worth noting.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Comparisons have been made between traditional African and Western ideas, particularly on the communitarian vis-à-vis individualistic conceptions of personhood where an implicit dissimilarity between the two conceptions has been suggested and highlighted (see, for example, Tempels 1959: 103; Mkhize, (2004), Ikuenobe, (2006). This alleged contrast became not only a point of departure upon which the African understanding of reality and personhood has been defined but also the basis for the traditional African and Western ideological dichotomy and categorization. Based on this observation, this paper is investigating whether there are any similarities or areas of convergence between traditional African and Western thought regarding personhood. In order to achieve this objective, reference will be made to ideas on personhood propounded by some philosophers from both African and Western traditional thought. For the purpose of this discussion, Western traditional thought refers to the philosophical thinking of Western culture beginning mainly with early Greek thinkers of the classical period, that is, the late 5th Century B.C. to early 4th Century B.C; and including the modern period, which is early 17th Century to early 18th Century. Specifically, this discussion will focus more on the works of Plato and Aristotle, and it will also make reference to the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and other philosophers of the modern period.

## II. THE INDIVIDUALISM AND THE COMMUNITARIAN CONCEPTIONS OF PERSONHOOD

Since contradictory propositions are unacceptable by the laws of formal logic, one of the questions relevant for this discussion is whether or not individualism and communitarianism as conceptions of personhood are contradictory perspectives such that we have to decide which one of them is true, that is, if any of them is true. It is evident that some authors such as Menkiti (1984), Daly (1994), and Wilkinson (2002) see an implicit contradiction between individualism and communitarian conceptions of personhood. That is, to the extent that individualism and communitarian conceptions of personhood are taken to be members of a contradiction where a middle term or view cannot be said to exist, it is assumed, in line with the laws of logic, that a person cannot be understood in communitarian and individualistic terms at the same time. By implication, and consistent with this thinking, understanding a person in this way amounts to saying a person is at once a communitarian being and is not a communitarian being, or that a person is an individual being, that is, an atomic, independent being, and is not that being at the same time, which claims will be a clear violation of the law of non-contradiction. In this case, individualism and communitarianism are sometimes viewed as contradictory or opposite terms where, upon comparing claims or information under each category, one has to decide that one category is right and the other is wrong or both individualism

and communitarianism are wrong because polarized contradictory perspectives cannot both be right and do not have a “middle way”.

However, the understanding of communitarianism and individualism as presented above presents a kind of false dilemma, for these two alternatives, or seemingly contradictory perspectives, are not strictly and practically exclusive and exhaustive. The two perspectives are not exclusive because it is not the case that human persons cannot be understood in communal and individual terms at the same time. Whereas the two perspectives can be said to be contrary to each other; that is, each perspective expresses ideas on the notion of personhood that are opposed or counter to the other one, the two cannot be said to contradict each other in a strictly logical sense where we have to choose either and not both, failure which we risk tolerating a contradiction. On the contrary, we may retain basic elements of the two opposing perspectives where we believe that both individualism and communitarianism contain some truth. This is because, in the case of individualism and communitarian conceptions of personhood, there is a sense in which one and the same person can assume a communal and individualistic existence consecutively throughout his or her life. Assuming that a person needs both aspects to develop into a completely balanced human being and that both aspects are inherent to human nature, it follows that there is no contradiction in asserting that a person is both an individual and a communal being. The supposed contradiction between the two conceptions of personhood in question led to the categorization of Africa and the West where, based on the noble task of complying with the law of non-contradiction, the former is labeled as communitarian while the latter is labeled as individualistic. Whereas such labeling is supposed to merely show that Africa and the West emphasize different aspects of personhood as opposed to denying the existence of the other aspect that is not emphasized; it may have been misunderstood by some to mean that Africans and Westerners are unanimously and exclusively communitarian and individualistic in outlook respectively.

However, following Bell's (2002) argument that even radical individualism as advocated for by Nietzsche still promoted moral responsibility to others, it is equally argued in this paper, albeit in a different way, that the use of platitudes such as ‘Western values are motivated by individualism’ while ‘African values are motivated by communalism’ may have hindered many from detecting some of the interesting similarities in thought that exists among some of the philosophers associated with the two camps in question. Most importantly for this discussion, the dichotomy may have led some to overlook elements of both communitarianism and individualism that forms conceptions of personhood in either camp. A brief survey of the history of ideas on personhood demonstrates that the practice of making a blanket categorization where Africans and Westerners are classified as communalistic and individualistic respectively could be an overgeneralization. This is what Hountondji (1996: xviii) refers to as ‘unanimalism’, and explains as the erroneous belief that all men and women in a given society speak in one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental matters.

As alluded to above, the view that the person has an independent existence and should be treated as an individual is considered to be a traditional European or Western view as expressed by a number of proponents of the African conceptions of personhood such as Tempels (1959), Menkiti (1984), and Wilkinson (2002). They argue that this western view is contrasting sharply with the African understanding of a person which is decisively communitarian. The general view here is that the individual does not come before the community; instead, it is the community that gives the individual his or her being and personhood. The view that traditional western philosophy is individualistic in its approach to personhood and human relations is adequately articulated by Wilkinson (2002) in her discussion of how cultural differences between races influence perceptions of gender in South Africa, and she writes;

White South Africans owe their heritage to the world-view that has been inherited from the Greeks, influenced by Cartesian dualism, Kantian rationalism, and the resultant liberalist values of individualism(...)the overriding ethos is that of Western individualism (Wilkinson, 2002: 355).

This Western individualistic view of the person as argued by proponents of the African view has resulted in notions of individual rights; where the rights and welfare of the individual are placed above those of the community. In connection to this view, Dube (2006: 134), points out that HIV and AIDS testing policy in Botswana when crafted, it was based on Western individualistic values of confidentiality and private individual rights. This practice, according to Dube (2006), overlooked the society around the individual and has placed the individual over and above the community that has made him or her a person, which is very inconsistent with the African communitarian understanding of a person. Dube (2006), believes that the individual's rights are in this case emphasized at the expense of the community rights because the individual who does not want to test for HIV and AIDS cannot be forced to, whilst such an individual continues to spread the virus in the event that he or she is positive and does not see the value of not spreading the virus further.

When articulating this African view in contrast with the Western view, Okolo (2002: 213) puts it this way: “It is the community which makes the individual, to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence”. In the words of Mbiti, an individual in the African context is defined as, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am”, (Mbiti, 1969: 108). This claim by Mbiti is considered

to be an adaptation of Rene Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* or "I think, therefore I am", yet it is also believed to be a demonstration of the sharp contrast of ideas that exist between the African and the Western understanding of a person. While African societies understand that a person is only a person provided he or she is a member not only of the community, family, and clan but also of the living dead or ancestors, plants, and animals (Mbiti, 1969), the Western societies understand a person as some 'isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory', (Menkiti, 1984: 172). Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the Western view on personhood as contrasted with the African view according to the proponent of the African view is given by Tempels when he writes;

Just as Bantu (Black African) ontology is opposed to the European of individuated things existing in themselves, isolated from others, so Bantu psychology cannot conceive of a man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it (Tempels, 1959: 103).

Not only has Western philosophy been accused of conceiving the idea of an individual that is capable of existing by itself, but also of ignoring the inseparable connection that exists between all living and non-living beings. Descartes is no doubt one of the Western philosophers often quoted regarding the notion that Western philosophy has erroneously reduced a person to one entity, that is, to a rational being. There are, however, much earlier Western philosophers including the pre-Socratic philosophers and the Atomists such as Heraclitus, Democritus, and Anaxagoras who, in their understanding of the nature of reality and by extension, personhood, picked one or two entities as the basic components that constitute human nature.

Notwithstanding the above observation, it is possible that the western philosophers referred to above attempted to answer different types of questions regarding personhood than the ones that other scholars elsewhere or at later times attempted to answer on the same subject. That is, for instance, many proponents of the African view on personhood are concerned about the relational nature of the human person; whether or not a person has ontological priority over the community, and whether he or she is by nature a communal being. However, some of the Western philosophers on the subject matter were concerned about understanding other aspects of personhood, such as the nature of a person as a thing in itself, and the basic components that constitute human nature, as well as those aspects of a person that remains the same or unaffected by the change. Some of these very same Western philosophers were equally concerned, under different sorts of questions on personhood, about the relationship between the human person and the whole of reality or the cosmos. There is therefore no apparent contradiction in alleging, for instance, that a person is 'a communal being' on one hand, and that 'man is a rational animal', on the other. If traditional Western thought should be accused of reducing personhood to a single, isolated entity such as thinking or will, or consciousness as Menkiti (1984) and others point out, some proponents of the African view could also be accused of reducing personhood to a single entity as well, namely, a communitarian being, and ignoring the fact that there are equally important aspects to personhood such as rationality and autonomy that should be highlighted. For instance, Okolo (2002: 214) observes when formulating their understanding of a person, the African communitarian view failed to consider the human person from 'inside' or as 'itself' that can also be understood as such in addition to its 'outside' or communal nature. However, such accusations and counteraccusations against either camp may not be necessary if one considers the sort of ontological, metaphysical, and normative questions on personhood the specific philosophers were dealing with when formulating their respective positions. The argument here is that the supposed truth of the statement on personhood made by Mbiti, for instance, that "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am", does not deny the supposed truth of Descartes' statement of "I think, therefore I am". This is because Mbiti's statement above is making reference to the relational or social nature of the human person while Descartes' statement is making reference to the rational or psychological aspect of the same being. A person can be understood as both relational and rational at the same, among other qualities.

### III. SOME SIMILARITIES BETWEEN AFRICAN AND WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF PERSONHOOD

Horner and Westacott (2000: 167) were right in their observation that all political philosophies presume a theory of human nature. This is because, as they explain, an attempt to describe political behavior hinges on ideas about what human beings are essentially like, otherwise the purported political theory would not make any sense as far as it attempts to prescribe how humans ought to act politically. It is, therefore, needful to examine, albeit briefly, ideas by some of the Western philosophers whose political ideologies have not only influenced Western thought but are also often used as a reference point in distinguishing Western thought from African thinking with regard to the concept of personhood. An analysis of works by some of these profound traditional Western philosophers' social and political theories reveals that some of them were equally communitarian as they were individualistic in their understanding of the nature of the human person.

One will realize that Plato, just like many other Western philosophers who came many years after him, thought that political reality is inseparable from morality, and by extension, from the natural connection

that exists between the individual and the larger community or state. He argued that the state could demonstrate the greatest virtue of them all, namely justice, only to the degree that the individual could demonstrate the same virtue. Emphasizing this argument by Plato, Stumpf (1994) points out that there is a structural and natural as well as logical relation between individuals and the state. Some may hastily reject this evidence on the ground that Plato's discussion here is concerned with a political structure or connection between the individual and the state, rather than a connection between the individual and the community. However, it is evident that Plato's understanding of the state is not limited to the ruling elite or to an equivalent of modern-day government, but extends to the whole society, social structure, or what we may refer to as the community in modern usage. Stumpf (1994) explains further on this point, by indicating that according to Plato, a state will reflect the kind of people the community has become. Not only does the state reflect the actual nature and character of individuals that constitute the state, but also that if we want to understand the nature of the individual person, we need to analyze the nature of the state. On this point, Plato wrote, "We should begin by inquiring what justice means in a state. Then we can go on to look for its counterpart on a smaller scale in the individual" (Stumpf, 1994:70). This may be Plato's answer to the question that is often asked among students of philosophy on this subject, namely; what comes first between the individual and the society, and which of the two should be taken to be the result of the other. It appears that even though it is the individuals who form the state and society, it is the state that is the 'yardstick' for the individuals' moral uprightness. The state, according to Plato, is man writ large. Plato believed that the state is a natural institution because it grows naturally from, and reflects human nature (Stumpf, 1994). When tracing the notion of the common good to early Greek and Roman philosophy, Etzioni (2014: 2) concludes that 'the common good' has deep roots in the history of Western philosophical and religious thought, pointing out that for Plato, "the good" was objective, defined as that which "every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything." Arriving at knowledge of the good within a community would create unity, which is 'the greatest blessing for a state'. In this conception, there is no tension between the private and public good, as individuals are thought to attain happiness (a private good) through the pursuit of justice (a public good).

Moreover, a look at Aristotle's ethical and political philosophy, based on the ancient Greek city-state also suggests that the basic communitarian ideals were part of the Greek philosophical thought. After asking what sort of people we want society to produce, and how society should be structured in order to produce the kind of people we desire, Aristotle contended that a polis or community exists for the sake of a good life and that human beings, as political animals, lead a good life by contributing to the good of the community (Etzioni, 2014: 2). Etzioni (2014) is of the view that Aristotle's question above presupposes that a society has a common end that both distinct from and actively shapes the good of the individual. It is not possible, according to Aristotle, for a man to fully develop outside the state. For the state to develop and function, it needs to go through stages, namely; family and the community. In Aristotle's version of the Greek polis, the people lived together very closely: they had common meals, they carried their business with one another, they made marriage agreements with each other's families, and they met together as free and equal citizens to make the laws and judge cases (Daly 1994). The ruling elite was supposed to pursue as its chief objective the well-being of the whole community in addition to cultivating a life of virtue for its entire people. There is no doubt that the individualistic concepts associated with the West such as freedom and individual human dignity were part of Aristotle's political theory. However, while Aristotle believed that each individual must have a natural desire and duty to pursue his or her personal happiness by living a life of virtue, at the same time he made a strong and necessary link between the individual and society. On this point, Aristotle concluded that "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god," (Stumpf 1994: 103). Aristotle formulated his theory of citizenship based on the two-fold notion of willingness to govern and to be governed. He argued that the deliberations of an assembly of citizens, each of whom has only limited insight, will be wiser than the wisest single man (Daly 1994). It is, therefore, safe to allege, consistent with Daly's (1994) observation that he made regarding the contemporary American culture, that Aristotle held a form of individualistic and communalistic conceptions of ethics, personhood, and politics as seemingly contradictory, yet complimentary realities that were supposed to be applied at separate spheres of life or be held continually as uneasy tension together. Further, a general overview of the liberalist ideologies of the modern period as discussed below depicts that communitarian-individualist strain continued to characterize most of the formulated theories on ethics, politics, and personhood, with some philosophers emphasizing individual freedoms, and yet without abandoning the need for communal existence.

It is not a matter of dispute that Liberalism has been a dominant political ideology in the Western world since the 18th century, and has led to the development and promotion of individual freedoms based on ideas propounded by certain influential western philosophers of the time, (Kernohan, 1998: 1). What is disputed in this paper are the generalizations that seem to indicate that western philosophers who were for the ideas of individual freedoms such as Descartes, Hume, Nietzsche, Rousseau, and Locke promoted a form of radical individualism with no room for a communal existence. For instance, not all liberalists could agree



with Hobbes' rather strong individualistic conception of society and persons where based solely on safeguarding self-interests such as personal security and self-preservation, the primitive men decided to band together in a society. According to Hobbes, the primitive man did this upon realizing that without such social life could have been 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,' (Harrison-Barbet, 1990: 200). Locke, for example, rejected Hobbes' idea of the primitive man being brutal and concerned only about himself, and argued instead that people are not only closely connected to God's natural laws of reason that govern the whole of reality but also that as a result of this rational instinct, they are naturally social. Locke is often recognized for having established liberalism as a philosophical ideology and also argued for the natural right to life, liberty, and right to property for all human persons (Harrison-Barbet 1990), and the need for a communal, cordial living in the form of a social contract. In contrast to what may be termed Hobbes's version of social contract theory Locke developed an even better and more communal social theory which can be likened in some respect, to Tempels' (1959) and Mbiti's (1969) theories of the human person. This is because all three scholars held views of human personhood that is interdependent with nature and there is also a supernatural or spiritual basis to it. For instance, Mbiti (1969) discusses the individual in relation to the household, family, kinship, and community at large. According to Mbiti, African thinking is that the individual simply does not exist alone. He exists corporately, that is through other people. By 'other people' Mbiti refers to both past generations and present communities to which the individual belongs. This, therefore, makes the individual not only part of the whole but naturally want to care for others and for the rest of creation. Locke expresses a more or less similar view when he wrote regarding all of mankind; '(...)sent into the world by his (God) order, and about his business, they are all his property...and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature(...)(Harrison-Barbet, 1990: 201). Moreover, unlike in Hobbes's social theory where the social contract is made between individuals and rights are surrendered to a sovereign, the Locken account holds that individuals surrender their rights, which he identified as life, liberty, and property, to the community. Harrison-Barbet (1990) makes an important point regarding Locke's theory of social contract, asserting that the theory was democratic in that authority lies with the majority of the commonwealth or community and that only those natural rights which are necessary for the well-being of the community are surrendered, and, 'the welfare of the community is the supreme law' (Harrison-Barbet, 1990: 201). Unless it can be successfully argued otherwise, the value of democracy and community welfare as advocated for by Locke above are consistent with or should be part of the communitarian aspect of a person and the general 'African spirit' of ubuntu. However, as already demonstrated, Locke, as well as many other Western philosophers, advocated for harmony and close connection not only between individuals at a community level, but also between the community, God, and the whole of creation, all of which form different versions of communalistic personhood.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Communitarianism in its broader sense has been viewed as a critique or reaction against individualism. It is believed that opposition to individualism is contained in the term communitarianism itself. According to some scholars such as Daly (1994), if any perspective is labeled as communitarian, it then means that it contrasts sharply with an individualistic alternative, such that each term carries with it a denial of the opposing term the same way that calling something large denies that it is small. As a result of such a dichotomy between communitarianism and individualism, some have wrongly concluded, that those who hold a communitarian conception of personhood cannot at the same time be said to hold an individualistic view, and vice versa. However, the discussion above suggests that some philosophers to whom the individualistic perspective of personhood has been attributed held such a perspective only to a degree. Such philosophers were just as communalistic as they were individualistic in their conceptions of personhood, even if it was to a lesser degree. Based on reason alone, it is concluded that upholding the priority of the community in evaluating personhood, as most African societies are believed to, does not necessarily deny the individuality of a person and its associated concepts such as personal identity and personal responsibilities and goals, nor does it deny other aspects that constitute personhoods such as free will and rationality. Similarly, asserting the priority of individuality, as the Western traditional thought is believed to, does not imply a disregard for a sense of commonality and communal good (Bell, 2002: 64). To this end, it has been demonstrated above that some Western scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes and Nietzsche to whom the idea of radical individualism is often attributed (*see* Long, 2007: 262), actually had room for communal existence of human persons in their conceptions. It has also been revealed, through a brief comparison of works by some African and Western philosophers on the issue at hand, that in principle there are many similarities between the two camps in their conceptions of personhood. This further shows that with respect to these philosophers' works, there is no obvious contradiction between some of the purported views on personhood associated with the two camps in question because the truth concerning

any one of the said claims about personhood does not necessarily deny the truth concerning the others' claims on the same issue. This is because emphasizing an aspect or category, as the two camps in question do, does not in itself mean a denial of the other category that is not emphasized.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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