DISCOURSE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNALISM IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The problem of personal identity is a perennial problem in the thought system of Philosophy. The question of identity is the first principle of being. Hence the question, what is personal identity? Can a person stand or exist distinct from the community? These questions are relevant because of the fact that scholars, writers and even lay men on the street placed much emphasis on communalism as the basic nature and structure of our African society. To this end, there is increasing need of intellectual discourse on how to achieve identity in the community. Thus, this paper argues that the philosophical foundation of individual identity lies partly within the community. Thus, I argue that man is an intersubjective being. That community-individual relationship or integration brings about a full flourishing of human person. It is within this framework that we investigate the place of personal identity in the communal whole.

Keywords: Africa, Individual identity, Communalism, Philosophy

Introduction

The question of identity embodies the value of the first principle of being: the principle of identity. This principle states that every being is determined in itself, is one with itself and is consistent with itself. Having the knowledge of a thing helps us to know what the thing in question is and what may be legitimately attributed to it. In this piece, what is personal Identity? What is communalism? Can individual stand distinct from the community? Personal identity tries to explain what the identity of a person necessarily consist in, and what kind of necessity is at issue. It is widely agreed that the theory of personal identity ought to explain, as Andrea Sauchelli put it, "what the identity of a person necessarily involve or consist in."[1]Frequently left open, however, is what type of necessity, metaphysical, nominological or conceptual is at issue. The essay is concerned with metaphysical necessity of personal identity in relations to communalism, that is, a transition from metaphysical sphere to social philosophy (social sphere).

The aim is to explain and explicate the concept of personal identity: What it is to believe, think, or assert that X and Y at different times is the same person. The notion of personal identity by different philosopher through time, and other conception of what identity entails. Within this ambit too, we will bring to the fore the implications of communalism for the self in Africa.

What Is Identity

The question of identity is very central and at the core of metaphysical questions. Every being is one with itself and divided from others. The quality of matter referred to in traditional metaphysics as accidents, such as size, colours, shape, and so on, "distinguish one being from the other."[2] If being does not have identity then everything would be everything, giving birth to one thing since nothing can be differentiated from the other. In this case there would be no subject and object relationship. This will create a casual traffic in order of being and knowledge.

The western philosophical tradition ascribes the invention of identity to John Locke. And according to Locke identity consists in:

> When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure that it is that very thing, and not another which at that very time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable so ever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present . . . when therefore we demand whether anything be the same or not, it refers always to something that existed such a time in such a place, which it was certain, at that instant, was the same with itself, and no other.[3]

From the foregoing therefore, Locke distinguishes between "qualities and numerical identity,"[4]on the one hand, a thing's qualitative identities comprise its defining properties: there are properties that one must mention in a full answer to a question "who am I?" or "What is it?" The problem of identity in this wise is taken to mean a question of numerical identity over time. What makes X at one time the same person as Y at another? Identity for Locke arises from comparison of things with itself through a period of time.

David Hume on his part believes that, the idea of identity arises from a propensity of the mind to attribute invariableness to an object while tracing it, without a break in the span of attention, through a variation of time. Hume notes:

> Though we are led after this manner, by natural propensity of imagination, to ascribe a continued existence to those sensible objects or perception, which we find to resemble each other in their interrupting appearance, yet a very little reflection, yet a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of opinion.[5]

According to Hume, "giving identity to our impression is fictitious; our mind is seduced into an opinion by means of resemblance of certain perceptions."[6] For Hume, an idea of identity is that, "to an object which persists throughout the length of time without change or interruption."[7] It is on this note that Nnoruka contends that writers from Descartes to Kant, "took the idea of identity to mean that an object is the same with itself."[8]

Personal Identity

Personal identity is a distinct quality that constitute a person, the size, colour, shape and both existential and non-existential features, in other words, what makes a person who he/she is without which he/she would not be term as such. However, Aristotle in Western philosophy, faced with the problem of continuity and change postulated that everything is composed of two elements, substance and accidents. "While the accident of a thing, for example, colour, size, height, changes, the substance does not change, it remains what it is, and this has what he conceives to constitute the identity of a thing."[9] Aristotle's theory of matter and form, the matter of a thing changes, but the form remains the same. When the form of a thing changes, the very nature (the substance) changed and it is no longer that thing. So applying this position of Aristotle to human person, the matter is the body while the form is the soul. The body changes but the soul does not change. Hence, the human person in spite of his bodily changes, from birth to old age.

Aristotle sees both the soul and the body as essential elements of the human person, the body is an integral part of human person in spite of the fact that it changes. Plato conceives the soul as the essential part of the human person. The

body for Plato is like a house where the soul lives. The essence of the human person is the soul and it does not change. "While the body (the house where it lives) changes, the soul remains the same."[10] This explains the identity or continuity of a person in spite of changes from birth to old age. For Aristotle the soul is not separable from the body, for the two forms an integral unit of human person. Plato and Aristotle are seen as great ancestors of idealism and empiricism.

Descartes and Berkeley continued the idealism of Plato. According to Descartes, man is a "res cogitans," a thinking being. Man for him, is essentially a thinking being. The body is not an essential part of a person. For him, "man is essentially a thinking being, my essence consist solely in the fact, I am a thinking thing."[11]What constitutes essential nature of man is mind. From Cartesian point of view, the question of personal identity consists of the fact that it is identity of the mind. In spite of the changes that go on in the body, the mind remains the same as long as man maintains his identity as a thinking being.

George Berkeley sees "man as essentially a spirit."[12] `Like Descartes, Berkeley plays down the idea of human body and sees everything as constituted in the mind, "esse est percipi" to be is to be perceived. Human body does not exist except as qualities or ideas in the mind. From Berkeley's point of view, personal identity is the identity of the spirit; for the spirit remains the same in spite of the passage of time.

However, the materialists, John Locke and Bertrand Russell see identity as identity of the body, brain or memory. Locke and Russell hold that personal identity is identity of the continuity of consciousness and memory. As long as I can remember thing I did years ago and my consciousness has continued since then till now, then I am the same person. "Consciousness and memory are inseparable and without the continuity of either of them there can be no persons identity."[13]A person therefore is not tied to bodily shape.

David Hume in book, *Treatise of Human Nature,* explains that, "the principle of identity consists of nothing but invariableness and interestedness of my object, through a supposed variation of time."[14] For Hume therefore, personal identity consist ininvariableness of self through time. Hume tells us that when he goes into himself and take a reflective look at himself, what he discovers are series of inner perceptions, the perception of one thing after another. He never sees any soul or spiritual, unchanging entity inside him. Hume contends:

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> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself,
> I always stumble on some particular perception or another of
> heat or light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never
> can catch myself at anytime without a perception. When my
> perception are removed for anytime, as by sound sleep, so long
> am I insensible of myself and man truly be said not to exist. And
> were all my perception removed by death and could I neither
> thin, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of
> my body. I should not be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive
> what further requisite to make me is a perfect non-entiy.[15]

For Hume if anyone undergoes the same introspection and come out with something different such a person must be a different kind of being from himself.

However, from the foregoing positions of philosophers on personal identity, we could see that the various courts of persons are precluded with short comings. Since this is not majorly the limit of the scope of my study I have to go ahead and do justice to communalism as a concept.

Communalism

By communalism we understand a theory of a just society in which the community is the foundation of political life, and in which the autonomy of the members of the community is assured."[16] The core element in this definition is that there is a unity of two poles: the community and the individuality or by extension a person. Both are brought into a relationship of mutuality and functional co-existence.

The community is basically a spirit of communing. It underlies the idea of sociability, exchange, intersubjectivity and reciprocity. In the community members relates to one another in a communal fashion of brotherhood, hospitality and care. There is solidarity of relationship. "The community constitutes a fulcrum of interpersonal relationship; from this it draws his life force."[17]

The Relationship Between Personal Identity And Communalism

The status of the personhood in Africa is a reflection in the communitarian features of social construct, such that, "the individual is said to receive his "mental furniture" of his entire life from the community."[18] The first contact that

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man has with reality is human contact, a contact with the family and subsequently the community. Community's consciousness resounded to constitute the backdrop of a person's realization of his consciousness as a person, distinct and already immersed in one's community. Going by this, at the level of self or personal identity:

> My identity is partly constituted by the community. What I am is partly what the Community has made of me. I do not have the definition of myself a priori, or outside community ties and tradition.[19]

In an African's cosmology the universe is not conceived as something discrete and individuated but rather it is conceived as series of interactions and intercommunication between the visible created order and the invisible world of God, spirits and ancestors are only possible when the human being become the ontological mean between entities acting above and below them. This vision helps us to the understanding of the relationship between personhood (self) and community. Tempels in his Bantu psychology noted that man cannot be conceive as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings. On the sociality of the self he noted, "the Bantu cannot be alone being". He observed that:

> for the Bantu, every individual forms a link on a chain of vital force, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below the line of his descendants.[20]

In western metaphysics of personality, personhood is conceived by the distinctness of individuality from the society. In Africa, the community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood. Mbiti in acknowledging the communal selfhood of African dimension notes:

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of a whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group. . . whatever happens on the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only

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say 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.' This
is the cardinal point in the understanding of African conception
of man.[21]

For Menkiti, "in communal Africa, it is the community that defines a person as a
person, not static quality of rationality, will and memeory."[22]Bisong captures
Olatunji's assertion that, "the state of being of the community determines what a
lot of individuals becomes, irrespective of the values cherished by the
individual."[23]Asouzu on his part asserts that, "in traditional Africa the
community not only defines a person but has the right of appropriation over the
rights and obligations of its members, it is the community that mostly determines
who should live and who should not have life."[24] Chimakonam believes that it is
the society that defines a person. For him, "person is not an internal but an
external thing . . . that I am what I think I am is socially meaningless for one
cannot talk of person without the society. Without the society there is no
person."[25] In following this line of thought Adidi Timothy and Irabor Benson
emphasized that, "African communalism rest on interdependence and not
independence to the detriment of oneanother."[26]

In Africa culture, a normal human being is said to have three levels of existence;
first, as an individual. Second, as a member of a group, and third, as a member of
the community. All the three levels of existence are merged together in African
culture. This is because all the three levels of existence are constantly interacting
and inter-penetrating one another. "A solitary individual does not exist, it is the
society that determines and patterns the life of a person."[27] Everybody is a life
force interacting with each other. Order in individual implies order in the
society; disorder in the individual means the same to the society. In anything
individual does he must try to strike a balance between his own personal interest
and that of the society. A person is truly involved in the society outside of which
he can make no headway, has no being. In the community, the person realizes a
selfhood that makes him authentic being.

Furthermore, Africans do not think of themselves as discrete individuals but
rather understands themselves as part of the community. Mbiti would say, "I am
because we are and since we are therefore I am," contrarily "Cogito ergo sum" of
Descartes identified the self with the "I am" in isolation from "we are.' On this
basis Richard Bell Captures Mbiti thus:

> The individual owes his existence to the other people. He is simply part of the whole . . . whatever happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to them happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am." This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.[28]

The notion of "personhood" or "being a person" is understood in many African language and societies as acquired status that is dependent upon people's relationship to their community. Roles and obligations are established by tradition and persons earn personhood by following these obligations. This is the reason our social and personal identity is said to be given to us by the community. A sheer ritual participation in one's society gives one "a person status." Individual identity Mahinde would say, is simply part of "a thorough fused collective 'we'"[29] Gyekye say that a person is only partly never fully, defined by ones membership of the community. A person has autonomy in spite of the degree to which they may be socialized by the community. This autonomy allows the individual a rational will to determine one's own goal and pursue them and to control one's destiny.

Implication Of Communalism For The Subject (Self) In Africa

The relationship between personal identity (self) and communalism (community) has brought to the fore the ontological primacy of the community and the organic character of the relationships between individual persons and the community that enable individual to achieve wellbeing and realized selfhood. Within the African communalism, the self is defined in terms of "we existence" through social and communal interaction.

Chukwudum Okolo observes, that such an understanding and conception of the self is "bound to generate all sorts of problems with regard to the status of the self as an individual, as an independent subject."[30] Kwame Gyekye in his book, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflection on African Experience,* opines that:

> Individuality, autonomy and responsibility are to some extend respected and catered for in the African communalistic understanding, one cannot fail to notice such assertion on freedom, autonomy and responsibility are rarely exercised owing

to the authoritarian hierarchical structure and deep respect for tradition found within the African culture.[31]

The question now is: How free and autonomous can an individual be in African communalism? Scholars in searching to answer this question seem to contend that the individual is free even though his/her will is determined by the community. "Although individual is swallowed by the society in African communalism, he still enjoys his freedom and autonomy."[32]

The seeming freedom and autonomy which individual enjoys are practical reality, derived from the community. It is no doubt the reason Okolo concludes that, "in African philosophy, self as a subject suffers; if is accounted for almost totally in terms of relations to others."[33] African communities in its existential situation seem to give little or no room for individual values, such as personal initiative, responsibility, subjectivity and self-determination. These values are very important for individual to exercise their personal freedom and autonomy for each man has intrinsic dimension in her being. A person cannot be reduced to a mere set of extrinsic relations. A person is a subject, an end in himself and not simply a means. Being an individual subject a person is self-determined, not merely community determined. To ignore personal initiative, subjectivity and independent will amount to undermining the very root of human freedom and autonomy. It is on this note that Kisekka asserts that the pressing issue facing the contemporary Africa, "is the lack of personal identity and personal self-direction which reduce the individual to simply living instead of existing historically, culturally and socially."[34] This brings about a mentality that someone cares for you more than you care for yourself, the mentality of total dependence on cultural community

Kierkegard's Philosophy And Its Implication For The Self

Soren Kierkegaard is known for his insistence on subjectivity. He argues for the category of the single individual and insisted on the subjectivity of the self against the totalizing Hegelian philosophy and against "individual" submergence to a so-called "crowd." Kierkegaard sees a single individual as the most critical thing. Existing as a responsible individual human being is the first condition in achieving authentic selfhood.

Kierkegaard, like Socrates, insists that a truly human existence as a single individual is something one must attain. The process of becoming subjective is

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bound to the process of decision and choice, for every day we make decisions which give content to our lives. It is the ability to make choice and decisions that is stifled by the domination of cultural community.

Kierkegaard sees the crowd as the most serious threat to subjectivity and individuation thereby precluding a truly human existence. Hence, "no one in our day dares to be a person. The one is so afraid of "the other," that he does not dare to be an I."[35] Man has to take responsibility for his/her choices it is this that gives birth to self. It singles us out and makes us have a genuine relation to the other. The person in the crowd is essentially "a number instead of a self."[36] Kierkegaard should not be seen as advocating some form of individualism but rather defending subjectivism on the grounds that it is in following the part of subjectivity that the individual accepts personal responsibility for choice of a certain kind of life.

Man whose essence is to exist, in the sense of becoming subjective, the individual relates to others. It is only in that intersubjective (community) relations one become meaningful and authentic and is capable of cultivating true subjectivity. However, if individual relates to truth subjectively he would be able to question and examine the efficacy and merits of the prevailing social, cultural and ethical current, responsibility is accepted, conscience awakened and true personhood established.

Personal Identity And Communalism: A Critique

From the foregoing write up, we have done justice to personal identity and its attendant problems. Philosophers have argued that identity lies in the body, while others see the mind and consciousness or the soul as the basis of identity. These positions in respect of personal identity have provoked commends and criticisms. Chimakonam argued for the body as the sole constituent of personal identity. "Only the body is perceptible and therefore could be the only judging parameter for the society, thus identity does not involve internal mind but external body."[37] Person as we can see is an integral whole, that is, body and soul. It is on this note, for Strawson, persons are distinct from material bodies, but they are not immaterial bodies or incorporeal non-bodies. A "person has states of consciousness as well as physical attributes and is not merely to be identified with one."[38] Michael Polanyi summarized Strawson's theory of person by saying, "a person is the body, is the appearance, is the self-conscious and rational individual, is the source and the object of rights and obligations, is that

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which takes roles and discharges functions"[39] and not merely an immaterial substance as postulated by Locke, thought by Descartes and Hume's distinct and disjointed perception, hence no personal identity.

Furthermore, the preponderance of community in personal identification have been questioned, criticized and rejected by many philosophers. C. B. Okolo argues that the social (community) vision of the personality or selfhood is problematic. For him, it jeopardizes freedom, autonomy and personal initiative. Individual community relations reduces man to a mere set of extrinsic relations, not an end in himself but a mean. He must be self not other determined. Iroegbu on this captures Okolo thus:

> The seemingly freedom which the individual enjoys is ultimately and in reality a derivative one, dependent on, and largely determined by the other, that is to say the community. Little or no room is left for initiative, spontaneity, responsibility auto-determination and so on, which individual cherish as an individual and which are the hallmark of true liberty and autonomy.[40]

Okolo goes to the extent of writing that a communal view of the self does violence to the status of the individual as an independent self-consciousness.

Again, Chimakonam objected to the personhood determination by the society in Africa. He said that it is not plausible. For him the society is never unanimous in its characterization of person. As regards one person, the society may have conflicting views about him therefore, for him the society or community does not have authentic view of individual personhood.

For me, a person realizes his full selfhood in intersubjectivity. Through community individual relationship there is a balance integration of the values that both society and individual present for the full flourishing of human person which also allows for attainment of authentic selfhood.

Conclusion

The problem of personal identity has persisted over the years because of the penchant towards divisiveness and extremism. Many philosophers have addressed the problem by seeking to argue that it is derived from the community in which the individual belongs. This exercise has not been without merit though

its critics point to the fact membership of a community is, of itself, insufficient to enable authentic self identity to take place. While communalism and its outcome may add to the appearance of the worst features of what Kierkegaard terms the crowd. True identity is not only based on the tasks or roles of the individuals but and with the community.

Ibuanyidanda philosophy offers a solution at this point, because it calls on all African philosophers and by extension all philosophers, to see, things through the windows of missing links of reality and never as an absolute mode of existence, for every individual person or being is a missing link that serves other missing links. The individual is prior to the community and when submerged the community takes precedence, which is to say that, social identity is confer on individual by the community. Viewing personal identity devoid of communalism would still bring to the fore sentiments, biases and misinterpretations on it.

It is precisely at this point that Kierkegaardian philosophy of subjectivity is able to offer a way since it is in following the sort of subjectivity that the individual come to accept personal responsibility for the choice of a certain kind of life. It is in following the path of subjectivity that personal identity (personhood) is achieved; the individual is able to respond authentically to the needs of the other and the true intersubjectivity that is Ibuanyidanda's hallmark comes to fruition. Again, it should be noted that the individual is partly determined by the community not wholly. A person has autonomy in spite of the degree to which they may be socialized by the community. This autonomy allows the individual a rational will to determine one's own goal and pursue them and to control ones destiny.

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