PERSON AND COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

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My aim in this paper is to articulate a certain conception of the person found in African traditional thought. I shall attempt to do this in an idiom, or language, familiar to modern philosophy. In this regard it is helpful to begin by pointing to a few significant contrasts between this African conception of the person and various other conceptions found in Western thought.

The first contrast worth noting is that whereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community. As John Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."[1]

One obvious conclusion to be drawn from this dictum is that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be. And this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community

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that the individual comes to see himself as man, and it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent, fact of this world. In the language of certain familiar Western disciplines, we could say that not only the biological set through which the individual is capable of identification by reference to a communal gene pool, but also the language which he speaks and which is no small factor in the constitution of his mental dispositions and attitudes, belong to this or that specific human group. What is more, the sense of self-identity which the individual comes to possess cannot be made sense of except by reference to these collective facts. And thus, just as the navel points men to umbilical linkage with generations preceding them, so also does language and its associated social rules point them to a mental commonwealth with others whose life histories encompass the past, present, and future.

A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought: in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.

This brings us to the second point of contrast between the two views of man, namely, the *processual* nature of being in African thought--the fact that persons become persons only after a process of incorporation. Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed. This is perhaps the burden of the distinction which Placide Tempels' native informants saw fit to emphasize to him--i.e. the distinction between a *muntu mutupu* (a man of middling importance) and *muntu mukulumpe* (a powerful man, a man with a great deal of force). Because the word "muntu" includes an idea of excellence, of plenitude of force at maturation, the expression 'ke muntu po', which translates as 'this is not a man',[2] may be used in reference to a human being. Thus, it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man. And during this long process of attainment, the community plays a vital role as catalyst and as prescriber of norms.

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In light of the above observations I think it would be accurate to say that whereas Western conceptions of man go for what might be described as a minimal definition of the person---whoever has soul, or rationality, or will, or memory, is seen as entitled to the description 'person'--the African view reaches instead for what might be described as a maximal definition of the person. As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term.

That full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society, indicates straight away that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes. As an Igbo proverb has it, "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up." The proverb applies, it must be added, not just to the incremental growth of wisdom as one ages; it also applies to the ingathering of the other excellencies considered to be definitive of full personhood. What we have here then is both a claim that a qualitative difference exists between old and young, and a claim that some sort of ontological progression exists between infancy and ripening old age. One does not just take on additional features, one also undergoes fundamental changes at the very core of one's being.

Now, admittedly, the whole idea of ontological progression is something in need of elaboration. Offhand it may not sit very well in the minds of those unaccustomed to the view of personhood being presented here. The temptation might be strong in some quarters to retort that either an entity is a person or it is not; that there can be no two ways about it. In response to this misgiving let me note that the notion of an acquisition of personhood is supported by the natural tendency in many languages, English included, of referring to children and new-borns as *It*. Consider this expression: "We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived *It* was dead." We would never say this of a grown person. Of course, with a child or new-born, reference could also be made by use of a personal pronoun, with the statement reading instead: "We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived he/she was dead." This personalizing option does not, however, defeat the point

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presently being made. For the important thing is that we have the choice of an *it* for referring to children and new-borns, whereas we have no such choice in referring to older persons.

The fact, then, that a flexibility of referential designation exists in regard to the earliest stages of human life, but not in regard to the more established later stages, is something well worth keeping in mind. What we have is not just a distinction of language but a distinction laden with ontological significance. In the particular context of Africa, anthropologists have long noted the relative absence of ritualized grief when the death of a young child occurs, whereas with the death of an older person, the burial ceremony becomes more elaborate and the grief more ritualized--indicating a significant difference in the conferral of ontological status.

Before moving away from the foregoing observations made in support of the notion of personhood as acquired, let me note, in addition, that in African societies the ultimate termination of personal existence is also marked by an 'it' designation; thus, the same depersonalized reference marking the beginning of personal existence also marks the end of that existence. After birth the individual goes through the different rites of incorporation, including those of initiation at puberty time, before becoming a full person in the eyes of the community. And then, of course, there is procreation, old age, death, and entry into the community of departed ancestral spirits--a community viewed as continuous with the community of living men and women, and with which it is conceived as being in constant interaction.

Following John Mbiti, we could call the inhabitants of the ancestral community by the name of the "living dead."[3] For the ancestral dead are not dead in the world of spirits, nor are they dead in the memory of living men and women who continue to remember them, and who incessantly ask their help through various acts of libation and sacrificial offering. At the stage of ancestral existence, the dead still retain their personhood and are, as a matter of fact, addressed by their various names very much as if they were still at center stage. Later, however, after several generations, the ancestors cease to be remembered by their personal names; from this moment on they slide into personal non-existence, and lose all that they once possessed by way of personal identity. This, for the traditional African world-view, is the termination of personal existence, with entities that were once fully human agents becoming once again mere *its*, ending their worldly sojourn as they had started out--as un-incorporated non-persons. Mbiti has described this terminal stage

of a person's life as one of "collective immortality" (in contrast to the "personal immortality" that marks the stage of ancestral existence, a stage in which the departed are remembered by name by the living, and do genuinely form a community of their own).[4]

But the expression "collective immortality" is misleading and problematic. At the stage of total dis-incorporation marked by the term, the mere *its* that the dead have now become cannot form a collectivity of any kind; and, since by definition no one now remembers them, there is not much sense in saying of them that they are immortal either. They no longer have an adequate sense of self; and having lost their names, lose also the means by which they could be immortalized. Hence, it is better to refer to them by the term *the nameless dead*, rather than designate their stage of existence by such a term as "collective immortality," thereby opening up the possibility of describing them as "collective immortals," which certainly they are not. This emendation apart, however, Mbiti is quite right when he states that for African man no ontological progression is possible beyond the spirit world: "Beyond the state of the spirits, men cannot go or develop. This is the destiny of man as far as African ontology is concerned."[5]

The point can be made then, that a significant symmetry exists between the opening phase of an individual's quest for personhood and the terminal phase of that quest. Both are marked by an absence of incorporation and this absence is made abundantly evident by the related absence of collectively conferred names. Just as the child has no name when it tumbles out into the world to begin the journey towards selfhood, so likewise, at the very end, it will have no name again. At both points it is considered quite appropriate to use an 'it' designation precisely because what we are dealing with are entities in regard to which there is a total absence of incorporation.

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that this phenomenon of a depersonalized status at the two polarities of existence makes a great deal of sense given the absence of moral function. The child, we all know, is usually preoccupied with his physical needs; and younger persons, generally, are notoriously lacking in moral perception. Most often they have a tendency towards self-centeredness in action, a tendency to see the world exclusively through their own vantage point. This absence of moral function cannot but have an effect on the view of them as persons. Likewise for the completely departed ancestral spirits, who, at the terminal point of their personal existence, have now become mere *its*, their contact with the human community

completely severed. The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that ==personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations.== It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense--an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.

John Rawls, of the Western-born philosophers, comes closest to a recognition of this importance of ethical sense in the definition of personhood. In *A Theory of Justice* he makes explicit part of what is meant by the general ethical requirement of respect for persons, noting that those who are capable of a sense of justice are owed the duties of justice, with this capability construed in its sense of a potentiality which may or may not have been realized. He writes:

> Equal justice is owed to those who have the capacity to take part in and to act in accordance with the public understanding of the initial situation. One should observe that moral personality is here defined as a potentiality that is ordinarily realized in due course. It is this potentiality which brings the claims of justice into play.... The sufficient condition for equal justice [is] the capacity for moral personality.[6]

I take it that an important implication of this claim is that if an individual comes to deserve the duties of justice (and the confirmation therein implied of the individual's worth as a person) only through possession of a capacity for moral personality, then morality ought to be considered as essential to our sense of ourselves as persons. And indeed Rawls has argued in another context that a Kantian interpretation is possible in which the transgression of accepted moral rules gives rise not just to a feeling of guilt but to a feeling of shame--the point being that once morality is conceived as a fundamental part of what it means to be a person, then an agent is bound to feel himself incomplete in violating its rules, thus provoking in himself the feeling properly describable as shame, with its usual intimation of deformity and unwholeness.[7]

If it is generally conceded, then, that persons are the sort of entities that are owed the duties of justice, it must also be allowed that each time we find an ascription of any of the various rights implied by these duties of justice, the conclusion naturally follows that the possessor of the rights in question cannot be other than a person. That is so because the basis of such rights ascription has now been made dependent on a possession of a capacity for moral sense, a capacity, which though it need not be realized, is nonetheless made most evident by a concrete exercise of duties of justice towards others in the ongoing relationships of everyday life.

The foregoing interpretation would incidentally rule out, I believe, some dangerous tendencies currently fashionable in some philosophical circles of ascribing rights to animals.[8] The danger as I see it is that such an extension of moral language to the domain of animals is bound to undermine, sooner or later, the clearness of our conception of what it means to be a person. The practical consequences are also something for us to worry about. For if there is legitimacy in ascribing rights to animals then human beings could come to be compelled to share resources with them. In such a situation, for instance, the various governmental programs designed to eradicate poverty in the inner cities of the United States could conceivably come under fire from the United Animal Lovers of America, or some other such group, with the claim seriously being lodged that everything was being done for the poor, but not enough for the equally deserving cats and dogs. Minority persons might then find themselves the victims of a peculiar philosophy in which the constitutive elements in the definition of human personhood have become blurred through unwarranted extensions to non-human entities.

Before bringing to a close the various comments made so far, it might be helpful to focus on two issues discussed earlier, in an effort to forestall possible misunderstanding. One issue is the acquisition of personhood, since the possibility exists of confusing the African viewpoint with the viewpoint known in the West as Existentialist Philosophy. The other issue is the articulation of the specific sense in which the term 'community' has been used in these pages, so as to avoid possible misinterpretation.

To begin with the first, it must be emphasized that the African concept of man contrasts in significant measure with Existentialism (which on the face of things appears to be its most natural ally among the various Western philosophers of the

person). Jean-Paul Sartre tells us that prior to the choice of his fundamental project an individual is "nothing [and] will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes himself."[9] Such a statement immediately evokes favorable comparisons between the African view of man and the Existentialist view, both views being regarded as adopting a notion of personhood, or self-hood, as something acquired.

But this, it must be warned, is a hasty conclusion to draw. For the Sartrean view that man is a *free unconditioned being,* a being not constrained by social or historical circumstances, flies in the face of African beliefs. Given its emphasis on individuals solely constituting themselves into the selves that they are to become, by dint of their private choices, such a view cannot but encourage eccentricity and individualism--traits which run counter to African ideals of what the human person is all about. Although in important ways existence does precede essence, it is not for the reasons that Sartre gives. We simply cannot postulate man's freedom and independence from all determining factors, including even reason, which is sometimes viewed by Sartre as unduly circumscribing the individual in his quest for a free and spontaneously authentic existence. As Professor William Abraham has pointed out in his book, *The Mind of Africa,* if possession of reason is part of our nature, then we cannot be enslaved by reason as Sartre sometimes seems to suggest; for no entity can be enslaved by its own nature.[10]

Nor is the above the only point at which Existentialist philosophy diverges from the African in the conception of man. Because of the controlling force of freedom, Sartre was led to postulate an equality of status between infant and child, on the one hand, and the grown adult, on the other. What all individuals have in common is that they choose; and choice is freedom, and freedom choice. As he puts it elsewhere, "Man does not exist in order to be free *subsequently;* there is no difference between the being of man and his *being free.*"[11] But this collapsing of the ontological distinction between young child and grown man is an illegitimate and absurd move. Even assuming that Sartrean freedom is a *sine qua non* of the metaphysics of persons, how can children with their quite obvious lack of intelligent appreciation of the circumstances of their lives and of the alternatives open to them, choose rationally? Is a choice undertaken in childish ignorance a choice that is truly free?

These misgivings are serious; and it is frankly quite difficult to understand what is meant by the type of freedom which Sartre insists both adults and children have in equal

measure, as a result of which it is then argued that they, and they alone, can define for themselves the selves that they are to be, each in his own way. As Anthony Manser has put it, and I entirely agree, "It would seem that little remains of the freedom Sartre has been emphasizing...; it is hard to see how an infant can be aware of what he is doing, and if not then it is odd to call him responsible."[12]

In the light of the foregoing observations, I take it then that the African view of human personhood and the Existentialist view should not be conflated. Even though both views adopt a dynamic, non-static approach to the problem of definition of human self-hood, the underpinning metaphysical assumptions diverge significantly. Above all, whereas in the African understanding human community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood, in the Sartrean existentialist view, the individual alone defines the self, or person, he is to become. Such collectivist insistences as we find in the African world-view are utterly lacking in the Existentialist tradition. And this difference in the two approaches is not accidental. Rather it arises because there is at bottom a fundamental disagreement as to what reality is all about.

Finally, let me try to clarify the sense in which the term 'community' has been used throughout this paper. Western writers have generally interpreted the term 'community' in such a way that it signifies nothing more than a mere collection of self-interested persons, each with his private set of preferences, but all of whom get together nonetheless because they realize, each to each, that in association they can accomplish things which they are not able to accomplish otherwise. In this primarily additive approach, whenever the term 'community' or 'society' is used, we are meant to think of the aggregated sum of individuals comprising it. And this is argued, not just as an ontological claim, but also as a methodological recommendation to the various social or humanistic disciplines interested in the investigation of the phenomenon of individuals in groups; hence the term 'Methodological Individualism' so much bandied around in the literature.

Now this understanding of human community, and of the approach to its study, is something completely at odds with the African view of community. When Mbiti says that the African says to himself, "I am because we are," the *we* referred to here is not an additive 'we' but a thoroughly fused collective 'we'. It is possible to distinguish three senses of human grouping, the first of which I shall call *collectivities* in the truest sense; the second of which might be called *constituted* human groups; and

the third of which might be called *random* collections of individuals. The African understanding of human society adopts the usage in description number one above, whereas the Western understanding would fall closer to description number two; the difference between the two being that in what I have called 'collectivities in the truest sense' there is assumed to be an *organic* dimension to the relationship between the component individuals, whereas in the understanding of human society as something *constituted* what we have is a non-organic bringing together of atomic individuals into a unit more akin to an association than to a community. The difference between the two views of society is profound and can be represented diagrammatically thus:

AFRICAN   WESTERN

As can be seen from the diagram, whereas the African view asserts an ontological independence to human society, and moves from society to individuals, the Western view moves instead from individuals to society.

In looking at the distinction just noted, it becomes quite clear why African societies tend to be organized around the requirements of duty while Western societies tend to be organized around the postulation of individual rights. In the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties. In the West, on the other hand, we find a construal of things in which certain specified rights of individuals are seen as antecedent to the organization of society; with the function of government viewed, consequently, as being the protection and defense of these individual rights.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), p. 141.

2. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), p. 101.

3. Mbiti, *African Religions*, p. 32.

4. Ibid., p. 33.

5. Ibid., p. 34.

6. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 505-506.

7. Ibid., p. 445.

8. See, for instance, Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975); as well as Tom Regan & Peter Singer eds., *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.,: Prentice Hall, 1976).

9. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism" in Nino Languilli ed., *The Existentialist Tradition: Selected Writings,* trans. by Philip Mairet (New York: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1971), p. 399.

10. William Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 20-21.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An essay on Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 25.

12. Anthony Manser, *Sartre: A Philosophical Study* (London: The University of London Press, 1966), p. 122.