

AN EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The metaphysical notion, the relational and the existential constructs of African person is characterized by a conditional state of human values. These human values are directed by the conceptual analysis of African society. African personhood toed the path of the western tradition of Plato and Aristotle that no man can live in complete isolation from others in society unless such a man wants to be a beast or an angel. African society is defined by the relational context and the existential construction of the principles of communitarianism practices in Africa. This paper adopts the analytical framework in discussing the relational context, metaphysical and existential construction of personhood. The interpersonal context of African personhood lends credence to the comparative analysis of personhood between the western and African perspective. This paper provides an overview analysis of the existential construction, metaphysical and the relational context of personhood in African society. The findings of this paper are that (1) the interpersonal context of personhood has empirical, relational, existential, rational, psychological, ontological and social implications; (2) the empirical results of personhood reveals a normative assumption; (3) African personhood has a perceptual representation; (4) the existential construction of human personhood lends credence to a claim of truth and the idea of the comprehensive conception of the good in African society; the concept of personhood relates to the individual context and it is a universal phenomenon; and (5) African personhood is an essential characteristic of the human species and it is not limited to perception, cognition, societal values and human circumstances.

Keywords: African, Person, Personhood, Relational context,

Introduction

This paper postulates that the concept of human personhood is recognized from the African perspective of human social order, communitarian principle, existential construction, ontological status; and the metaphysical notion of African personhood. The metaphysical notion of African personhood reveals that the African person is defined by perceptual representation and relational construct. The African person is perceptive about his immediate natural environment. He is defined by natural order, time, communitarian setting, rationality, cognition and societal dictum. The African man is defined by a sense of belongingness.

Moreover, the metaphysical notion, the relational and the existential constructs of African person is characterized by a conditional state of human values. These human values are directed by the conceptual analysis of African society. African personhood toed the path

of the western tradition of Plato and Aristotle that no man can live in complete isolation from others in society unless such a man wants to be a beast or an angel. African society is defined by the relational context and the existential construction of the principles of communitarianism practices in Africa. This paper critically examines the relational context, metaphysical and existential construction of personhood.

Furthermore, the interpersonal context of African personhood lends credence to the comparative analysis of personhood between the western and African perspective. This paper provides an overview analysis of the existential construction, metaphysical and the relational context of personhood in African society. The findings of this paper are that (1) the interpersonal context of personhood has empirical, relational, existential, rational, psychological, ontological and social implications; (2) the empirical results of personhood reveals a normative assumption; (3) African personhood has a perceptual representation; (4) the existential construction of human personhood lends credence to a claim of truth and the idea of the comprehensive conception of the good in African society; the concept of personhood relates to the individual context and it is a universal phenomenon; and (5) African personhood is an essential characteristic of the human species and it is not limited to perception, cognition, societal values and human circumstances.

Nevertheless, this paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introductory remarks. Section two focuses on the conceptual analysis of personhood in African philosophy. Section three discusses the concept of personhood in African philosophy. Section four focuses on African philosophy of personhood and the ontological status of time. Section five is anchored on the evaluation of personhood as a relational context and an existential construction. Section six is the concluding considerations.

Personhood in African Philosophy: A Conceptual Analysis

The concept of personhood as a universal phenomenon has various arguments to it. The concept of personhood is not only restricted to African philosophy, morality and politics. According to Simon Evnine (2008, 1), politics and the nature of persons are very well trodden areas within philosophy. The concept of human person does put us in touch with morality and value in quite distinct ways. Simon Evnine (2008, Op.cit) in his theoretical position argues that other animals cannot be moral or immoral and they are, one supposes, severely limited in what they can value and in what forms that valuing can take. Reason, an epistemic feature thus lies at the foundations of all the things that make us (for better or worse), special.

Nonetheless, the concept of personhood brings to the foreground that man is a rational animal as exemplified by Aristotle and most subsequent philosophers have concurred, if not with the animal part of the definition, at least with the rational part. Human beings are by their very nature connected with reason which animals do not possess (Evnine, 1-2). Battista Modin (2007, 243) in consonance with Simon Evnine asserts that when we wish to give a comprehensive name to man's being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way, we say he is a person. This is a term we never use for plants or animals, but only for man. According to Battista Mondin (2011, 6), "it was Christianity that created a new dimension for man, that of the human person. This notion was so erroneous to classical

rationalism that the Greek Fathers were not able to find the categories and words in Greek philosophy to express this new reality". As rightly observed by Mondin (2011, 6-7):

Only thanks to the concept of the person-a being gifted with infinite dignity and absolute value- brought to light by Christianity, which makes all men images of God created directly by Him, could all discrimination based on sex, age, race, language, power, possessions, cult and so forth become illegitimate, unjust and odious.

In the light of the above, Battista Mondin (2011, 7) further stress that all men are equally worthy of esteem, respect and love, even one's enemies, especially the weak, the poor and the most humble. Thanks to the revolutionary concept of the person, Christian philosophers were able to substitute Greek aristocratic and racist humanism with a truly universal humanism.

Moreover, the concept of personhood is not only deeply rooted in Christian ethics that all persons are emanation of God but that the concept of the human person is tied to social relationships and culture. In his theoretical position, Simon Evnine (2008, 2) sees the conception of persons as that which is embedded in what he calls our social practices- a nexus of customs, conventions, and institutions within which we live and move and have our being. Be that as it may, the concept of personhood is not only tied to social practices but is tied to what Battista Mondin (2007, 145), calls cultural anthropology. According to Simon Evnine (2008, 1), our culture is hugely more advanced than that of even the most advanced non-humans. Battista Mondin (2007, 145-146) in consonance with Simon Evnine (2008, 1), asserts that:

It was above all that tremendous crisis that hastened a more attentive and profound study of that which culture is for itself, for the individual and for society. Man is not a natural being, but a cultural being: this means that at the moment of birth, nature gave man hardly the necessary minimum, the essentials, to be man, and assigns him the task of making himself and forming himself so as to fully realize his being through culture.

Furthermore, the concept of personhood has multidimensional perspectives. According to Battista Mondin (2007, iii), the concept of personhood has ontological, psychological, dialogical, historical, global and absolute value. However, the concept of human personhood is traceable to human history. In other words, the concept of personhood has historical trajectory. Accordingly, Battista Mondin (2007, 243-244) asserts that:

Historically, the word "person" marks the line of demarcation between pagan and Christian culture. Philosophers take into consideration only impersonal thought, whose immobile order regulates nature as its ideas: the appearance of the singular is like a flaw in nature and consciousness. The singularity of the person, unique and unrepeatable (and, consequently, the substantial equality in dignity of every member of the human species), is a truth carried, affirmed, and diffused by Christianity, and was a truth with a "subversive

power”(peacefully subversive) as few others in history were: little by little, as it succeeded in making inroads and penetrating the pagan culture, it profoundly changed paganism, substantially varying it, giving birth to medieval and later modern culture, which was in turn saturated with Christian values, not only in the initial phase, but also in its period of greatest splendour.

Worthy of note is that Battista Mondin (2007, 244) asserts that for many reasons, today the concept of the person affirmed by Christianity (which has become the important patrimony of modern culture) is no longer shared in many circles. Many people no longer want the word “person” to intend the uniqueness, unrepeatability, absolute value and sacredness of the individual. Battista Mondin (2007, 244-245), in his theoretical construct further heightened his theoretical position by arguing that the concept of the human person is a word is not only unique but wish to assign to this word a merely sociological meaning. For Battista Mondin (2007, 244) man is not “man in himself, independently of that which others do” to render him as such. Even if man is given a biological identity, man would not equally have any autonomous consistency, nor, consequently, any absolute rights. Calvino (1975, 129) in consonance with BM (2007, 244-245) asserts that:

The biological event does not suffice of having taken origin from a human spermatozoid and egg to make a human being: it will be ‘human’ only inasmuch as through the smile, word, affective relations, help, learning, play and the work of other human being it enters to make part of the collective, outside of which the individual of the species ‘homo sapiens’ is nothing more than a frightened and frenetic animal, unadapted to any environment.

In the light of the above theoretical position of I. Calvino, Battista Mondin (2007, 245) further heightened his theoretical position by asserting that according to the post-Christian culture of our times, a person is only he who is recognized of belonging to the human species. The sense of the word “person” is, therefore, no longer that of the human reality in itself, but rather that of a social convention. For Battista Mondin (2007, 245-246):

The concept of person is a conquest of Christian thought, joined with the meditation and reflection on the history of salvation. This is not the history of the human species, of the collective and universal, but it is the history of individual concrete particular persons, the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Isaiah etc-and a history that exalts the value of every single exponent of the human species, inasmuch as every man is bestowed the title of child of God and brother of Jesus Christ.

The Concept of Personhood in African Philosophy

The African person has a sense of belongingness and he is not individualistic as exemplified in the western philosophical tradition. African personhood is a distinctly part of all human nature defined within the natural order of things in the physical world. African personhood is a relational theory represented by the metaphysical notion of perception. The African person is perceptual and emotional. Worthy of note is that arguments concerning

the nature of African personhood are metaphysical, normative, existential, and consists of philosophical beliefs or insights which may be properly asserted in either in metaphysical and existential construction or relational construct. The interpersonal context of African personhood lends credence to the comparative analysis of personhood between the western and African perspective. Molefe motsamai in his work *“An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality and Politics”* argues that the normative concept of personhood is seen as the foundational moral category to theorise about African moral and political thought (Molefe, 2019, 1).

Worthy of note is that Molefe in his theoretical position further asserts that the metaphysical notion of personhood pertains to facts that constitute a thin called a human being; it is a species- Homo Sapiens (Molefe, 2019, 2). Accordingly, Molefe Mosamai in consonance with Kwame Gyekye further asserts that: The notion of personhood in which one is a person (human being) is prior to any process of socialization or acquisition of habits/character (Molefe, 2019, 2-3). Molefe further heightened his theoretical position by arguing that:

The debate regarding personal identity in the African tradition tends to diverge between (1) those that account for it entirely in terms of social relationships and (2) those that account for it by invoking a combination of individual and social features. Some African philosophers have argued that the “environing community” refers to the ontological notion of personhood qua human nature. This is the case precisely because the “environing community” is not one of the properties of human nature that one can single out like the body and so on. The “environing community” is the property that is external to human nature (Molefe, 2019, 4).

Nevertheless, Ralston Christopher and Justin Ho, in their work entitled *“Disability, Humanity and Personhood: A Survey of Moral Concepts”* argued that many of us hold that persons are intrinsically valuable and therefore should be respected by cultivating those features that make them persons, and not engaging in actions which may prevent them from exercising or exhibiting those features (Christopher and Justin, 2007, 620). For Ruth Macklin, asserts that although, the literature on personhood is vast and continues to abound, there is little evidence that writers on this topic are approaching a consensus on the meaning of the concept or on the criteria for its correct application. Moral values are by far the most prominent in their influence on debates and controversies surrounding personhood. (Macklin, 1983, 35) Ruth Macklin (1983, 35) in consonance with Joseph Fletcher’s theoretical position (1979, 12-18), proposes criteria or indicators of humanness or personhood. Following list taken from Joseph Fletchers by Ruth Macklin, the list consists of fifteen positive and five negative ones. These according to Ruth, (1983, 35) and Joseph Fletcher (1979, 12-18) these include the following:

- (1) Minimum intelligence
- (2) self-awareness
- (3) Self- control

- (4) A sense of time
- (5) A sense of futurity
- (6) A sense of past
- (7) The capability to relate to others
- (8) Concern for others
- (9) Communication
- (10) Control of existence
- (11) Curiosity
- (12) Change and changeability
- (13) Balance of rationality and feeling
- (14) Idiosyncrasy
- (15) Neocortical function (Fletcher 1979, Macklin, 1983)

Furthermore, apart from the positive notion given by Joseph Fletcher and Ruth Macklin, these scholars also identified the five negative propositions of personhood. These five negative propositions are:

- (1) Man is not non or anti-artificial
- (2) Man is not essentially parental
- (3) Man is not essentially sexual
- (4) Man is a bundle of rights
- (5) Man is not a worshipper (Fletcher and Macklin, 1979, 1983).

Moreover, the concept of personhood reveals that within the course of western political and legal theory, claims made on behalf of a universal conception of humanity (personhood) have had a progressive thrust (Kittay, 1999, 2). Worthy of note is that the concept of personhood requires the normative principles of communitarianism and dependency. For Kittay, dependency is inescapable in the life history of each individual (Kittay, 1999, 29). Dependency remains one of the unassailable facts about human existence. Worthy of note is that the concept of personhood requires the normative principles of communitarianism and dependency. Accordingly, Eva Kittay asserts that dependency is inescapable in the life history of each individual. Dependency remains one of the unassailable facts about human existence. While conditioned in fundamentally significant ways by cultural considerations, dependency for humans is as unavoidable as birth and death are for all living organism (Kittay, 29). Frederick White in consonance with Eva Kittay asserts that personhood is a distinctly human state with the natural order. The postulate that personhood is a distinctly human state within the natural order is basically an assertion of human exceptionalism (White, 2013, 76). For Gary Varner, personhood is deeply rooted in the classical and connectionist models of moral reasoning (Varner, 2012, 63). According to Gary Varner, personhood reflects on personal identity and personal morality (Varner, 2012, 51). Gary Varner further heightened his theoretical position by asserting that human personhood is defined by the nature of intuitive-level system (ILS) rules (Varner, 48). Gary Varner further asserts that human personhood is defined by moral standing or “moral considerability” versus moral significance (Varner, 2012, 22).

An African philosophy of personhood and the ontological status of time

A critical look at the concept of personhood from the African context reveals the normative conclusion of what Aigbodion and Idjakpo call communitarian consensus (Aigbodion and Idjakpo, 2010, 1). Wangari Maathai in consonance with Aigbodion and Idjakpo sees the interpersonal context of African personhood as that which is simply tied to the African family (Maathai, 2009, 274). Accordingly, Wangari Maathai further asserts that the base of African society is the family (Wangari, 2009, 275). Worthy of note is that a critical examination of the concept of personhood from the western and African perspective reveals that the concept of personhood reveals what Finn Hansen calls the self- transformative moment of the individual person (Hansen, 2009, 292-293).

Furthermore, the concept of personhood reflects on the pathway of the Western tradition and the classical philosophers of Plato and Aristotle whereby they argued that no man can live in isolation from others in society unless such a man wants to be a beast or an angel. This paper provides an overview of the existential metaphysical and relational imports of personhood. However, the concept of personhood as a universal phenomenon has various dimensions to it, politically, morally, existentially, religiously, socially, psychologically, ontologically, globally, metaphysically, historically, and anthropologically. The concept of personhood has a sociological meaning.

In addition, the concept of personhood puts us in touch with moral precepts, normative outcomes and human values. Worthy of note is that the concept of personhood brings to the fore that man is a rational animal as exemplified by various classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. However, human beings are intrinsically and unavoidably connected with cognitive reasoning. For Robert Pippin, human reason is, in all persons, are capable of determining the principles of action and persons are capable of acting on such motivations, because such a principle holds for all rational agents (Pippin, 2007, 185-186). This cognitive reasoning makes us different from other animals. The concept of personhood is deeply rooted in Christian theology that all creatures emanate from God. Worthy of note is that there is inextricable nexus between the concepts of personhood and culture. According to Pippin, culture assumes the role of the moral educators in a community of persons (Pippin, 2007, 196). For Pippin, culture places a high value on a kind of civic harmony in an emancipated global society (Pippin, 2007, 196). It is germane to note that time plays a critical role in the interpersonal context of personhood. According to William Lawhead, time is out there in the world, characterizing the existence of external objects, but is also something we experience internally as characterizing our subjective experience (Lawhead, 2002, 484). Iroegbu in consonance with Lawhead asserts that the human person lives within periods (Iroegbu, 1995, 305). For Iroegbu, the concept of personhood is defined by an egocentric time scale and time is reckoned on the rhythm of nature (Iroegbu, 1995, 305-306). Iroegbu, further heightened his theoretical position by arguing that the human person is defined by time and the deepest meaning and the significance of time is eternity.³⁷ in his work entitled "*Enwisdomization and African Philosophy*" Iroegbu asserts that the human person is noema-noetic, psycho-somatic, psychological-physiological, socio-cultural, individual-rational, and human-divine integrated being (Iroegbu, 1994, 81). Worthy of note is that the

concept of personhood revolves around individuality. For Iroegbu, individuality involves selfhood and relationship (Iroegbu, 1994, 81-82). Pantaleon further asserts in his work on the “Kpim of Human Person” that the concept of human person revolves around relational context and communitarian principles (Iroegbu, 2000, 42-43). However, the concept of personhood is deeply rooted in the normative principles of communitarianism and social practices.

Evaluation

Having examined the concept of personhood in African philosophy this paper therefore observes that the concept of personhood is a universal phenomenon and it does not restrict itself to African setting alone. This paper advocates that the concept of personhood cuts across all culture and race. The concept of personhood is deeply rooted in the normative conclusion of social order, communitarian principle, existential construction, ontological status and the metaphysical notion of African personhood. The notion of personhood reveals that the African person is defined relational dimension.

Nevertheless, the African person is perceptive about his environment. He is defined by natural order, the passage and the ontology of time, communitarian setting, rationality, cognition and social communication. The concept of personhood is characterized by a sense of belongingness. The concept of personhood advocates human values and culture. These human values are directed by the conceptual analysis of African society. The concept of personhood reflects on the pathway of the Western tradition and the classical philosophers- Plato and Aristotle whereby they argued that no man can live in isolation from others in society unless such a man wants to be a beast or an angel.

Furthermore, this paper provides an overview analysis of the existential construction, metaphysical and the relational context of personhood. However, the concept of personhood as a universal phenomenon has various dimensions to it. The concept of personhood is not only restricted to African philosophy, morality and politics. The concept of personhood does put us in touch with morality and human value. Worthy of note is that the concept of personhood brings to the foreground that man is a rational animal as exemplified by Aristotle and most subsequent philosophers have that human beings are by their very nature connected with reason which differentiates us from other animals. The concept of personhood is deeply rooted in Christian ethics- that all persons are emanation of God.

Conclusion

Having critically examined the concept of personhood in African philosophy, this paper, therefore, concludes that the concept of personhood is recognized from the African perspective of human social order, communitarian principle, existential construction, ontological status; and the metaphysical notion of African personhood. The metaphysical notion of African personhood reveals that the African person is defined by perceptual representation and relational construct. The African person is perceptive about his immediate natural environment. He is defined by natural order, time, communitarian setting, rationality, cognition and societal dictum. The African man is defined by a sense of belongingness. The

metaphysical notion, the relational and the existential constructs of African person is characterized by a conditional state of human values. These human values are directed by the conceptual analysis of African society. African personhood toed the path of the western tradition of Plato and Aristotle that no man can live in complete isolation from others in society unless such a man wants to be a beast or an angel. African society is defined by the relational context and the existential construction of the principles of communitarianism practices in Africa. This paper critically examines the relational context, metaphysical and existential construction of personhood.

Moreover, the interpersonal context of African personhood lends credence to the comparative analysis of personhood between the western and African perspective. This paper provides an overview analysis of the existential construction, metaphysical and the relational context of personhood in African society.

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