

**RECONCILING WESTERN AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: RATIONALITY,  
CULTURE AND COMMUNITARIANISM**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

**MASTER OF ARTS**

of

**RHODES UNIVERSITY**

by

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August 2001

## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to reconcile Western and African philosophy with specific reference to the issues of rationality, culture and communitarianism. It also discusses the post-Enlightenment, Western philosophical concept of liberal “atomism” and the primacy of the individual and the emergence of a communitarian critique in response. This thesis intends exploring how Western notions of individuality and the communitarian response can be reconciled with contemporary African philosophy and African communitarian thought in particular. To do this, it is necessary to explore the problem of liberal individualism and how African communitarianism might reinforce the Western communitarian critique. African communitarianism has a processual understanding of personhood that underpins its conception of the Self. In contrast to this view, Western communitarianism has a relational conception of the individual Self. Thus, this thesis argues that African communitarianism has a more profound understanding of the constitution of the Self. To demonstrate these claims, this study discusses notions of rationality which inform each of the philosophical traditions. This will enable a comparative analysis of the above-mentioned philosophical traditions with the intention of uncovering the concepts that provide the platform for their reconciliation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Special acknowledgements go to the National Research Foundation for providing an academic scholarship that enabled me undertake this research. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr Ivor Sarakinsky, for his patience in assisting me and sharpening my thinking. I would also like to give special thanks to my grandparents Mr Machule and Mrs Nokhwezi Vitsha for never giving up on me and Reverend L. M. Mqala for his encouragement.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis discusses modern liberalism, communitarianism and African philosophy examining notions of individuality, community and rationality within these philosophical traditions. It studies these three perspectives, identifying similarities and differences that emerge. The first task is to discuss the post-Enlightenment, Western philosophical concepts based on liberal atomism and the primacy of the individual and contrasting it with the debates coming out of the communitarian critique of liberalism. Furthermore, this research will investigate how African philosophy in its understanding of personhood and community can further the communitarian critique of liberalism.

In contemporary South Africa, there is a need to undertake research to give meaning and content to the vision of the African Renaissance. With regard to this, Gyekye (in Coetzee, 2000b: 14) argues that “the evolution of the socio-political theory which integrates the values of individuality and community is a necessary pre-condition of Africa’s renaissance”. This necessitates the project that is pursued in this thesis and which aims at reconciling different philosophical perspectives : aspects of liberal individualism, communitarianism and African philosophy.

The first part of this thesis discusses liberal individualism, its origins and problematic in Western philosophy. The aim of this endeavour is to understand the concept of individuality and the notion of rationality that informs it. The main problem raised with this view is that of prioritising the individual over the community, thereby assuming that individuals pre-exist community.

This is a significant problem in individualism because all other questions emerge out of this

presupposition.

The criticism of this is that individuals, in making their life choices, must be informed by the values of the community within which they were reared.

Furthermore, to be able to make moral choices, individuals must have some advanced understanding of moral concepts and values which they only acquire within the community. It is at this point that communitarianism raises problems with liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is informed by Kantian rationality which emphasises individual autonomy and self-determination as constituting rational agency (Taylor, 1985). It is here that the liberal theory of rights emanate.

Communitarianism and African philosophy seek to provide the discussion with the necessary conditions for individual development which are absent in liberal individualism. This constitutes the second and third tasks of this thesis. African philosophers and communitarians discuss rights which emanate from their respective conceptions of a person. They suggest that one does not need to make atomistic assumptions to have a theory of rights.

For the communitarian, human beings are social animals. Individuals are embedded within the community which then shapes them and affect the choices of their life plans. African philosophers go further than this. Concurring that individuals are social animals, they provide a concept of personhood which captures their understanding of the nature of the person and the conditions in which they are constituted within their communities and cultures. Some African philosophers talk about the actual cultural practices which have an impact in life and destiny of the child growing within the culture particularly in the African context.

This is informed by a notion of rationality that differs from Kantian rationality.

The notion of rationality found in African philosophy and communitarianism is contextual rationality due to the emphasis on the community and culture in which each person embedded.

This notion of rationality deviates from the Western notion of rationality which assumes universality which, in most cases, tends to exclude African philosophy.

The challenge posed against universality in the Western notion of rationality raises another problem for us. This is the problem of particularity which results in relativism. This is pursued in the third task of this thesis. In pursuing the above-mentioned discussions, there is a need to clarify African philosophy and because it has come to have different meanings in the post-colonial discourse. Firstly, it is essential to establish the necessity of talking about an African philosophy.

Serequeberhan (1993: 38) asserts that all cultures deal with the same philosophical issues which are universal. It is important to note that even though they are universal, they differ in how each culture traces the unity of these “themes, synthesises and organises them based on the conception of life, namely the interrelation between objects and persons and between persons themselves”. Therefore, he (ibid) argues, we can and should be able to talk about African philosophy because African culture has its own way of establishing order, its own view of life. The stream of African philosophy spoken about in this thesis is modern contemporary African philosophy.

Contemporary African philosophy understands philosophy as systematised writings of African professional philosophers who examine traditional thought and culture and from these extract issues relevant for philosophy. This does not refer to traditional assertions that lack analytical dimension and argumentative justification because without these, Wiredu (1998: 196) argues, there is no philosophy.

It is vital to make a distinction between this view of African philosophy from African

socialism. African socialism was drawn from Marxism and because of the similarity of the African communal structure with the vision of Marxism, it was possible to import socialism as the answer in restoring the pre-colonial African community. This view did not take into account the meanings and the symbols that made society cohere in the African context and the understanding of personhood, which made community important.

The fourth task of this thesis is to provide the critical evaluation of communitarianism and African philosophy and then investigate the possibility of reconciling the three philosophical perspectives discussed in the thesis. In pursuing this task, reference is made to Hegelian philosophy, the distant ancestor of communitarianism as the basis upon which a synthesis might be possible excepting some aspects in the understanding of rationality.

The possible problem with this is, as it has been implied by Olufemi Taiwo (1998:8) in his article: *Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Africa's challenge to philosophy*, it is difficult how imagine how African philosophy can be commensurable with Hegelian philosophy. Hegel argued that

“Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World shut up; it is gold-land compressed within itself the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night” (Taiwo, 1998: 6)

In this passage Hegel refers to Africa proper which he describes as Africa south of Sahara. The motivation for this outrageous claim is clear when Hegel argued (in Taiwo, *ibid*) that “the peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to

it, we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas - the category of universality". Hegel's main point of contention is the absence of the category of universality which African thought represented in his time, more especially the work done by explorer-anthropologists.

This refers to ethno-philosophy which has since been rejected by many a modern African philosopher for the very reason that Hegel invokes in the above passage. This is folk thought that lacks the critical analytical dimension and argumentative justification Wiredu (1998: 196) refers to. Therefore, we can talk of African philosophy being reconciled at certain levels with Hegelianism, because modern African philosophy is an attempt to escape the problems of ethno-philosophy, which was based on cosmological and spiritistic argument, and do philosophy according to certain universal standards, nevertheless, maintaining the uniqueness of African philosophy. In the fourth task the goal is to attempt to reconcile different philosophical perspectives and identify the platform upon reconciliation can be achieved.

## CHAPTER 1

### PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

*The subject's right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom, is the pivot and centre of the difference between antiquity and modern times. This right in its infinity is given expression in Christianity and it has become the universal effective principle of a new form of civilization.*

Hegel

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses individualism and its problems in the liberal tradition. The focus will be on liberal contract theories that emerged in the seventeenth century as well as successor doctrines that view society as constituted by individuals in pursuit of their own ends (Taylor, 1992: 29). Essentially in this tradition, individuals pre-exist community and combine to form community. The liberal tradition prioritises the individual above the principle of obligation that flows from individuals belonging to society (ibid, p.30). The first task of this chapter is to lay out the tenets of liberalism as a political theory. In this, it is important to distinguish between seventeenth century classical liberalism and post-Enlightenment liberalism. This will enable us to examine post-Enlightenment modern liberalism which is crucial for this thesis. In doing this the distinction between negative and positive liberty will be important.

Having done so, it will be necessary to pursue the discussion of individualism that will that will inform an understanding of liberal neutrality that is linked to both individualism and rationality.

This will be achieved through the discussion of Kant's theory of freedom (Taylor, 1985) and the notions of rationality that inform modern liberal thought. Rationality as reflective and deliberative articulated in Kant (ibid) and rationality as instrumental are both important in liberalism. Crowley (1987) develops these ideas by exposing the lack of character and depth in the liberal conception of the human agent. This last theme leads into an important issue - the communitarian response to modern liberalism.

### **MODERN AND CLASSICAL LIBERALISM**

The distinction between classical and modern liberalism is essential for the understanding of continuity and discontinuity in the liberal tradition. This will highlight the foundations of liberal thinking characterised by MacPherson (1962) as "possessive individualism". Very important as the basis of classical liberalism is the doctrine of social contract propounding an instrumental view of society and certain forms of utilitarianism emanating from this doctrine (Taylor, 1992: 29). In this tradition of liberal thought, Thomas Hobbes became the most famous thinker. In this theory liberty is prior to legitimate order, legitimate order arises only as the creation of individuals through consent that entails the conferring of their natural rights to ruler (Taylor, 1985: 319). Freedom, in this sense, is part of the natural condition of people called the 'state of nature' (ibid); political society then becomes a human attempt for the protection of the individual's property in his person (MacPherson, 1962: 264).

This view, Taylor (1985:319) argues, sees liberty outside a social context, it belongs to man by virtue of being naturally alive. Liberty, understood naturalistically, exists in such conditions as that state of nature that results in the state of war because of the appetitiveness and possessiveness of the individual unbridled in the absence of legal prohibitions from an

authoritative structure (Taylor, *ibid*; MacPherson, 1962: 25).

In this context society can be understood as instrumental in order to protect the liberty of the individual from intrusions of other individuals in their appetitive pursuits in society (Berlin, 1958: 11).

This is the case with Locke as well (MacPherson, 1962: 269). Individuals are by nature equally free from the jurisdiction of others. The freedom of each individual is only limited by the requirement of other's freedoms. This necessitates some monitoring. Therefore, political society becomes a 'contractual device' for the protection of the individual and the orderly regulation of their relations with each other (MacPherson, 1962: 269) This captures the central features of what is called classical liberalism. This political theory forms the basis of liberal thinking and the major part of what came to be called negative liberty as we shall see later on.

Modern liberalism understands itself as an alternative political theory to the 'overly individualistic theory in classical liberalism (Gaus, 1982:7). Classical liberalism viewed people as independent, private and competitive beings who see civil association as a framework for the pursuit of individual interests (*ibid.*). These views, though understood as only the tenets of classical liberalism, arguably form the background of liberal thinking. For Gaus (1982) modern liberalism and its conception of people stresses mutual dependence over independence, co-operation over competition and mutual appreciation over private enjoyment. There is a subtle theme coming out of this. It is important to note that this theory, though it waters down classical liberal conceptions, still prioritises the individual over the community in that the individual enters community for mutual pursuit and protection of his own life plans and aspirations. Crittenden (1992: 155) expands on this subtle shift in modern liberalism. He argues that the modern liberal enterprise is to reconcile individuality and sociality.

This view asserts that individuals must look to others in the community in order to fully complete themselves. The understanding here is that for an individual to develop fully his nature, he must work with others in society. Citing Gaus, he (ibid) argues that the idea of finding completion in others is the crucial conceptual link between the modern liberal's conception of individuality and their avowal of man's social interests. This, it is argued, may take modern liberal thought out of the atomistic orientations that are associated with the classical tradition (ibid). One should bear in mind that the completion of an individual that is said to happen in community is an individual's ability to pursue his own unadulterated interests and life plans protected from inhibitions by others by the authoritative society structure. Crittenden (ibid.) suggests that it might be argued that this debate does not actually take modern liberals out of the atomistic orientation completely because, in essence, social relationships remain quite instrumental. Liberals argue that these relationships do not amount to instrumentalism because individuals in society have intrinsic interest in the lives of others and share experiences with them (ibid). Therefore, according to modern liberals, the pursuit of individual life plans does not mean that individuals are atomistic because they would have intrinsic interest in the lives of others which would have implications for the nature of their life plans.

This is still problematic because these individuals are able to see and determine the social relationships they pursue - it seems as if they are the ones who decide their involvement in pursuit of completion of self. Essentially, this does not fall far from individualism. It might be argued that this individual is still possessive, if not very atomistic.

As Crittenden puts it (ibid) there seems to be a fear of losing the individual in the affirming of the importance of the community. Modern liberals having attempted to reconcile individuality

and sociality still leave some gaps.

Rawls (1972), in his theory of justice attempts to do this. The Rawlsian subject in the original position is not alone but with other subjects who are also under the veil of ignorance. This means that this subject is in a social relationship. They are together to decide the terms of a just society. Perhaps, this is an example of how modern liberals attempt to reconcile individuality and sociality. Rawls (in Crittenden, p.155) argues that everybody needs one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for their own sake, and the successes and enjoyments of others are necessary for and complementary to one's own good. The individual in this sense is abstract. The social relationship in which he is a player does not constitute his self. In a sense, he still remains an individuated self among other selves. His involvement in this community is for the reason of setting the fair standards for him to play and pursue his life plans. The question of instrumentality of this social relationship under the veil of ignorance comes out strongly in Rawls' language cited above. Rawls misrepresents the way in which people relate to their conceptions of good (Mulhall & Swift, 1992: 13, 14).

His view mistakenly assumes that people's ends are formed independent of or prior society, which is regarded (as in classical liberalism) as the outcome of negotiation between individuals whose ends are already given prior that social relationship (ibid).

### **POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LIBERTY**

In order to further clarify the differences between classical and modern liberalism as well as conceptualise the contemporary meaning of liberalism, it is crucial to embark on the differentiation between negative and positive liberty pioneered by Berlin (1958). For Berlin, the conception of liberty that asserts that one is free to the degree to which there is no interference to the exercising of liberty is the negative conception. If an individual is prevented from doing what he himself considers right to do by others he is to a certain degree unfree

(ibid, p.7). One's incapacity to attain his goals is lack of freedom. It is regarded as a problem if one is prevented from attaining such goals by human interference (ibid). Moving from the naturalistic notion of freedom which understands freedom as the natural condition mankind, it is supposed that if men were left to their own devices, this would be a state where men interfere with the private sphere of others, it is therefore assumed that the area of men's free action needs to be protected by law. It is argued that there must be a private sphere (of men free pursuits of his goals) which should under no circumstances be overstepped because that would entail an interference of individual freedom (ibid, p.09).

The idea of negative liberty, in essence, posits that one is free to pursue whatever he sees fit and only guard that he does not in that pursuit trample on another's area of free action.

Berlin (ibid) clearly states that in saying that the negative defence of liberty consists in the goal of warding off interference. Therefore, threatening a man with persecution or any or imprisonment until he submits to the life which he exercises no choices of his goals is the repudiation of his freedom. To deny a man all opportunities but one, no matter how admirable the prospects upon which it opens or morally desirable its results is to "sin against the truth that he is a man with a life of his own to live" (ibid). This means that no matter how pure the motive of these actions may, they amount to the violation of freedom.

Non-interference and absence of restraint in all human pursuits represent a natural life of man. This conception of liberty may be fitted with the classical liberals already discussed above. The defence of liberty is valued regardless of the reason to block it, it does not matter if that defence of liberty will eventually lead to fragmentation of society. The problem here is that though there is a provision that prevents an individual from trampling on another's freedom in

pursuit of his own, the pulling of each individual to his own self-determined goal may lead to eventual societal fragmentation.

The content of communitarian critique, as will be discussed in more detail later, goes along these lines. Negative liberty may be summarised as 'freedom from' but on the contrary positive freedom as 'freedom to' (ibid, p.16).

For Berlin, this positive sense of freedom is about the individual being the originator of his own life plans and decisions. For this conception, freedom is realised when one is moved by reason, or purposes which are his very own (ibid.) An individual must be self-directed, deciding and not just acted upon by external nature or by other men. It asserts that it is rationality, reason that distinguishes one from the world. The free individual in the positive sense of freedom should be conscious of himself as a "thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain by reference to his own ideas and purposes" (ibid).

This is important, because it sets the tone for the kind of an individual posited in modern liberalism and modern society in general. The above assertions are about individuals who do not act on a stimuli-response basis but those who reflect on things. This is somewhat different from the negative sense of freedom, which emphasises the absence of restraints on individual goals. The positive sense of freedom, though concerned about the absence of external restraint, are essentially concerned with the quality of the pursuits which must be self-originated, not felt but reasoned. This conception of freedom offers an understanding of freedom as self-determination (Taylor, 1985: 321). The negative conception of liberty can obviously be associated with classical notions of freedom as the natural condition of man that

prevailed in the pursuing and fulfilment of unhindered desires. This conception could be understood, as a form of slavery in light of the modern notions embodied in positive liberty. Self-determination entails the individual's recovering of the authentic self, 'the voice within' (ibid).

The assertions about the authentic self are crucial here because they cannot escape the arguments about the constitution of that self.

Berlin, in positing this authentic self, presents it as the dominant self. This implies a self that stands dominant to the power of his natural desires. This self is the one that is identified with reason (ibid, p.17). He argues that:

This dominant self – variously identified with reason, with my 'higher nature', with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my 'real' or 'ideal', or 'autonomous' self or with my self at its best (ibid).

The dominant self, he posits, is contrasted with the 'empirical' self with irrational impulses controlled by uncontrolled desires and passions. This is the self that is tossed back and forth by every gust of feeling, desire and passion (ibid).

This self can be referred to as the 'felt self'. This conception of liberty may be problematic because it allows individuals to pursue what they consider their own conceptions of good and that may degrade cohesion in the society. For instance in the present traditional rural organisation there is protocol according to tradition and age in manhood or womanhood and this maintains order and cohesion in their community, degradation of that with individual pursuit of what one considers to be original to himself may in the long run undermine the social order and the order of community leading to fragmentation referred to above.

This is a sufficient discussion of positive liberty and implications for modern liberalism. In the

light of this, it would be fruitful to discuss the concept of individuality which is the direct outgrowth of modern liberalism.

Essentially, this tradition seeks to propound the idea that individuals pre-exist community and combine to form community. This is clear in that modern liberalism prioritises the individual above the principle of obligation as individuals belonging to society (Taylor, 1992: 30). From the above presupposition, liberal thought assumes that society is not the main determinant of ends but the outcome of negotiation between individuals whose ends are already given prior community (Mulhall & Swift, 1992: 14). This is clear in that individuals in pursuit of their interests co-operate for the preservation of themselves as individuals. These ideas are pivotal to this chapter as it discusses how liberalism has evolved in response to criticism.

From this, it is important to introduce the doctrines of liberal neutrality. Liberal neutrality advances the view that individuals in society should pursue their own view of the good life (like the one posited in the positive sense of liberty) with assumption of shared values. They promote a society with open-ended plurality of values which individuals choose as they think and reflect on them (Goodin and Reeve, 1989: 04). This view results in the idea of the society or minimal state that does not seek to entrench value-laden decisions but only to facilitate the pursuits of individually-determined life plans. This view is rooted in the Kantian notion of freedom (Taylor, 1985) that is discussed later in this chapter.

## **LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM**

Individualism is central to classical and modern liberalism. Here the human individual in society is defined as valuable in and of itself. For Brown (1993:11), the individual is capable of exercising freewill and that capacity to make choices is central in defining what it is to be human or, should we not say, to be an individual. Brown (ibid) is an important writer who explicates the characteristics of the modern liberal individual. In liberal individualism the notion of choice and the capacity of an individual are crucial for this project because capacity in a human individual is developmental. Thus, the invocation of capacity in individualism requires a discussions of capacity-formation. Is the capacity to make choices divorced from the social and historical context? That question entails origins and then the scope of such choices. This is going to come out clearly in our discussion.

Central to liberal individualism, according to McKercher (Brown, 1993:11), is an affirmation of individual autonomy that is exemplified in the significance of free choice discussed above. Individualism entails an internally motivated and authentically free will, individuals are active subjects who give meaning and sense to the world around them. In this view, it is argued that what matters is an individual giving shape and content to form and content of community and not vice-versa. (ibid, p.12). In arguing this, Brown (ibid) is basically assuming that the community does not have a life and consciousness of its own (repudiation of the organic community). This view then understands community only as the collection of individuals and the aggregation of their wills.

This is problematic and has grave implications for liberal political theory. It undermines the community (its life and consciousness) that is crucial in constituting the self, giving content to the self and his capacity for choice and action (ibid).

Brown (ibid, p.14) presents two ways in which liberalism is seen and these views are not

necessarily mutually exclusive. Liberal individualism is seen as abstract. This means that it has been seen as divorced from social or historical context; as individuals pre-exist community. This kind of understanding of the individual can be associated with the social contract theories of classical liberalism (ibid). The second way in which liberal individualism has been comprehended is MacPhersonian possessiveness (1962). This means that the issue here is not only free will but also ownership of property, property in his own person (ibid, p.15). This is important for understanding rationality discussed later in this chapter.

Brown herself describes that concept of possessiveness as an accurate characterisation of liberal individualism (ibid). MacPherson's concept of possessiveness is clearly stated in his propositions on possessive individualism which he argues are characteristics of liberalism, classical or modern.

MacPherson (ibid, p. 263) argues that:

the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.

This idea of possessiveness is rooted in the positive conceptions of liberty. The idea of a rational will central to this conception of freedom is an important fact for establishing possessiveness. Van Niekerk (1998:63) defines acting rationally as the acting of the subject to gain complete autonomy or self-possession. Therefore, the individual in pursuing self-determined goals gains autonomy and self-possession. The rational individual posited by Berlin (1958) and Kant (Taylor, 1985) is possessive in that, he is self-determining, and if he, as an individual, still carries out his vegetative human desires unhindered, he could still be considered irrational.

The individual in modern liberalism is possessive and it is from this that a problem starts, the possessiveness of the self in the context of community is the basis of individual atomism. If the self is possessive in the sense discussed above, he then becomes atomistic in pursuit of his life plans, those that are particular to him and only relate to others because of the provision against violation of their freedom in pursuit of individual life plans.

Taylor (1992: 29) also characterises the individual posited in modern liberalism as atomistic. This tradition originated in the seventeenth century doctrines and has resurfaced in the contemporary liberalism. Central in this doctrine is what can be called the primacy of right. This primacy of right theory running through liberal individualism ascribes certain rights to individuals as fundamental and binding unconditionally.

It also views the obligation to belong or sustain a society as laid on individuals only through their own consent or through belonging to that society being only to his advantage (ibid, p.30). This means that the responsibility for individuals to maintain societal life is only acceptable if they, as individuals, consented to it. The idea of belonging to a community continues in liberalism to be viewed in instrumental terms. An individual as a free willing being consents to a community and may join it through it being important for his pursuits or self-completion as discussed in the beginning.

The primacy of right doctrine can be contrasted with the fact that human beings, as argued by Aristotle, are social animals because they cannot be self-sufficient alone, which atomism assumes prior society (ibid, p.32) This is problematic for modern liberalism and this is the front at which the debate with communitarians take place. The primacy of right theory asserts the right of freedom attributed to humans to be able to choose their own life plans, to form their convictions and within the bounds of reason to act on them (ibid, p.40).

The capacity of an individual to make choices about his life plans, to form convictions based

on the particular conceptions of good is not there just by virtue of being alive. This is the problem with liberalism. Taylor (ibid) argues that these capacities may fail in some cases to be developed. If these capacities may not be properly developed, that means there are certain conditions that must be in place for proper development of such capacities. Embeddedness in community life is the necessary condition for development of such capacities, their development is not a question of choice prior to community but develops within a community. Individualism and the primacy of right doctrine are central in constituting the tradition. Even though some points in liberal thought have recently been watered down in response to communitarian critique. There are crucial issues that remain central in liberal thought; many of which are have been highlighted. Having said that, it would be important to investigate the foundations of liberalism in order to remain clear as to what issues still warrant criticism while saying more about the possessive nature of the liberal individual. The following section discusses the Kantian Foundations of modern liberalism and its criticism.

## **KANTIAN FOUNDATIONS**

Kantian rationality is imperative to understand the basis of liberal thought. For Kant (Taylor, 1985: 321) contrasting Hume's idea that reason must be a slave to passions, it is reason that must occupy the highest place in determining action rather than passions. The former view sees reason as instrumental and this renders reason of little value (ibid). The real function of reason is to give our actions quality motivation. The role of reason is to have an influence on the will (ibid). Therefore rationality for Kant makes actions moral. Kantian rationality postulates that it is not really an outcome by itself that decides the morality of an action (i.e. whether an action is good). This is because one may pursue outcomes out of duty or a 'pathologically submissive self'. The morality of an action must be decided by the quality of

the motivation that inspires it, which must be reason (ibid, p.322).

This is important because from the very onset, duty, as a motivating factor of human action, is inferiorised or disqualified. The sources of duty are numerous. It can be imagined that duty can be connected to the context within which an individual finds himself in. Therefore, if one acts out of duty, one has allowed external factors to intrude upon his autonomy (ibid).

This has implications for an individual embedded in community. For Kant what qualifies as quality motivation for an action is something internal to the individual, that which he is the only determinant of. An individual acts morally when he acts with a certain goal, this is the goal of conforming the will to reason (ibid, p. 322). Because rational creatures act on the basis of reason not out of duty, they conform to laws that they have formulated. In this way an individual in acting according to the law he has reasoned or determined is free indeed as the rational agent (ibid, p.323). What does this say for the laws or values that pre-existed an individual? If these individuals are guided by anything but their rationality, there will be problems for any social structure that assumes the role of guiding an individual self. This is because the structures of social institutions and their laws which pre-exist the living rational agents could then be neglected. In response to these probing thoughts, Kant argues that rational agents recognize the common law. This makes it constitutive of moral agency (ibid, p. 328). In this assertion it is very important to understand what he means about recognition. This means that individuals have to have consented actively to the common law that binds them in society. This idea is linked to the conception of freedom as self-determination by an individual will. This is called 'autonomy' (Taylor, 1979: 04).

If an individual deviates from this he is then acting in a manner which is unworthy of a rational agent, he is living a life lesser than the standard of freedom. If an individual allows the will to

be determined by an external consideration, natural inclination, any authority is failing his rational agency, his call to freedom (ibid). The fact that these rational agency stand and 'recognise' the common law through which to govern their lives sounds more like the seventeenth century social contract where individual mutually confer their (natural) rights to the authority they all recognise. But the difference is with the Kantian rational agents these common laws do not have the determining function but the facilitating function amongst the pursuits of rational wills.

This understanding of rationality (as pure reason) is objectionable. An individual in the Kantian understanding of rationality has the ability to evaluate between courses of action and therefore has an ability to offer an account of why he chose and acted the way he did (Crowley, 1987: 177). This is not exactly the problem, because it is necessary for an individual to have the freedom to choose between courses of action and to be able reflect on these an offer an account. If an individual is not able to reflect and offer an account of his action, he has a problem either in his mental capacities or there is a severe case of totalitarian conditioning. It is in the individual's mental capacities to understand and to reflect upon what he is doing.

If to be responsible for judgements and therefore courses of action one chooses, then that is to be responsible for who one is (ibid.). In that sense then "it is 'up to us' who we are, the implication being that we have some capacity to shape ourselves and hence our evaluations" (ibid.). The problem with this is the fact some judgements or choice of actions will inevitably lead the individual to evaluate about what is the *moral* action to take.

The question of the morality of a particular act cannot be determined by an individual nor by the time he needs to make the choice, it naturally precedes him. This is a problem

for Kantian rationality because for him a rational individual lives under the regime of morality that he has partly formulated (Taylor, 1985: 323).

Taking this further, pure reason, by its nature, cannot be a faculty that unilaterally enables people to choose who they are in any radical sense. This is not a faculty that is given *prima-facie* (Crowley, 1987: 212). This is because there will be nothing to reason about and the courses of action facing an individual who is denied any “morally significant context” will be meaningless until an individual has some purpose he is pursuing which he can only have in the context of some serious interpersonal relationship (ibid: 208). To make choices an individual needs to have concept, an idea about what life is and then his destiny in it. Kwasi Wiredu, in his book *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African perspective* (1996: 19), argues that a human being is born only with a biological make-up, but with no concepts and within that make-up lies the basis of innate conceptual abilities.

In order for one to have and understand a specific concept (especially with reference choice and its moral substance), one must have some linguistic ability and such an ability with others that are not mentioned is the result of training through the learning process. This serves to make clear the fact that “reason functions as a means to understand and bring to consciousness that dimension of depth - inarticulate sense of self which necessarily precedes our ability to reason” (Crowley, 1987: 213). Therefore, it is problematic to conceive of reason which, in a way, enables an individual to choose himself.

This is a very strong challenge towards Kantian rationality and should require Kantian liberals to seriously revisit the intellectual foundations of liberal thinking if they are to talk of a social individual, because the liberal self that flows from Kantian rationality and the social-political arrangement flowing from it cannot be reconciled a self constituted in a community.

Modern liberalism, because of these problems, has been seriously challenged by the philosophical tradition called communitarianism which offers a critique of the liberal self.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE COMMUNITARIAN CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

**Imitation is natural to man from childhood; he differs from other animals in that he is the most imitative; the first things he learns come to him through imitation.**

**Aristotle**

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the communitarian criticism of the normative priority of the individual in the modern liberal tradition. This view prioritises the community over the individual and views the community as a primary necessity for developing the capacity for choice which is necessary for individual freedom. Therefore, the main purpose of this chapter is to present an exposition of communitarianism. The first part of this chapter will focus on discussing the Hegelian foundations of communitarianism. This is crucial for a discussion of a notion of rationality different from the one propounded by Kant. The second part of the chapter will then present a general exposition of communitarianism together with liberal modifications.

In discussing post-Enlightenment liberalism, two important themes emerge. Mouffe (1990:218) identifies these as “self-assertion” and “self-foundation”. The former can be identified with the political project of liberalism and the latter with the epistemological project. The first theme is about the individual in liberalism who makes his own choices. This idea in simple terms can be associated with the primacy- of- rights aspects in liberalism (Taylor, 1992:

30). The second aspect highlights the abstractness of the individual who seems to be the originator of his own individuality. This is expressed in Kantian rationality. The communitarian critique is set against both these aspects of the Enlightenment liberal project. In discussing Hegel's concept of "ethical life", the purpose is to address the second aspect of the Enlightenment project ("self-foundation") and discrepancies thereof.

## **HEGELIAN FOUNDATIONS**

Hegelian "ethical life"<sup>1</sup> has been very important for establishing a communitarian notion of rationality. Therefore, it would be very important to discuss it as a foundation for communitarianism. Ethical life refers to mutual moral obligations one has to an ongoing community of which one is an important part and this set of obligations have to further and sustain this society (Taylor, 1984: 177). Our main interest in ethical life is how exactly does being part of this ongoing community constitute the self. The idea of "ethical life" can be contrasted with Kantian morality.

With Kantian morality, obligation holds an individual not in virtue of being part of a community, but as an individual who in anything is self-initiating and is in that sense a rational will (ibid, p.178). But Hegelian ethical life holds that morality reaches its fullness in an ongoing community. This is what gives obligation its definitive content as well as providing the context for realizing it (ibid.). Morality in this sense is not abstract but has a foundation in community. Ethical life emphasizes the significance of the process of becoming an individual.

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<sup>1</sup>Ethical life refers to a social order, that is composed of a set of institutions which are the family, the civil society and the modern state (Wood, 1990: 196).

The Hegelian response to the abstractness of Kantian morality is that moral duty has to have a history and cannot be conceived of as something separate from the social and political circumstances (Smith, 1989: 71).

Therefore, this conception of morality calls Kantian morality based on willing and acting rationally to question. The main issues as raised by McIntyre (ibid) is that

moral concepts are embodied and are partially constitutive of forms of social life. To understand a moral concept, to grasp the meaning of the words which express it, is always at least to learn what the rules are which govern use of such words and so to grasp the role of the concept in language and social life.

This shows that the Kantian rational agent who is prior to and independent of community cannot in that sense be moral. This is because if the individual is in any sense social, he cannot avoid the good and the right which govern that society within which he is situated. Therefore, morality can never result from an individual reflection on which is the moral way to live, but rooted in “pre-reflective customs” of a people (ibid, p.72). It is rooted in what the individual has no role in determining.

According to Hegel, moral life is ‘situated’ within common communal norms and that is the only way in which we can decipher the (moral) right or wrong (ibid.). As a result, Kantian rationality cannot produce an individual who is social and not abstract but produces

an “unencumbered self” found in the recent practical philosophy of John Rawls<sup>2</sup>.

The unencumbered self is denied the possibility of membership in any community that is bound by moral ties antecedent to choice (Sandel, 1992: 19). This is why it is impossible to accept the liberal individual based on Kantian rationality and simultaneously any serious framework of constitutive community.

It is important to note that Hegel did not understand the state and the political community as only the precondition for freedom but also as the dimension of freedom. This means that he did not understand these as requirements and structures for facilitating freedom. Freedom is embodied in the state and political community.

A state (community) is not just necessary to enforce the fulfilment of contracts and an entity with access and license to the use of coercion but a locus of shared understandings (Smith, 1989: 233).

The community in this sense is more than just the collection of a number of interests which the state must secure in order to maintain individual freedom, it is a network , a union of shared ethical ideas and beliefs which develop on a common cultural history and the sense

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<sup>2</sup>The individual under the “veil of ignorance” does not know how the various alternatives present in society will affect his own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate and make choices on the basis of general considerations. No one knows his place , status and his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and responsibilities. They do not have any conception of good but they must choose principles to live by whatever the specifics of their individual lives when they get out of the “veil of ignorance” (Rawls, 1972: 137).

of civic identity (ibid.). Hegel's view of rationality and morality is developed by Crowley (1987: 208). This is the form of rationality which fits with the communitarian vision of society. Crowley (ibid.) argues that the abstract nature of the rationalist epistemology posited by liberals is their fatal flaw. He argues that:

a self without attributes and constitutive attachments cannot choose in any morally significant sense of that term (choice), what its attributes ought to be, any more than a mind bereft of knowledge can reason about what the world or the person ought to be like.

This is what Hegel attempts to express in mentioning common cultural history, the sense of civic identity and the ethical beliefs which come to be shared in community. These are important ingredients for the development of a rational self in the Hegelian sense. Hegel's account of rationality is not a simply given attribute of human behaviour but a goal to be achieved (Smith, 1989: 234).

This is what he means when he refers to community not being only the precondition but also the dimension of freedom. The community is central in ensuring the development of a rational person with capacity for choice which the liberal see as what constitutes freedom. It is the proper condition within which rationality is achieved.

Liberalism, with its Kantian foundations, attaches priority to the self at the expense of all communal ends and purposes. This self achieves freedom in an arrangement that is neutral and indifferent to any question about the human good. It exalts only the right of individuals to

pursue their own conceptions of what is good, in fact 'beneficial' for themselves, within the societal framework (ibid.). In the Hegelian sense it is difficult for the Kantian self to have any sense of good without embedded-ness in the union of shared ethical beliefs. Therefore, the possibility is for the individual to evaluate anything as good on the basis of its benefits for the individual self which would include the maintenance of that arrangement (ibid).

Hegel's account of the evolution of mutual recognition is an important factor in the realization of individual freedom within the societal structure. This is the process which develops a consciousness for the need for interdependence in order to realize freedom. Hegel begins this process at an encounter between two agents, each understanding himself as being-for-self, that is, having a subjective point of view on the world (Pinkard, 1996:59). This encounter between the two agents cannot be solved by the death of another, it can only be resolved when the life of each is preserved in the struggle for recognition. In this struggle one must accept the point of view of the other as a slave. The master can only be the master because of the recognition he receives from the slave. He is dominant as the slave recognizes his point of view as dominant (ibid). This becomes the struggle for recognition of each by the other, meaning that the fact that the slave accepted the master's point of view at the initial stages, does not cast these relations in stone. Different dynamics develop in this relationship as the slaves' consciousness develops through the stages (ibid, p.61). This consciousness develops in the stages of history which he classified under different epochs such as stoicism, skepticism and unhappy consciousness, which we are not going to discuss in this paper.

In these stages freedom begins by existing only in thought and is worked by historical developments such as the Reformation and the French Revolution which Hegel maintains as important for the development of the consciousness of freedom for the Western subject

(Pinkard, 1996: 64-78). In unhappy consciousness as the last stage freedom was understood to be in waiting to be redeemed by a distant, divine point of view (God). This is transformed when a concept of “universal will” develops which is a conception of a shared point of view that is developed by human activity. This does exist in trying to disavow the subjective point of view for the universal that exists somewhere as an abstract entity but by fusing them into a unity. This is the desired condition of mutual recognition which thrives in ethical life (Pinkard, 1996: 77).

Kwame Gyekye, an African communitarian, presents two concepts of community which will be important for our understanding of the difference in the conceptions we have just discussed (Coetzee, 2000a: 47). These are the “associative” and the “aggregative” concepts of community. The associative conception is the understanding of community as the collective that is constituted by patterns of interpersonal relationships and that this association is structured by these relationships, with the sociological, cultural and traditional rules which are implied and reproduced only to strengthen the make-up of the association (ibid.)

He argues (ibid.) that “these relationships are regulated by culturally reinforced reciprocities, comprehensive interactions, and mutual sympathies and responsibilities”. This conception of community is relevant to the one envisaged by Hegel. It is the only kind of community that would seem to operate on the basis of the union of shared ethical beliefs that have developed in common cultural history and the deep relationality of the individual - needed for the development of a sense of civic identity. This means that as individuals have the same cultural history and as they interact values develop which are shared because of the common experience. This is a pre-requisite for the development of sociality in the process of constituting the self.

The aggregative concept of community can be identified with the Kantian forms of liberalism discussed in this chapter. This conception views the community as an aggregate of individuals, “treated as separate units contributing arithmetically to the whole and have interests contingently rather than constitutively connected” (ibid, p.48). This is going to form the crux of the discussion of the linking of communitarianism and African philosophy that will be taken up later in this paper.

Hegel implicitly reinforces the importance of the formative role of history in the construction of the self (Smith, 1989: 235). The individual found at the ‘end of history’ in Hegel is situated in the society and the societal climate which are a culmination of the process which took place prior to him, these come to permeate him and thus shape him. Hegel’s *Geist* (Spirit) objectifying himself in the world would successfully achieve the end point of this development in that era (Pinkard, 1996).

Therefore, the individual self in that era stands at the culmination of the process which he could not have by any chance reflected on, controlled or chosen but penetrates his identity all the same.)

In this sense individual identities (linked to the sense of self), which are essential for the choices one makes, “are bound up with our individual life histories and the histories of the peoples and the cultures to which we are attached” (ibid.). For Hegel individuals are what they are by their existence in community (Taylor, 1984: 181). He asserts that everything that a man has become he owes from his inherence from the community.

All value or quality a man embodies, according to Hegel, he has through the state (political community) and “an individual is an individual in this substance” (ibid).

This is in many ways concurs with the age-old phrase which has captured African philosophical vision of communitarianism: 'umntu ngumntu ngabantu' ( a person is a person through persons). It basically summarizes the view that in order for an individual to reach the fullness of personhood as conceptualized in African philosophy, interpersonal relationships and sociality are central necessities.

Hegel associated ethical society with the classical Greek polis. In this community, the norms and ends that are expressed in public life are the most important for the citizens and are central in the definition of their identity (ibid, p.185). In this community, the institutional arrangements in which individuals cannot but find themselves in, is not felt as foreign, as an intruder in the realm of individual freedom. This means that individuals do not experience community as an inhibition in their individual lives but as a necessity for the actualisation of their real freedom. The community is the essence of the self (ibid.). This essence is sustained by the activity, the affirmative participation of the citizens, they see this as their work - universal work which creates and re-creates itself through the actions of each of all (ibid.). This is what makes the ethical community a proper condition of freedom. In this sense, freedom exists in the harmony between social necessity and individual freedom.

Rationality flourishes in being rooted in the 'essence'. The objective (which is the self-existence of the political community with the life of its own, created and maintained by the affirmative participation of individual citizens) and the subjective will are then reconciled in Hegel, and form one and the same, indivisible, "untroubled whole" (ibid, p.186). This view promotes the assertion that community is not, therefore, a mere instrument or a precondition of freedom but its central dimension.

Hegel argues that when citizens stop identifying with the norms and ends of the community, when they begin to 'reflect'<sup>3</sup>, when they turn back on themselves and see themselves as individuals with individual goals, that leads to the dissolution of the ethical community. This is the condition that necessitates the dissolution of the political community and its life (ibid). This view is very important in strengthening the communitarian argument as a whole. Crowley (1987:211) concurs when he argues that an individual cannot easily discard many of his attributes (acquired in the pre-reflective customs of the community) without calling his individual identity fundamentally into question, in which case then he undermines the framework that is absolutely necessary for his freedom.

This is the foundation upon which many communitarian thinkers base their communitarian theories. The general exposition of these theories together with those of other communitarians we undertake to represent in the next section.

## **GENERAL EXPOSITION**

The main objective of this section is to discuss communitarian theory that emanates from the above foundations in general as a critique of liberalism. In the last section the focus was on presenting Hegelian foundations of communitarianism with its implications for a different conception of rationality from that of liberalism. That has already set the tone for the

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<sup>3</sup>Hegel was not necessarily against the practice of reflecting. For Hegel, the community reflected through historical practices and the institutions of art, philosophy and religion. Religion, for instance, helped the community to reflect on its absolute principles governing life (Pinkard, 1996:221-222). It is important to note that this form of reflection is a communal practice and assist the community constitute its identity (ibid).

controversy between liberalism and communitarianism.

Communitarianism attacks liberalism on two levels. The first level is methodological and the second is normative (Avineri & De-Shalit, 1992: 2). At the methodological level, communitarians argue that the premise of liberal individualism such as the rational individual (found in Kant) who chooses freely are false because the social, cultural and historical contexts that are required for the development of such attributes in human behaviour are neglected (ibid).

At the normative level, communitarians argue that the premises of individualism have to result in morally unsatisfactory consequences (ibid). These consequences are subjects empty of moral character as a result of being thinly constituted (Crowley, 1987: 219). Crowley (ibid) argues that if an individual chooses the kind of life to lead and the values to have, that must necessarily be set against the background of (moral) ties and commitments which he did not choose, but which give moral substance to his choices. This is the problem present at the level of the normative critique against liberalism. These two aspects of the communitarian critique of liberalism challenge the two aspects in post-Enlightenment liberalism which were raised at the beginning of this chapter. Those are 'self-assertion' and 'self-foundation' which are challenged at the methodological and normative levels respectively by the communitarian critics.

These are the two themes that emerge from our discussion. Walzer (1994: 242) argues that what moves the communitarian critique in liberal society is fragmentation which is the exact opposite of the community - "the home of coherence, connection, and narrative capacity". The life that the individual living in this fragmented society as a self-willing, free

individual reduces the idea of society to the co-existence of separate selves that are only joined at the level of contract (ibid.).

In liberal society the life of an individual is expressed in the language of utilities for the individual self and the language of rights (ibid). In the light of this diagnosis, one might suggest that in a society like that, where there is no consensus on the conceptions of good, the liberal society might be the solution. This is because in that situation a procedural republic<sup>4</sup> would be an absolute necessity to maintain justice (ibid, p.243).

Justice, in this sense, is not understood as having any moral content. It is upholding and protecting of all the values individuals choose balanced with the harm principle.

This suggestion seeks to undermine the communitarian argument raised above on the basis of the fact that if they understand the liberal society to be fragmented there is no point of trying to return to the “lost Eden” (ibid). The best thing to do is to service the fragmentation by invoking a just liberal society which might just save the fragmented society from degeneration. The problem with this is that it would then mean that the atomistic nature of the liberal society discussed by Taylor (1985: 187) is not a problem for post-Enlightenment liberal theory but the most desirable state of affairs as long as the harm principle is upheld.

The above line of argument is diluted by the second argument posited by the communitarians. Communitarians assert that liberal theory and the society they advocate misrepresents real life. This argument is in line with the aspect of ‘self-foundation’ in

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<sup>4</sup>The procedural republic is an arrangement where “society is an association of individuals, each of whom has a conception of good or worthwhile life and, correspondingly, a life plan. The function of society (*republic*) ought to be to facilitate these life plans, as much as possible and following some principle of justice”(Taylor, 1995: 186).

Enlightenment liberalism. It leads us to discussions about the constitution of the self, the process by which an individual is founded.

This has come out numerous times in this paper and for me is the most powerful of the communitarian criticisms which the liberals cannot avoid. It argues that people loose from all social ties, unencumbered, with each being the one and the only inventor, 'founder' of his life, with no criteria at all are mythical characters (Walzer, 1994: 243). This is about the conception of self. In this liberal understanding, the self is prior to its ends and in that way, it is morally bankrupt, without character and depth because these are acquired or develop from being embedded in society (Baynes, 1990:65).

The communitarians such as Taylor and Sandel (*ibid*, p.66) have presented an alternative conception of the self. They argue that human beings are 'self-interpreting animals', this means that their relation to their ends is not just about weighing their preferences, but the process of interpreting and evaluating those ends constitutes who they are. This emphasizes that the process of deciding the courses of action to take is moral, context-bound, and any attempt to transcend it would result in the fragmentation of the very basis of community.

McIntyre (Mulhall & Swift, 1992: 71) concurs with this view. The reason for liberals advocating this conception of self comes from the understanding that individuals cannot agree on a conceptions of the good (*ibid*, p. 72). This is true, but it is because the liberal self does not have any moral framework upon which to base his conception of good. If the liberal individual was situated in community he would be embedded in it together with other actors and disagreement would not be far apart that a consensus based on shared understandings cannot be reached. This is what Bell (1993: 63-64) attempts to spell out. He introduces the idea of substantial agreement which is based on shared meanings. Shared meanings, for Bell

(ibid) does not refer to agreements of the community or consensus on certain issue they may be lobbying at a particular point in time but “an authoritative interpretation of community morality that bears on the proper character of the community”. This idea then limits the understanding of the moral status of the certain thing to the moral context or community within which it is interpreted.

In liberal thought one must abstract himself from the community’s shared meanings in order to be able to criticize the community rationally. This is what constitute moral freedom (ibid, p.64). This assumes that there are universal standards which one can employ to criticize any community. Bell (ibid) argues that it is necessary for one to hold a universal view of morality to criticize the community. This approach believes that there are objective and universal standpoints that should be applicable to all societies. For me Kantian rationality attempts to express just this. In this view, Bell argues, one appeals to universal principles that are independent of any social or cultural particularities (ibid). The second view which is appropriate to the communitarian standpoint views critical standard to be drawn from the communities shared meanings of a particular society rather than from an external, impersonal imposition (ibid).

The latter view allows a communitarian to argue that one can then invoke a common good or to be fair, an agreement on the conceptions of good. This, however, may raise the problem of relativism. For an example this argument has been used by African leaders against the idea of universal human rights. They argue that they have their own understanding of human rights which is not necessarily the one Western powers claim to be universal (Howard, 1986).

In the first section we have discussed Hegel’s understanding of community as entailing the union of shared ethical beliefs. This is pursued by McIntyre (ibid, p. 93) more than any

other communitarian thinker. For McIntyre the very failure of liberalism to acknowledge the constitutive attachments of individuals to their communities has resulted in them invoking the impossibility of these individuals agreeing on the common conception of good (ibid).

For McIntyre (1984: 127), what an individual is doing can only be intelligible in his context, within a narrative. This has an important bearing on the conception of selfhood. He argues (ibid) that a correct conception of self must have its unity residing in “the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end”. He (ibid, p.128) uses the term of a ‘setting’ to illustrate this point. A setting may be an institution, a social milieu of a human being. This setting has a history, it is within this history that the histories of the individuals are situated. Without this ‘situation’, the history of the individual and its changes would be confused. This means that if an individual’s history is not placed within this larger picture, he will not have the capacity for self-understanding (social identity) necessary to enable himself to choose in any serious sense.

This is in line with Crowley’s (1987:212) understanding of the function of reason as the “faculty which allows us to integrate that self knowledge (acquired through our experiences), to make it our own and construct from it an articulated understanding of ourselves, of our deepest values”.

The simple understanding of this is that we may choose against the background of unchosen foundation. But it is important to understand this clearly. It is not the endorsement of totalitarianism but an attempt to explain “the process governing the formation of individual selves” capable of making moral choice and the sense in which they can be said to be free.

This discussion leads us to a point which will be examined in the next chapter about cultural universals and particulars and the idea that there are elements of particularity and universality in every culture, which may lead us to conclude that intersections exist, as a common place between cultures (Wiredu, 1996: 20).

## **CONCLUSION: LIBERAL RESPONSES**

The communitarian critique of liberalism resulted in a number of replies from contemporary liberal theorists, some of which are mentioned in the previous section. It also prompted some to rethink liberal theories. Kymlicka (Brown, 1994: 18) argues that liberalism does not deny the need for the social world in an individual's life, but attempts to understand and encourage human capacity to question the appropriateness of a particular social context. What is at stake in this debate is the 'human capacity' and the implication that it is a given fact rather than a product of a developmental process.

Liberalism rejects the idea that is associated with communitarian critics, such as Crowley (1987: 211), that individuals are embedded in a social context and while being able to make sense and interpret their social relationships, they cannot transcend or reject them because they embody their identity (Brown, 1994: 18). Liberals argue that individuals are capable of questioning and rejecting their social situation (ibid.) Kymlicka (ibid) argues that :

We can and do make sense of questions not just about  
the meaning of the roles and attachments we find ourselves in,  
but also their value.

The problem here still is that it seems as though the appropriateness of the particular social

context and its value seems to be measured by and decided on the basis of its instrumentality for the individual. To this Gauthier (1992: 157) argues that in defending the normative priority of the individual to community, liberalism does not imply anything about the causal basis of individuality nor does it (liberalism) reject it. He argues (ibid) that the self-consciousness that is necessary for an individual to have a genuine self-conception may only be possible as the result of socialization.

Gutmann (1992: 128) provides a more serious challenge to communitarian political thought. She argues that communitarians such as McIntyre and Sandel see the moral universe in dualistic terms. They encourage one to see it as either our identities are independent of our ends which leaves us unencumbered selves or they are constituted in community, leaving us encumbered by the socially determined life plans.

These are both extremes because what the communitarians criticize in liberalism, the primacy-of-rights that produces an unencumbered self, they have the same problem, which for them is the self that is encumbered by socially dictated ends. This may result in cultural oppression that may be carried out in the name of maintaining valued ends such as protecting the moral fabric of society. This society would be static, because if there is social change the individual taking the first step would suffer. Gutmann (ibid) argues that these communitarians miss the appeal of liberals to reconcile the competing conceptions of good.

Lastly, according to Gutmann (ibid, p.130), it is Sandel who argues that the main concern of communitarianism is the concentration of power in the hands of corporate economy, the bureaucratic state and the dwindling of the intermediate forms of community that are important for encouraging active public life. She continues to advance the position that

communitarianism has no point in undermining liberal values but its good use is recovering politics that liberalism has lost. These are broad based communities like civil societies which are not based on necessarily eroding the liberal state but which enliven them (ibid).

Communitarianism is valuable for highlighting the fragmenting effect of individualist morality in society. This discussion is going to enable us to open a dialogue between communitarianism which has foundations in Hegelian ethical life working within German idealism and African philosophy which developed from African professional philosopher's attempts to extract what is of philosophical relevance in the traditions, cultures of the African cultural communities. This seeks to compare the two and identify the common ground between them.

## CHAPTER 3

### COMMUNITARIANISM: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

**Dark Africa?**

**Who nursed the doubtful child of civilization,**

**On the wand'ring banks of life-giving Nile,**

**And gave the teeming nations of the West**

**A Grecian gift?**

**Micheal Dei-Anang**

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses African communitarianism in contemporary African philosophy. This will entail the exposition of the African philosophical perspective of communitarianism. Here, the African concept of personhood is central. The centrality of this concept is necessitated by, according to Berlin (in Gaus, 1983: v), the fact that the ideas of every philosopher concerned with human affairs rests on the conceptions of what Man is. Therefore, it is important to grasp this central image, which may be implicit, but which determines the picture of the world.

African communitarianism rests on the processual view of the self. This view understands personhood as attained and that “the self is a person only as socially embedded individual” (Coetzee, 2000a:56).

It is essential to define African philosophy before undertaking this task. Serequeberhan (1991: 38) asserts that all cultures deal with the same philosophical issues which are universal.

It is worth to noting that even though they are universal, they differ in how each culture traces the unity of these themes, synthesizes and organises them based on their conception of life, namely the inter-relation between objects and persons and between persons themselves.

Serequeberhan (ibid) establishes the necessity of talking about a particularly African philosophy (or African perspective of issues in the realm of philosophy) and its difference to other philosophies. He (ibid) argues that we can and should be able to talk about an African philosophy because African culture has its own way of establishing order, its own view of life. According to Georg Misch (ibid) life is a starting point of philosophy, that is life as lived and embodied in the world in which human beings live and move.

Without assuming any homogeneity in African culture or thought, there is, however, one central theme running through African philosophy and that is communalism (communitarianism<sup>1</sup>). Existence-in-relation sums up the African conception of life and reality (ibid, p.40). African thought holds that created beings preserve a bond with one another. Serequeberhan (ibid) argues that an African feels and knows himself to be in intimate and personal relationship with others in a community, he attains growth and recognition by how well he fulfills a function (inseparable with his being) for the overall well-being of the community. It is this theme in African philosophy that is important for our discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>These terms can be used interchangeably.

This thesis understands African philosophy as systematised writings of modern African professional philosophers who examine traditional thought and culture and from these extract issues relevant for philosophy<sup>2</sup>. This does not refer to traditional assertions that lack the analytical dimension and argumentative justification because, without these there is no philosophy (Wiredu, 1998: 196), Wiredu continues to say that if any philosopher is undertaking a comparative work between African and Western philosophy, which is the object of this thesis, “they will have to look at the philosophy that Africans are producing today”(ibid, p.197), rather than African folk thought.

The discussion of African philosophical perspective of communitarianism must entail a closer look at the notion of rationality found in it. Rationality can be defined as a basic quality that all human beings are thought to share in common and a principle that governs their behaviour (Sogolo, 1998: 217). Taylor (1985: 134) posits the two senses of rationality. Rationality is seen as logical consistency at the level of thought and secondly, as instrumental self-interested action. African philosophers, in discussing rationality, emphasize the role of language and the social thesis (importance of the sociality aspect of persons) as important. This perspective will argue for the understanding of rationality that is partly embedded in cultural structures from which it derives many normative nuances (Coetzee, 2000a: 12).

## **THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD**

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<sup>2</sup> Coetzee and Roux (1998: 451) understand this trend of philosophy of African philosophy to be universal and critical, “favouring second-order evaluation of first-order claims about African cultural heritage and worldview”.

African thought differs with the Western views of understanding the individual. The Western liberal view abstracts a certain feature of the human individual, such as rationality and proceeds to make it the defining characteristic for individuality (Menkiti, 1984: 171). In Kantian philosophy this feature is the individual possession of rational will and in Marx it is an individual's potentiality to master nature and himself (Agrawal, 1998: 152). These writers recognise the value of human life, the moral worth or autonomy and understand this value to derive from the consideration of specific facts about the nature of the individual person (ibid). This contrasts with the African view of the human individual. This view denies that persons can be defined by working certain physical or psychological characteristic of the individual (Menkiti, 1984: 171).

In this view the self is defined by reference to the community. This African view of the self is summed up in J.S. Mbiti's (1969) famous statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (ibid). This simple understanding posits the reality that the communal world takes priority over the reality of the individual life histories (ibid). Menkiti continues to argue that "it is in rootedness in an ongoing community that the individual comes to see himself as a man" (ibid, p.172). This means that in order for the individual self to understand itself (as a self), he must be immersed in community and it is here that he is constituted as a self, with language spoken in his specific human community contributing to his understanding of his moral concepts and all other requirements associated with progression to full personhood (ibid).

In this view, it is not the natural static quality such as rationality or will that defines a person (ibid). In African thought it is through immersion in the community that one comes to acquire the human conceptual framework of thought (Agrawal, 1998: 153). It is important to note that

the assertion that the human conceptual framework of thought is acquired and does not get installed in its full content on arrival to the human community. Rather, it is a process of incremental development until one reaches full personhood, which manifests in the way he fulfills responsibilities within his community. In clarifying this fact Menkiti (ibid, p. 172), asserts that the processual view of man in African thought means that a person before attaining full personhood goes through “a long process of social and ritual transformation until he attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man”. The excellencies that are definitive of Man include the commitment of communal well-being and fulfilment of the community prescribed norms.

For Menkiti (ibid, p. 173) individuals may fail to attain personhood. He continues to say that because of this possibility the African community emphasised the rituals of incorporation and the necessity of learning social rules. This leads to the attainment of the social self-hood, that is a communal self. The suggestion by Menkiti (ibid) that personhood is something at which individual could fail to attain is controversial. If the attainment of full personhood relies on acquiring the excellencies seen as truly definitive of Man, which involves commitment to communal well-being, this may result in the community revoking the rights of mentally disabled people and those who do not fulfill community standards. But this will be followed later in this thesis.

Gbadegesin (1998: 292) develops the idea that rituals of incorporation are necessary for the attainment of social-selfhood. He (ibid) argues that to better understand the making of the social self, it is important to understand the processes that are undertaken in the coming-to-being of the new -born into the extended family structure. Gbadegesin (ibid) discusses this

with specific reference to Yoruba culture. In the arrival of the baby, the experienced elderly wives serve as midwives and also make sure that the baby is taken care of (ibid). On the eighth day, a ceremony is organised for the naming of the baby by the baby's grandfather, who then consults oracles to find out the child's future. In this process it is worth noting that the naming of the child is an engagement of the whole family. The baby from the youngest age gets immersed in the collective culture. Secondly, the name of the child is selected according to the situation of the family and its traditions. His name, therefore, can only be understood in relation to the family history, traditions, tragedies etc (ibid).

His name is expected to be a constant reminder, guide that reminds and connects him with the family and the circumstances of his birth (ibid, p.293). This is the stuff of anthropology and the philosophy of culture but the issue is relevant to this chapter in that it raises the consciousness of the child as a member of his family, his position in it and his community in general (ibid).

In this context, the child is brought up by his family involving step-moms and the men in the family who approve and disapprove of the different aspects of the child's behaviour (ibid).

Therefore, in these rituals of incorporating the child into the coming-to-being process, it is clear how the life-plans and life decisions are partly formed in and by the community from the consultation of oracles and the social milieu within which the child is brought up.

Menkiti (1984: 173) argues that the older an individual gets, the more he fulfils the requirements of personhood. This does not only refer to growth in wisdom but to acquiring the 'excellencies' definitive of personhood (ibid). This is a potential problem in African philosophy. Didier Kaphagwani (in Kigongo, 1992: 61) says that this understanding of the elderly having acquired the characteristics of full personhood results in epistemological

authoritarianism as they are the only ones who are said to have the wisdom and the knowledge. This epistemological authoritarianism arguably is the basic cause of political authoritarianism in the modern context (ibid, p. 62). This is the understanding of elders as Plato's 'philosopher-kings'. This is problematic because it is a form of indirect coercion, and is inimical to growth of individuality (self-hood). It denied the young the critical appraisal of the social system and deprived them of cognitive active participation in it (ibid, p.62).

To illustrate the processual view of personhood, Menkiti (1984: 173) makes reference to natural tendency of using the pronoun 'it' when referring to newborns and infants in English. This is normally used to refer to inanimate objects. It would not be used to refer to grown persons. Though a personal pronoun such as 'he' or 'she' can also be used in referring to children, Menkiti (ibid) argues that this flexibility of referential designation being possible with regard to children at earlier stages of human persons but not with the later stages has significance that is worth keeping in mind as having implications for the understanding of children with incomplete self-hood (ibid, p.174). This view is challenged by Gyekye (1998) - an African philosopher who offers a more relational view of the self - one which follows the Western communitarians.

Menkiti (ibid), by drawing attention to the natural tendency to use 'it' for infants illustrates the view that personhood is acquired in community. Gyekye (1998: 322) argues that the point that Menkiti wants to make is that the use of the pronoun 'it' for infants means that they are not yet persons because they have not yet been embedded in community and, therefore, the community has not conferred personhood on them. This is problematic because it would seem to destroy the basis for respect and the dignity of children's lives. Also problematic for Gyekye (ibid) is the fact that Menkiti makes this inference and attributes to African thought this idea

based on an analysis of a characteristic of English grammar.

For Gyekye (ibid, p. 319), Menkiti's account of personhood in African philosophy is "overstated and not entirely correct, and require some amendments and refinements". The problem with this view is that it has parallels in the conceptions of the social status of the person held by scholars of African socialism<sup>3</sup>.

This understanding of personhood would produce the kind of community which is inimical to the well-being of individual persons. Gyekye's problem is the understanding of personhood as something that is achieved at the later stages of life - the view which understates other features in an individual person which are biologically given but definitive of the person. Contested here is Menkiti's processual understanding of personhood.

According to Gyekye (ibid, p.320) communitarianism sees the human person as an inherently communal being, embedded in the web of social relationships and interdependence and never as an atomic individual. It is, therefore, important to note that this view of a human person informs an understanding of the community not as mere aggregate of atomistic individuals whose interests are "contingently congruent", but as a group of persons linked by interpersonal

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<sup>3</sup>African Socialism was drawn from Marxism and because of the similarity of the African communal structure with the vision of Marxism, it was possible to import socialism as the answer in restoring the original pre-colonial African community. According to Bwalya (Van Niekerk, 1998) it was a response to specific needs that arose out of the prevailing circumstances of decolonisation. This view drawn from the ancient African social order, in its traditional setting, and was easily translated it to modern socialism, which put absolutely no value in an individual person (Gyekye, 1998).

bonds, who see themselves as primarily members of the group and share values and goals (ibid). The reason why the understanding of personhood is the issue in African thought is the fact that the understanding of community will emerge from such a view.

If we see individuals as atomistic then that will have implications for the kind of community we envisage, but if we see the individual as a non-person until the community confers personhood upon him, that will have implications, often dangerous, for the kind of community we envisage.

This is why it is vital for any kind of understanding of human persons to be critically appraised.

“The notion of common interests and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community; that notion in fact defines community” (ibid). It is argued that it is this notion that will differentiate the real community from the mere aggregative association of individuals (ibid).

Gyekye (ibid, p.320) presents six propositions that are necessarily implications of the understanding of the human person as communitarian by virtue of being born into the existing community, and of his natural sociality. These are as follows:

1. The human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, communal life is not optional for any individual person.
2. The human person is at once a cultural being.
3. The human person cannot - perhaps must not live in isolation from other persons.
4. The human person naturally connects with others and must have relationship with them.
5. Social relationships are not contingent but necessary.

6. Following from (4) and (5) the person is constituted, only partly by social relationship in which he/she necessarily finds him/herself.

The fact that the person is partly and not wholly constituted by social relationships is crucial for Gyekye to illustrate the watered down understanding of personhood and the community's role as only in part rather than in totality as envisaged by Menkiti (1984).

It is essential that a consideration to other aspects of human nature is made, because though the human person bears natural sociality, "he or she is by nature other things as well" (ibid, p.322). The failure to consider other aspects of the human person will result "in investing the community's will all-engulfing moral authority to determine everything in the life of the individual" (ibid). What "other things" is Gyekye referring to in the above-mentioned passage? By these Gyekye (p. 326) refers to such attributes of the person as rationality, a capacity, or perhaps potential capacity, for virtue and for making and evaluating moral judgements and hence the human person is capable of choice. "It is not the community that creates these attributes; the community discovers and nurtures them"(ibid).

Therefore, the problem with Menkiti (1984) is the way he exaggerates the role of the community in the constitution of the human person. Secondly, the implication that newborns have non-person status is problematic because it fails to recognise other attributes in human persons which only exist in potentiality. Because, even though in a newborn the excellencies definitive of personhood have not yet manifested, they only exist in potential form and the function of the community is not to create them but to provide the developmental context.

Agrawal (1998: 153) argues that to attain the consciousness of self-hood as a person requires one to have been submitted to the "personifying process of human relationships".

It is important to highlight two issues in this. The first is the attainment of consciousness of

self-hood and the second, is the personifying process of social relationships. These both take place in the network of human relationships.

I suggest that the first issue is about the process of constitution of the self in the community that gives one the ability to make choices. This is the process of actualisation of the self within the social and the cultural context provided by the community. The second, is simply the process of socialisation, the process by which an individual acquires values and norms that define what being human is for a particular community.

This leads to the discussion of the factors that are essential for the personifying process to take its course in African communities. It is vital, however, to understand that this is not the process of construction of the person as if the human is non-person on arrival to the community. This is the process of the discovery and development of the social which the human person gets submitted to choicelessly. Coetzee(1998: 276) argues that African philosophy develops from culture, there is no African philosophy which is not a product of cultural construction. Although, this might be true of philosophies originating in other parts of the world, African philosophy is more linked to culture than others. This is true especially for the section of African philosophy we are dealing with here. This implies cultural relativism which will be discussed further on.

There are four concepts discussed by Coetzee (ibid, p.276-277) which can be seen as essential for the development of shared understandings in cultural community within which humans are embedded. The first concept is culture. African philosophy understands culture as a resource of social meanings upon which members of the community draw to mediate the contingencies of their everyday lives (ibid). It is a resource for the material and moral worlds of the community and it is through these that a certain group of people understand themselves as a



specific cultural community or group.

A culture of reciprocity emerge within a community from that understanding, forwarded by Coetzee (ibid), that “they owe to each other mutual provision of all those things for the sake of which they have separated themselves from everyone else and joined forces in the particular community which they in fact make up”. This means that a culture is important for the emergence of identity of a group of people as a community, and this group having delimited itself as a cultural community would seek mutual provision for all those resources, material or otherwise, which are particular for them. It is from this that a special commitment and developed sense of common life develop. This is the second concept and it is what constitutes an association of men and women as a community (ibid). This shows the necessity of developed shared understanding which is the pretext for the African philosophy’s communitarian self.

It is a common fact that culture is a dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, a human person gets embedded in a culture and a community she/he did not choose from birth, and these are important for the constitution of self-hood. But, it is important to note that this culture is not crystallised but those persons also get involved in the creation of their own commonality and identity as culture adapts with time. The third is the concept of ‘dialogical relation’. Coetzee (ibid) argues that the members in community are in a dialogical relation to each other. This is the interactive context through which members actualise their social identity and serves as a determinant of choice. This means that individual persons in the community, who are social in character, create their commonality through this process of dialogical relation. This leads to the conclusion that it is possible to establish conceptions of good that would come to be accepted through this interactive network.

He continues to argue that it is only within a culturally specified range of options that an individual person can make a choice, for instance about life plans. This is important to show the impossibility of atomism for the communal self.

In the previous passage, both identity and subsequently choice is informed by community's culture. It is argued that this is possible through the function of traditions. This is the fourth concept. Coetzee (*ibid*, p.277) defines tradition as "a historically extended socially embedded narrative about the systems of thought (moral, political, epistemological) and social practices of a specific community". This definition links to the discussion of culture as dynamic. If culture is dynamic, traditions, being important as historically extended narratives are crucial for creating interpretative continuity in contemporary community. Traditions are, therefore, constitutive of moral and political precepts (*ibid*). This discussion means that human persons cannot know their good prior to social interaction (community) and then it follows that their good is bound as a matter of consequence to the good of the community. Coetzee (1998) as an Africanist scholar presents these concepts in attempting to conceptualise African philosophical assertions in modern social theoretical language.

The factors that are significant for the development of social meaning all hinge on the interaction of human persons. This is what Kwasi Wiredu (1996: 13) refers to as the concept of human communication. Communication is the transference of a thought content, the expression of an attitude, an emotion from one person or group of persons to another (*ibid*). The transference of thought content invites evaluation in terms of its truth or falsity and the transference of expression of an attitude, emotion or wish requires evaluation of a different nature, that is, in terms of a variety of normative concepts (*ibid*).

Language, for Wiredu (*ibid*), is the central vehicle of human communication, and language has a variety of mediums such as words, gestures, and artifacts. This is noteworthy because these

language mediums exist and make sense within a particular culture. The concept of human communication is crucial to allow for the creation of shared meanings and understandings. This is interesting because it implies that these shared meanings are continually negotiated and re-negotiated in culture or community within which and individual exists. Wiredu (ibid) argues that there is no human community that can continue to exist without human communication. Like Gyekye (1998), he understands community not as an aggregation of individuals “existing as windowless monads but of individuals as interacting persons, and an interaction can only be on the basis of shared meanings”(Wiredu, 1996: 13). A human being deprived of the basic necessity of being embedded in the socialising influence of communication will remain only biologically human, but mentally is bound to remain subhuman, because in the failure to understand what it is to be human. Therefore, Wiredu (ibid) understands human communication to be having a humanising influence on individuals.

The human being is understood as being born with a biological make-up, but with no concepts, but within this biological make-up, there is an innate conceptual ability (ibid, p. 19). This concurs with Agrawal (1998: 153) in arguing that it is through immersion in the community that a person acquires the human conceptual frameworks of thought. Gyekye (1998) also understands an infant to only have the potentiality for grasping the moral ‘excellencies’ and because of that cannot be viewed as non-person as Menkiti implies in his discussion.

Wiredu (1996: 19) asserts that to possess a specific concept must entail some linguistic ability and such an ability, one cannot have prior to community because it is only a result of training. Human persons should first communicate in their cultural community and grasp concepts such as moral concepts within that culture. The problem would arise in that the cultures, for instance, in Africa are not homogenous. Therefore, the problem of relativism arises because

concepts understood in this sense become too relativistic and meanings are shared within very limited confines.. To answer to that, Wiredu (ibid, p.20) argues that there are elements of universality and elements of particularity in all cultures and what defines the human species across the spectrum are the universals of culture. This does not solve the problem because, what defines human species will vary from culture to culture. This is problem will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## **RATIONALITY**

The previous discussion has implications for the notion of rationality that informs African philosophy. The notion of rationality that is in African philosophy emerges from the understanding of person which is held. If the human person is understood as a social being, that acquires human conceptual framework only by being immersed in the human community, that must inform the understanding of rationality which is held.

Rationality is an attribute that all Men are thought to have. And it is believed that their thought processes are governed by such principles (Sogolo, 1998: 217). It is believed that in some cultures these rational principles are well systematised and stated that individuals come to internalise them. This can be taken further to say that it is from these principles that govern thought processes that action is also determined.

Rationality can be understood as logical consistency at the level of thought, that is, one cannot confirm that something is p and not-p simultaneously, and the rationality can also be understood as self-interested or instrumental action at the level of action (Taylor, 1985: 134). This is the understanding of rationality in the Western context that is universalised. It is understood as the universal quality of all men. Therefore, the cultures that seem to be deviating from this understanding are irrational. This was the case in the emergence of the

work undertaken on African societies. The early works published on the indigenous African societies attempting to articulate the implied world views moral values and conceptual systems embedded in the particular cultural codes and customs were seen according to Western rationality as falling within the category of the irrational (Van der Merwe: 2000: 3). This was challenged with the rise of the understanding of rationality as situated.

This is the concept of rationality which is compatible with African philosophy. Masolo (in Van der Merwe, 2000: 3) acknowledges Peter Winch as very important in challenging the universal notion of rationality and his work questioned “the uncritically assumed neutrality of the conceptual schemes and categories of (Western) anthropology and philosophy” and the claims of objectivity and universality of Western rationality. This leads us to conclude that rationality should be understood “in terms of the rules that give an action meaning in a particular context” (O’Neill, 1999: 16). In this, O’Neill (ibid) argues the role of language is important. Citing Winch, O’Neill (ibid) argues that the concepts we have are necessary to make sense of the experience we have in the world, that is, our reality. This means that we are able to think and to act in the world within the language and the context in which we find ourselves. Therefore, rationality should be understood within that context.

The concept of human communication is relevant to the understanding of rationality discussed above. If Wiredu’s assertion that human persons are born with only an innate capacity for grasping concepts in their biological make-up, and begin to develop concepts in the context of interaction in human community (Wiredu, 1996: 19), then it should be assumed that human beings are born with only a capacity for rationality which he comes to develop within the social context. This assertion can also be made in the light the point, by Agrawal (1998: 153) that a person acquires the characteristically human conceptual framework of thought through immersion in the human community. These have implications for the rationality understood as

a faculty that deals with the thought processes, because thought process should entail ability to grasp concepts and reflect on them within the a particular human community.

African philosophers, according to Coetzee (2000b: 12) have understood a significant truth, which is, that rationality is partly embedded in cultural structures from which it derives its normative nuances. It is important to note that it is only *partly* embedded and not *totally* embedded. This comes from Gyekye's (1998: 327) understanding of rationality as a basic quality of human beings. Although, it is not a quality definitive of a person, it is part of it. That means that the human community does not create that attribute in human beings, but discovers and nurtures it.

African philosophers emphasize the role of language and the social thesis that individuals are social beings embedded in human community.

It is, therefore, clear that the authority of a reason for an action is explained by appealing not only to biology, but the social origins of the norm that is held. "As culture-dependent norms they derive their authority from a socially shaped sensibility" (Coetzee, 2000b:14). This means that a rational individual in society would act in terms of these socially-shaped particular sensibilities. This is important for rationality at the level of action because it means that though it has been argued in the Western tradition that rationality is given characteristic of a human individual it cannot be conceived of outside of the community.

Coming back to the issue of language. Language is understood by African philosophers such Gyekye and Wiredu as the most significant mediums through which people can understand and make sense of their world and through that world communicated to themselves and to others (ibid).

It is argued that "all languages possess conceptual structures peculiar and even unique to

themselves, but these structures can be rendered communicable in other languages by dint of near-inter-translatability of all languages “(ibid, p.6).

This is of great significance because the assertions about the importance of language in rationality cannot escape the problem of relativising rationality, which would make, I suppose, difficulty for inter-community relations. This is because languages are not fully inter-translatable, and there are to some extent incommensurable conceptual frameworks (ibid, p.7).

What is crucial about language is that “as a critical medium of convergence on contextualised truth, assuming inter-translatability, it opens rationality to cultural influences” (ibid).

This is imperative because language is the medium through we make sense of our experiences, reflect and conceptualise our reality. The understanding emanating from this is that rationality being a human attribute, discovered and nurtured in human community, is partially constructed in the community and it can only be determined within that particular context. A problem with this understanding has been raised in connection with relativism. African philosophers attempt to answer this question by extracting in African cultures elements of particularity and of universality linked to Wiredu’s concept of human communication (Wiredu, 1996).

Wiredu’s (ibid) concept of human communication is essential in attempting to solve the problem of relativism, which might impact negatively on the understanding of African philosophy, owing to Africa’s heterogeneity. O’Neill (1999: 21) trying to explain this cites Habermas’ critical theory. Habermas (in O’Neill, ibid) argues that there is always a possibility of a person to use language in trying to reach mutual understanding with another person or group in spite of vast cultural differences between them.

Habermas’ justification rests on the unique ability of human beings to use language in a communicative way, which is internal to all cultures (ibid). This latter part of this section points to the conclusions of this thesis. This is an attempt to reconcile different philosophical

traditions. This is what Taylor (in O'Neill, *ibid*, p. 20) called the 'fusion of horizons' which is defined as " the sharing of perspectives that we aspire to in our efforts to understand other cultures (philosophical traditions)".

## CONCLUSION

African philosophical perspective of communitarianism or communalism is based on the understanding of the nature of the person and how a community follows on from that image they have of a human individual. If we are discussing communitarian theory, we cannot avoid addressing the question of shared understandings and social meanings which for African philosophers is created by culture and taken forward by the understanding of human individuals as constituted and steeped in shared historical tradition. Modern African philosophy has attempted to move away from the assertions of African communalism which were based on mythico-religious assumptions and have tried to invoke philosophically defensible concepts. This has an important move from ethnophilosophy<sup>4</sup> to philosophy that can be eligible for engaging in dialogue with philosophies originating elsewhere. This is the object to be pursued in the following chapter. Wiredu (1998:198) argues that it is important that the material on African philosophy be approached critically because all the peoples who have made

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<sup>4</sup>Ethnophilosophy uses religious, historical, poetical and moral texts and extract from these what is taken to be philosophy. Hountondji (1996:179) argues that in the process of extracting philosophy from these they lose their original flavour and theoretical significance. Ethnophilosophers ignore the historical relativity of these texts produced at certain times by certain individuals with different motivations even within the same communities (*ibid*).

breakthrough in the quest for modernity have done so by going beyond folk thought. It is important that this discussion of African philosophy is followed by a critical evaluation of African philosophy which will be part of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### CRITICAL EVALUATION AND SYNTHESIS

**Either follow tradition or else in what you do be consistent. In public matters you will be consistent if you do not translate word for word, not jump into narrow imitative groove, from which both fear and rules followed in the given work prevent your escape.**

**Horace**

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present a critical evaluation of communitarianism and African philosophy. We will discuss the conceptual and political issues that flow out of these communitarian perspectives from two different worlds . This will lead us to making the conclusions that the three perspectives (liberalism, communitarianism and African philosophy) discussed in this thesis can be reconciled. The previous two chapters demonstrated that communitarianism is identical to African communalism (as it has been presented by modern African philosophers) though they have different origins. What we are hoping to say at the end of this thesis is these similarities can be explored and a dialogue initiated between communitarianism and African philosophy as a response to liberalism.

The first step will entail the critical evaluation of the communitarian critique of liberalism as discussed by Buchanan (1989) and the propositions that he attempts to defend. We then briefly discuss how these ideas compare with African philosophy and how most of the

criticisms he presents apply to African philosophy as well. The second part will be a discussion of the problems in African philosophy as discussed by Howard (1986), Gyekye (1998), Kingongo (1992) and Kernohan (1998) that will allow for a reconciliation of Western and African perspectives.

## **A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF COMMUNITARIANISM**

Buchanan (1989: 852) argues that communitarianism refers to a number of views that are not necessarily the same even though there are some common themes present in most of the important communitarian work. He (ibid) sums up the communitarian critique of liberalism in five propositions.

Firstly, communitarianism understands community as a fundamental and irreplaceable ingredient for the good life of human beings, and the problem with liberalism is that it devalues and undermines the role of community (ibid). Secondly, communitarianism sees full participation in the political life of the community as of fundamental importance.

Consequently, the problem with liberalism is that, in viewing political association as instrumental, it undervalues political life.(ibid).

Thirdly, liberalism fails to provide an adequate account of the importance of obligations and commitments that are not chosen under a contract such as familial obligations or obligations to support one's community or country (ibid, p.853).

This is interesting because, even though some liberals have argued that they have not assumed that socialisation is non-existent or that one has these forms of obligations, the point of communitarianism is that there is not an adequate account or conceptualisation of that.

Fourthly, liberalism presupposes a defective conception of the self because it fails to recognize that the self is “embedded” in and partly constituted in community and values which are not a result of choices (ibid).

Fifthly, liberalism has a wrong understanding of justice, because it understands justice as the “first virtue in social institutions”. This presupposes that individuals hold conceptions of good prior to any community enabling them to choose any requirements for a just polity (ibid).

The first four are the most powerful criticism presented by communitarians. The third and the fourth are the most important and relate directly to African philosophy. These are the views that are held by modern African philosophers as discussed in an earlier chapter. The difference, however, is that communitarianism responds to modern liberalism, whereas African philosophy invokes such propositions from an understanding of the person as steeped in community and culture that shapes his make-up.

Buchanan (1989: 858) argues further that liberal individual rights provide valuable protections for the flourishing of the community. That means they are essential for development of a well ordered community.

The problem with communitarians, therefore, is that they fail to recognise the value of individual rights for the community. The reason for this danger is that they have assumed that the only justification for the liberal individual rights rests exclusively upon the ideal of individual autonomy or individual well-being where participation is neglected as an important ingredient for human good (ibid, p.858). This means they have taken for granted that a commitment to liberal individual rights is inimical to any form of commitment to community participation.

It can be argued that a commitment to the notion of liberal individual rights which neglects

the value of community and full participation in it will result in individual atomism that is rejected in communitarianism. On the other hand the commitment to community and full participation that excludes any notion of liberal individual rights will result in an individual exposed to ostracism and other forms intrusions into his or her freedom by the community.

Before we proceed with the further problems of the communitarian critique it would be useful to emphasise the three themes that are common in this tradition. The first is that community is an important human good (ibid). For Buchanan (ibid) this theme is uncontroversial because it is hard to deny the fact that a life lacking in any form of participation in community would be defective. The second is that participation in political community is a vital ingredient for good life of human beings.

This view, according to Buchanan (ibid) is not uncontroversial but plausible and can be defended by appealing to such philosophers as Aristotle (ibid). The third theme is that participation in the highest political organisation in an inclusive political community such as the state, is an essential for the best life for all human beings (ibid). This is viewed as the most controversial of the three themes. Buchanan (ibid) argues that there are a diversity of the conditions that are favourable for human flourishing. Therefore, the assertion that the best life of human requires participation in this highest form of political organisation is an undefendable dogmatism and it depends on a highly particularistic theory of the objective good. The danger of this kind of thesis is the possibility of totalitarianism (ibid, p.860). This will result from the enforcement of one value or set of values in society where individuals are not protected by individual rights to pursue their own life plans without destructing the basis of their community.

Buchanan (ibid) suggests that the debate between communitarians and liberals might be seen as the disagreements on various ways of serving the value of the community but each highlighting different nature of risks rather between those who value community and those who do not.

He (ibid) is, therefore, asserting that the communitarians in arguing that modern liberals devalue community are misguided.

These are serious criticisms that Buchanan (ibid) is presenting against communitarianism. It is important to note that he accepts the value of the community for the good life of human beings but raises concerns about rejection of liberal individual rights as problematic to commitment to community because it may lead to cultural oppression. In the light of this, argues Buchanan (ibid), a political liberal may be seen as a “cautious communitarian”. This view does not seek to reject the communitarian project as a whole.

Buchanan (ibid) accepts the value of communitarian critique if liberalism, he rejects the radical communitarian views evidenced in the third theme discussed above. The argument of the “cautious communitarian” is that in valuing community, one need not abandon the framework of individual rights but one should appreciate the role they can play in protecting communities under certain historical conditions (ibid,p.861). What are the historical conditions that Buchanan is envisaging? There are instances of change in societies, which involve a break from the norm and may offend the community’s sensitivities (ibid).

Therefore, individual rights may serve to facilitate rational change and formation of new communities by allowing individuals who are dissatisfied with the usual and current forms challenge and pioneer new alternatives.

It is important to note that it is in the nature of communities to change or adapt to change

because the failure to do that will result in extinction in its isolationist tendencies. Buchanan (ibid, p.863) asserts that Mill's argument for liberty is significant for the flexibility of peaceful change provided by the framework of rights which outweighs the risks of excessive fragmentation and instability that concerns communitarians. This criticism did not seek to reject the value of the communitarian critique, but to raise blind spots that could lead to the eruption of the undesired and to raise the idea that valuing community should involve a framework of individual rights within that community.

## **CULTURAL OPPRESSION**

The notion of communitarianism that excludes any framework of individual rights will result in what Kernohan (1998: 14) calls cultural oppression. This is the form of oppression that may be inflicted by an individual or a group to another group in a set of accumulative harms.

Cultural oppression may occur through the transmission of certain beliefs about value and these values may be transmitted through language, images, stories, expectation and norms, and the role models presented by the community's cultural heritage (Kernohan, ibid). A person can only be subjected into this form of oppression through membership in a community. This is why the emphasis in prioritising the community over the individual person without any framework for individual protection may be problematic. Both communitarianism and African philosophy would fall into this trap, but Hegel seemed to escape this trap.

Their prioritising of the community over the individual seems to believe in the intrinsic goodness of the community and the lack of faith in the individual ability for self-determination.

This is evidenced by the fact that communitarians and African philosophers believe that prioritisation of the individual over the community would result in social fragmentation. Though that may be true, they fail to look at the prioritisation of the community over the individual as having the possibility of the opposite extreme. They do not provide any framework for the protection of the individual from the intrusions of the community. The concept of cultural oppression is noteworthy because, as Kernohan (ibid) argues, it is a form of power. Citing Galbraith (ibid) he classifies the concept of power into three categories. These are condign power, compensatory and conditioned power.

The concept of power associated with cultural oppression is conditioned power. Conditioned power operates through “persuasion, education, or the social commitment to what seems natural, proper, or right *causing* the individual to submit to the will of another or of others” (ibid, p.15).

The problem with this is that submission reflects the preferred course because the motivation of submission itself is not recognised. Because of its naturalness to the person subjected to it is immune to the critical reflection that will allow the individual to challenge it or shake it off (ibid). The individual self in communitarianism and African philosophy is susceptible to this kind of conditioning which seems desirable for these two perspectives.

The problem arises in the failure to qualify such notions as the constitution of the self and “embeddedness” in the community in both these philosophical traditions. The main objective of conditioned power is to crush independence of the conscience to produce a pathological commitment to community that is associated with the occult (ibid).

The area that is most affected in this is the area of choice. It would seem that the choices of an

individual that is embedded in community do not go beyond the community scope of what is accepted and possible. This is celebrated in the philosophical traditions we are discussing as the evidence of the fact that this shows how things are supposed to be.

Kernohan (ibid) argues that conditioned power does not just determine the outcome of person's choices "but also the process of deliberative choice itself is the site of human agency in the cognitive sense". The problem with conditioned power is summed up in Rousseau's assertion (in Kernohan, ibid) that "the most absolute authority is that which penetrates into a man's inmost being, and concerns itself no less with his will than with his actions".

The point that is being made here is that the quality of the motivations that lead one into making choices and actions are skewed.

This is significant in that it causes one to understand the value of Kantian rationality as necessary for true freedom. This notion asserts that it is not the outcome by itself that decides the morality of the act, because one may pursue outcomes out of duty or a 'pathologically submissive self'. The morality of the act must be decided by the quality of the motivation that inspires it (Taylor, 1985: 322).

This is the notion that the communitarianism with its African philosophical perspective have rendered illegitimate. This is the question that we are going to pursue in the last section of this chapter. To illustrate the problem with cultural oppression. Cultural oppression makes inequality seem natural and makes groups of people to accept something less than their fair share. This is determined by the person's belief about value (ibid, p.25).

This problem can be associated with African philosophy because while excluding any framework of individual rights, it provides an environment that is infested with ontologically justifiable

hierarchies. Individual person within such a culture (from which this thinking arises) will accept such justification as the natural order of things. This is the problem that Kigongo (1992:61) sought to address in pointing out that such justifications result in political authoritarianism in modern political context and attribute unequal value between the young and old, denying the young any critical appraisal of the social system and depriving them of cognitive active participation (ibid, p.62). This is about denial of freedom from coercion, freedom of expression and participation. This problem is further pursued by Howard (1986) in the following section.

### **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE CONCEPTION OF RIGHTS**

African philosophers in their discussions of African communitarianism, have sought to defend a notion of rights that is based on the cultural uniqueness of Africa (Howard, 1986: 16). The problem with this is that this undifferentiated communitarian society upon which this is based belonged to the pre-colonial and so it no longer exists (ibid). Therefore, this attempt to create a continuity with the past by invoking such notions of community can be seen as problematic in the sense that African cultures are changing and in the modern post-colonial context have begun to reflect the emergence of the new social classes with differential access to property and power (ibid, p.17).

The defence of the communitarian values associated with the African past in the modern context would then reinforce such differential access to material resources and the imminent danger is that, as argued in Galbraith's concept of power (Kernohan, 1998:25), the people will accept such as the natural order of things owing to such commitment to norms that have originated in their cultural past. This is the first criticism of African communitarianism.

Howard's problem (1986: 17) is that African philosophers have rejected the notion of universal individual rights that are associated with modern liberalism on the basis of cultural relativity. Before going any further, it is necessary to note that the problem with Howard (ibid) is that in pursuing the critique of the African conception of rights, she does not offer any philosophical defence for the universality of liberal individual rights she seeks to defend.

Howard (ibid) suggests that the argument associated with African philosophers that different societies have their own particular conceptions of rights is based on the confusion of human rights with human dignity. She (ibid) argues that all societies have notions of human dignity that are based on the cultural views on the nature of human beings which in turn reflect the particular social organisations in each society. But these are different from rights as entitlements that allow the individual to make claims on or against the state.

The versions of human dignity that are found in African philosophy are based on the idealised interpretations of the pre-colonial social structure. Invoking the pre-colonial model of African communitarianism neglects the social changes that have taken place in African societies since colonial times (ibid). This is the reality which the African socialists failed to grasp and as result they sought to build their societies upon a past long gone and consequently aborted perpetuating historical conditions that are now prevailing (ibid). This is another angle of attack on African communitarianism.

Howard (ibid, p.18) argues that the concept of personhood that is presented by Menkiti (1984) and other versions of it found in other African philosophers, is not the basis for a concept of human rights. This concept, as shown in the previous chapter, tended to see personhood as the defining feature of Men but is an end product of the person's fulfilment of his or her prescribed roles (ibid). Miers and Kopyoff (in Howard, ibid, p.19) argue that African societies have a different notion of freedom.

This is the notion that does not lie in the a withdrawal into a meaningless autonomy but in attachment to a kin group, and from that view they argue that even though slavery thrived in African pre-colonial societies its antithesis was not freedom but belonging (ibid). This is based on the view that sums up African philosophy: existence-in-relation, as the desirable form of life.

This discussion is essential in attempting to show that the concept of rights is different from the concept of human dignity. Howard (ibid) then goes on to argue that in the pre-colonial society, viewed as the perfect model and origin of African communitarianism, women, aliens and children were accorded different status and rank and consequently different rights and privileges than adult males.

For African philosophical perspective of communitarianism to be a viable political philosophy in the modern context, it has to overcome these characteristics of the cultural values which form the basis of the content of their philosophy. Kigongo (1992: 61) agrees that there were coercive elements inherent in African communalism. At the same time there were also epistemological and political forms of authoritarianism. The epistemological form of authoritarianism was based on the monopoly that the elders had to knowledge and what they said had to be believed without question (Kaphagwani, in Kigongo, ibid). It is this epistemological authoritarianism that translated to political authoritarianism in modern times (ibid), and it resulted in the differential access of certain classes to material and power resources.

Kigongo (ibid), having accepted this reality in African communitarianism, argues that individuality and social cohesion are two African cultural realities. He (ibid) argues “that they constitute a dichotomy, without any essential opposites”. Individuality is defined as “the autonomous power of choice and decision of will as essential conditions for the exercise of

other freedoms” (ibid, p.60). And social cohesion is “a state of affairs whereby individual in the society constantly pursue certain fundamental virtues on the basis of enhancing a common or social good” (ibid). It is argued that these concepts are not antagonistic because if individualism is pursued responsibly or with a sense of duty, that is in a way that does not contradict with the common good (ibid).

This is true , but it falls into the trap of conditioned power discussed in the previous section. Bidney (ibid) argues that this is clearly articulated in the assertion that a rational human being, a person directed by rational ideals conforming to rational principles, decides and acts in the context of values and standards of his society which are prior to his arrival in it (Bidney, ibid). That is difficult to understand because in the instances of social change which are discussed in the first section of this chapter, an individual person may be dissatisfied with the present order and seek to pioneer new alternatives that are unknown to his society and which may be offensive to its values.

I think that the solution to this difficulty this necessitates appealing to values and standards which do not originate from the present society. In the absence of the framework of individual rights as separate from human dignity there will be no protection for such individuals. From the above discussion, it is clear that African philosophy is deficient like communitarianism, in the area of protection of the individual against the intrusions of community and attribution of equal rights to all in society. In a society which has operated on the basis of respected hierarchies and social stratification, there is a perpetual need for some mediating agency between the individual and community in order to allow the individuals to be equally free. Having shown the weaknesses which African philosophical perspective of communitarianism has to overcome, it is necessary to present few defences by African philosophers and make

suggestions.

Gyekye (1998:328) argues that communitarianism is not antithetical to the doctrine of individual rights. He argues that communitarianism cannot disallow the exercise of the self-determining individual who have the capacity to evaluate and re-evaluate the entire practice of the community. Gyekye (ibid) is the foremost African philosopher who has sought to consider the dangers of exaggerating the role of the community in the making and the determining of the individual and his actions. In response to the criticism made by Howard (1986), that African philosophers confuse the concept of human rights with their concept of human dignity, Gyekye (1998: 328) asserts that the respect for human dignity, which is the fundamental attribute of the human person which cannot be disregarded by the community generates regard for personal rights.

What this means is, agreeing with Howard (1986) that there is a difference between human rights as claims and human dignity as mere acknowledgement of value, a notion of rights can be founded on the basis of human dignity. The concept of human dignity is anchored in theism. This is based on attribution of value upon all mankind by virtue of being created by God (Gyekye, 1998:328). This is evidenced in the maxims held in African communities that “all persons are children of God; no one is the child of the earth” (ibid).

It is crucial to note that the presupposition in this thinking is the belief that there is something intrinsically valuable in God and this value, in the creation of humankind, is endowed upon all. The reason why this is important is that it is possible to derive a theory of rights from understandings of value in human beings more especially in societies that are steeped in such theistic beliefs.

This is crucial because it relates to the Hegelian notion of mutual recognition and the popular

concept of “ubuntu” (humanness) which presupposes such beliefs as discussed above.

Agrawal (1998: 153) states this view clearly when he argues that “in the human situation we are all for each other and paradigms of existing beings who have intrinsic worth”. He (ibid) continues to say that without this kind of attitude towards each other we could not relate at the level of “rational communal activity” and the society of persons could not be realisable.

This means that for the existence-in-relation propounded in African philosophy to be possible,

there has to attribution ultimate worth between relating persons (ibid). Agrawal (ibid)

concludes that it is the recognition of value of human life that is an essential, perhaps the

foundational characteristic in the human community. The failure of African socialism was to

recognise that the basis of the pre-colonial African communal structure was not economics of

sharing but this was an outgrowth of these notions. Gyekye (ibid) continues to argue that even

though a theory of rights is possible, it must to realised that communitarianism in general

cannot be expected to give individual rights the priority.

This is because communitarian theory in its nature assumes great concern for communal values

and common good which is seen as of utmost importance for the healthy functioning of the

individual.

Therefore, though rights have a role to play, communitarian theories will disallow the

separation of rights from common values and will not give them priority. “It must be noted

that in any scheme of value, ranking occurs or is resorted to when situations require that

preferences for some values be made over other values” (Gyekye, ibid). This is supposed to

mean that where necessary, communal values should take priority over the individual rights.

This might be problematic because it betrays any notion of personal rights and individuals as

ends in themselves.

Gyekye (in Coetzee, 2000a: 50) introduces the notion of equal moral standing of individuals-as-units and individuals-in-relation in attempting a more coherent and advanced theory of individual rights in the communitarian context. This notion is called equiprimordiality. The individual-as-unit talks of individuals as being rational in the sense that they have an ability to make moral judgements. It is argued that the human individual has a mental feature in his or her biology which is independent of modification by the socio-cultural milieu (ibid). This means that an individual's reflexive abilities are given. Seen in this light, an individual has an ability to distance him/herself from inherited values and institutions (ibid).

This is quite a step taken by Gyekye in modifying the moral authority accorded by other philosophers to community. On the other hand sociality, that is, individual-in-relation is also a natural feature which constitutes the context, cultural space for the actualisation of the human individual potential (ibid). The above discussion accepts the two realities of the human person, individuality and sociality and that these have equal moral standing.

Gyekye (ibid) asserts that recognition of individual rights by communitarian theory is conceptually required. But he (ibid) does seem to be referring clearly to liberal individual rights. For Gyekye (Coetzee, p.51) "rights are a means of expressing an individual's talents, capacities and identity".

This is the notion of rights as responsibility rather than corresponding obligations but they are based on moral responsiveness to other's needs. These rights should not be insisted on in the way that Howard (1986) argues. This is because the lack of sensitivity towards responsibility to others entitles community to take certain necessary steps in order to preserve the community but these may result in the overriding of individual rights (Gyekye, in Coetzee: 2000: 52). This means that the community involves itself in the function of ranking of values,

and though recognising individual rights, they act in accordance with their order of importance and in pursuit of community's self-preservation may rightfully infringe on personal rights.

Gyekye (ibid) in a way believes in the balance between common interest and individual goods and in the modern context it should be the function of the state to maintain the balance.

But Gyekye's bias towards community appears in that in the event of direct conflict between the two, common interests take preference (ibid). This is in the nature of all communitarian theories owing to their priority of community over the individual and according to it such value has importance for function of human life. These are the most important responses that African communitarians put forward against the criticism posed towards them. The discussion so far has tried to accommodate the notion of individual rights, first by arguing that from the concept of human dignity a notion of personal rights can be generated and second, in the idea of the balance between individual good and common interest with priority given to the common good in the event of conflict.

The acknowledgement of the need for respect of human rights is an important step. The important factor is however trying to describe which definition of rights is adopted, the liberal individual definition that was provided by Howard (1986) above or the notion of rights as responsibilities provided by Gyekye (in Coetzee, 2000: 51).

## **CONCLUSION: A SYNTHESIS**

Chikwudi Eze (in Coetzee, ibid, p.70) an African philosopher argues that modernity calls for a rights-based state, this is essential in the light of the unchallengeable criticism Howard (1986) raised about gross inequalities in the modern context.

Eze (ibid.) argues that this state should either uphold individual rights as overriding or find some reconciliation between individuals and groups as rights bearers. The second seems to be

the best option and this is what Gyekye has been attempting to do. It is the best option because of the lack of self-sufficiency of both individuality and individual rights and communal structure without such protections for individuals. The object of this thesis is reconciling different philosophical traditions. These are modern liberalism, Western communitarianism (mainstream) and African communitarianism with an emphasis on rationality and individualism and communitarianism. The similarity between western communitarianism and African philosophy would make possible a dialogue between them which each other to further contributions.

And liberal political philosophy would be necessary for the justification of negative liberties in a way that would protect the individual while preserving the community.

The discussion presented in the preceding chapters and in this chapter indicates that each of these philosophical traditions has inadequacies, and so there has to be some reconciliation in ways that have already been suggested during the discussion. Hegel (in Bellamy, 2000) offers a bedrock of what any attempt to reconcile these traditions should entail.

According to Bellamy (2000: 04) Hegelian philosophy disputes the liberal argument of inherent incompatibility between the individual and the community. Hegel's project is to attempt to explain human freedom and individuality (ibid). The Kantian agent is an autonomous chooser of ends and he can distance himself from his or her natural inclinations. This forms the foundations of the liberal individuals. This theory views society as a contract between individuals for the realisation of goals that were self-determined antecedently (ibid, p.5). Hegel contrasts this view and he attempts to show the process by which an "individual's will is realised in particular objects and mediated by certain universal norms of behaviour which are social in origin" (ibid). For Hegel, possession of such norms of behaviour constitute individual identity, providing human actions in the context of community with meaning and

continuity (ibid). This means the individual makes sense of him or herself, of what he or she does in the context of the society.

The particular can only make sense of itself in the context of the universal.

Hegel sought to find the resolution for the dilemma between the particular and the universal, that is, between individuality and community which has been the main theme of this thesis.

This is achieved through a synthesis between the two (ibid, p.6). The community has a set of cultural norms, values and traditions which are inherent to the collective practices of its members and these are rooted and develop in the history of the community. Though the individual shares many concepts together with the others within the community, this does entail his or her complete identity. For Bellamy (ibid, p.7) the relation of the community to the individual can be likened to the way rules of language relate to speech. Though vocabulary and grammar do not determine what one thinks or say, they do structure it.

This point is inevitable for understanding the synthesis between individuality and sociality or community. What Hegel is arguing is that the will, wants, desires and autonomous actions of individual agents develop within the context of society rather than antecedent to it (ibid, p.8).

Hegel's philosophy is important in showing the formative process of the individual agent.

Bellamy (ibid) argues that Hegel

proposed an institutional framework which would provide an arena for individuals to voice criticism of their social bonds and hence develop them as human needs change, without returning to a putative asocial state of nature of the war of all against all.

This means that the individual is embedded within the community as it has been argued by western and African communitarians but this does not mean that it ceases to exist.

Hegel argues (in Bellamy, *ibid*) that the individual “consciousness emanates from the individual himself and is not instilled into him by others: the individual exists within the substance”. This is noteworthy because if the individual is seen in this light, there would be a need for negative liberties in order to protect the forceful communal intrusions or cultural oppression which would seek to deform such consciousness.

The role of the community would also be seen as important in order to provide the context not just for the fulfilment of individual desires autonomously chosen but for their development.

The community seen as the arena where individuals can reflect and reason about their social bonds as shown in Hegel’s dialectic, would lead to each in community valuing each other (*ibid*). This is crucial as it has been argued by Agrawal (1998: 153) that it is the recognition of value and ultimate worth of persons as the foundational feature of human life that the social bonds can be realisable. Therefore, rights based on the idea of mutual recognition would not be seen as destructive to the common good.

This should be the basis of reconciliation between Western and African philosophy in the issues of individuality, communitarianism and rationality, that individuality is reconcilable with community drawing arguments from all three for such assertions, and that Kantian rationality basing the liberal character if moderated can co-exist with Hegelian rationality, concerned with processual development of such rationality, which informs communitarianism. In this, African philosophy is very important in enlivening the communitarian debate by returning the metaphysical debates found in Hegel, assertions which have been avoided by western communitarians, as argued by Bellamy (2000:3), for fear of totalitarianism.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis liberal individualism, communitarianism and African philosophy have been explicated in order to allow us to understand the differing origins of each of these philosophical traditions. In the last chapter the critical evaluation of the communitarian critique of liberalism and African communitarianism is presented. This allowed us to establish the possibility of reconciling themes flowing out of these with liberal individualism in an attempt to create a balanced society. The main themes that emerged from the beginning to the end of this thesis are those of individuality and community. The debate between these views in social and political theory is an old one. But it has been drawn to relevance in the contemporary era by the need for a balance between the community and the individual in the wake of an era of human rights. There has been a need to establish the line between the private sphere, the sphere of the individual and the public sphere, the sphere of society. The main question has been to what extent can individual autonomy be limited by communal obligation? It is important to note that this debate has existed in the mainstream political philosophy from the Western perspectives. African philosophical views have been relegated to the realm of anthropology.

In this thesis an effort has been taken to craft African philosophy into this debate and acknowledge what modern African communitarians have said. This has opened the dialogue and broadened the scope of the debate. It also served to highlight the significance of such concepts as culture, traditions, language and contextual rationality in the creation the commonality, which is important for community. African perspectives' emphasis on these has been the reason for relegation to the realms of anthropology, but it is noteworthy that these are also the strengths of African perspectives in social and political theoretical debates as has been

shown in this thesis.

This is the case, particularly in the possibility opened in the fourth chapter, of providing an alternative foundation for the theory of rights on the basis of human dignity.

Modern African philosophers, African communitarians in particular, embark on a shift from mere assertions of folk traditional thought to the critical examination of these to extract issues that are relevant for contemporary philosophy. This necessitates the analytical dimension, self-reflection and argumentative justification as shown in the third chapter. In that way African philosophy has been able to engage other philosophical traditions. In contemporary South Africa and post-colonial Africa, there is a need to embark on the kind of research which establishes the bases for a balanced state, one which upholds the individual without destroying the framework for the community and the culture which makes society cohere. In the last chapter it has been established that though community is essential, individual rights are necessary for the protection of the individual against the negative intrusions of the community. And they are necessary to accommodate and facilitate social change which is inevitable for continuous survival of the community (Buchanan, 1989: 863). Establishing the basis for the above-mentioned facts is a major achievement of this thesis.

Reconciling different philosophical traditions is a significant step considering the political history of Africa. Didier Khaphagwani (in Kigongo, 1992: 61) has argued that from Africa's concept of personhood, as presented by Menkiti, 1984), results epistemological authoritarianism, which exalts the elderly as the only section of the community that has access to knowledge and wisdom having reaching the full personhood. This leads to political authoritarianism in the modern political context and the exclusion of the young and women in political institutions.

In light of this, this thesis opened African philosophy to the challenge of its unbalanced and cultural rooted notion of personhood. This has contributed to the achievement of what Taylor (in O'Neill, 1999: 20) calls the 'fusion of horizons'. This means the sharing of [perspectives in an effort to understand the 'other culture' (ibid). This is crucial because the understanding of something new or different, the exposure to the 'other' perspective, is self-transformative to the extent that it involves the broadening of our horizons (ibid). This is what we have attempted in this study, because it opens a dialogue between philosophical traditions and in a sense establishing a symbiosis between them.

The idea of the reconciliation between these philosophical traditions contributes to the understanding of rights of minorities within communities which is another pertinent issue for contemporary politics. This is one fact that made Hegel important as a bedrock upon which synthesis could be based. In Hegel's dialectic, the community is seen as the arena where individuals can reflect and reason about their social bonds and this leads to each in community valuing each other (Bellamy, 2000: 8). This is important in the context of multi-ethnic and multicultural societies in post-colonial African states. Van der Merwe (1998: 7) argues that multiculturalism "demands a philosophical reflection from within criss-crossing of and breaches between various particular histories, traditions and modes of thinking intermingled in the multicultural context of present-day societies". The synthesis between these philosophical traditions is a step towards realising the above in the modern political context.

The invoking of Hegelian thinking as a bedrock for the kind of a synthesis that has been undertaken in this thesis is not assuming neutrality, because there is no neutral ground, no "view from nowhere" (Van der Merwe, 1998: 8).

It is important to note that every philosophical perspective has its own history and tradition. Van der Merwe (ibid) argues that this realisation forces one to enter into dialogue with the

other perspectives, a synthesis which allows each perspective to complement another. Rationality is at the centre of this undertaking. The notion of rationality that bases a philosophical perspective is essential. The form of rationality that assumes universality, which is the feature of Western philosophy, is potentially problematic for the valuing of other cultures or perspectives. According to O'Neill (1999:22) human rationality must be thought of as being embedded within particular forms of life. This is historical bound and communally embedded rationality that is associated with the communitarian critique of liberalism and African philosophy. These are the essential foundations for the respect of each other, at the same time, this mutual recognition leads to the 'fusion of horizons'.

Hegelian philosophy is the closest to the ideal of reconciliation of perspectives which promote individuality and those that uphold community. Hegel (in Bellamy, 2000) sought to find the resolution to the age-old dilemma between the universal and the particular, that is, between the individuality and community, the object of this thesis, and this is achieved through the synthesis of the Western and African philosophy at the level individualism, rationality and communitarianism.

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