

‘The individual’ in the individualism/communitarianism debate: In defense of personism¹

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Abstract

Conceptually obfuscating the construct ‘the individual’ with the individuality of persons is the main underlying presupposition that generates the communitarianism/individualism debate and nourishes its tensions. Adopting chiefly an analytic approach, this paper brings some clarity to the substance of the debate focusing on Western ‘communitarian’ thought. It advocates making ‘the person’ the focus as ‘personism’ necessarily encompasses individuality and communality. Dispelling many quandaries of the debate, it is hoped, exposes to a greater degree, what should be one main, if not the main, concern of socio-political theory and practice.

Keywords: ‘the individual’, individuality, community, communality, personism

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge that substantive portions of this article appear in some form in her PhD dissertation.

Introduction

The disagreement in the communitarianism/individualism debate: A recap

A bone of contention between individualist and communitarian thought, regardless of the particular differentiation per author, is the idea of 'the individual'. The question or concern that engaged the neo-Kantianism of Rawls' *A theory of justice* (1971) as well as other individualist thinkers such as Robert Nozick, David Gauthier, Ronald Dworkin, and to some extent Kymlicka is 'the individual'. Subsequent responses from contemporary 'communitarian writers' like Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor from his Hegelian traditions, center fundamentally on this same notion of 'the individual'. Even though this theme is very prominent in African philosophy, the paper focuses on the 'communitarian' critique from the western (Anglo-American and European) context which is presumed to be typically individualist in its socio-political orientation, systems and structures. Such an approach, in my view, better helps to expose the identified conceptual challenge one is confronted with in seeking to advocate for 'community' and its ideals in a linguistically and conceptually entangled term – the individual – which is under scrutiny in this paper. The linguistic and conceptual clarity envisaged at the end of this critical examination should dispel many of the quandaries of socio-political thought and practice.

Whereas Rawls and his contemporary followers have sought to advocate a special place of priority for 'the individual', her rights, freedoms and autonomy, the communitarian school, from its Aristotelian antecedents, through Rousseau and Hegel especially, has been committed to championing the cause of community and its attachments. The 'communitarian writings', in their various renditions, have sought to emphasize the significance of community and communal relationships to 'the individual'.

By distinguishing between morality as *Moralität*—abstract, universal rules of morality—and morality as *Sittlichkeit*,—community-

specific ethical precepts—Hegel (Allen, 1991, pp. xii-xiii), and his later followers, prominently Charles Taylor, set out a foundational distinction that has served as perhaps the most enduring basis for a revision of the neo-Kantian Rawlsian tradition and its implied ‘atomist’ tendencies.²

From an African perspective, to ask the question, “does the individual’s life belong to him or does it belong to the community” for Menkiti, for instance, would be to ask the unintelligible and obnoxious, if not abominable, because in his view, “it is *the*³ *community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory*” (1984, pp. 171-172) and that, “as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be.” (p. 180). In the words of Senghor, “Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society.” (1964, p. 49). He buttresses the point with the claim that “Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals.” (pp. 93-94).

Wiredu and Gyekye also argue that the community “alone constitutes the context, social or cultural space, in which the actualization of the possibilities of the individual person can take place, providing the individual person the opportunity to express his individuality, to acquire and develop his personality and to fully become the kind of person he wants”. (1992, p. 106). According to Mbiti, it is the community which makes the individual to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence. In his words, somewhat opposed to Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), “Whatever happens to the individual

2 A label that even proponents of individualism themselves preferred not to admit to, even if the substantive grounds for that designation had not changed much in their theoretical foundations. See Taylor’s critique of ‘Atomism’ in *Philosophy and the human sciences* (1985), pp. 187, 189.

3 My emphasis to show how the use of ‘the’ suggests a problematic connotation of community as referring to a restricted linguistic, ethnic, geographical or biological group.

happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: *'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.'*" (1970, p. 141; my emphasis). By this thinking, a human being becomes real only in her relationships with others in a community or a group and consequently, the growth and fulfillment of the human being is inextricably tied to the harmonization of this interaction. So, in the words of Kenyatta, "nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost, he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary." (1965, p. 297). Such African communitarian understanding of being would then be best captured as "I am related, therefore we are" instead of the Cartesian individualistic definition of a human-being as an entity merely defined by thought, "I think therefore I am". Indeed, in Dickson's view many agree that the sense of community is definitive of Africanness (1977, p. 4).

The communitarian critique of individualism, from both perspectives, is therefore the counter-view that, to varying degrees, regards as inconceivable, meaningless and non-realizable the individualist conception of higher morality as enshrined in abstract and universal rules formulated behind a 'veil of ignorance' independent of, or purportedly disengaged from specific actual human habitation. Consequently, the communitarian view rejects the corresponding notion of 'the individual' as a rational, free and autonomous being who is an 'end in herself' (Kant, 1993, p. 30) and whose 'inalienable' rights, guaranteed by their 'deontological'⁴ nature, have the fundamental priority, or at least a fundamental priority, over the good. (Dworkin, 1978, p. 198; Nozick, 1974, pp. 31-32).

By contrast, the communitarian critique rather 'embeds', 'encumbers', 'constitutes', links, locates, or defines 'this individual' within or in terms of a concrete community-shared context-of a kind-family, neighborhood, nation, state, historical or linguistic

4 See Hasnas' alternative view of natural rights in his discussion of Rasmussen and De Uyl's argument for a morally derivative status of natural rights: an instructive perspective to communitarian critiques of liberalism as "it seems to highlight a distinction between the moral and political domains" p.1.

group, ancestral or blood-related group— depending on which ‘communitarian’ one reads. Communitarian writers, in general, regard the moral rules of this community context as the higher level of morality and as the only way in which actually to achieve *genuine* autonomy, rights and moral freedoms of ‘the individual’.

Thus, the communitarian response seeks to concretize ‘the individual’ by situating her in a community context. The claim is not only that community is natural and therefore necessary for ‘the individual’, but that ‘the individual’ *cannot* have a freely chosen life detached from community; that meaningful individual autonomy, freedom and justice, if it exists at all, exists only within the socio-historical context of constitutive community of a sort, its culture and language. And it is in this community context, argues the communitarian, that moral values can be given actual meaning and substance. (Taylor, 1985; Sandel, 1984; MacIntyre, 1984).

Further, the communitarian critique insists that the very identity of ‘the individual’, her self-understanding and agency, stem from this community. According to Taylor, for instance, the very identity of ‘the individual’, her self-understanding and her agency, stems from communal belonging. He argues that “... an *individual* is constituted by the language and culture which can only be maintained and renewed in the communities he is part of,” for “outside of the continuing conversation of a community, which provides the language by which we draw our background distinctions, human agency... would be not just impossible, but inconceivable”⁵ (1985, p. 8) Taylor thus, outrightly rejects the individualist’s doctrine of primacy of rights by labeling it as ‘atomist’ since it does not accept the principle that, just as rights-bearing is unconditional for ‘the individual’ so is community-belonging. (1985, p 188).

From the perspective of Sandel, ‘the individual’ does not exist prior to its ends. Rather it *is* composed or constituted by its ends. And to the extent that its communal-others share in its ends,

5 My emphasis to show how *the individual* as used here depicts concreteness, not a property or an aspect of a person; a usage which seems to be a source of the challenge against communitarian thought touching on the place of creativity, innovation and responsibility in the absence of disengaged identity.

identities are merged in a larger entity –family, tribe, nation—that is uniquely able to form and pursue its common good on the basis of a shared vocabulary of discourse, common background practices and understandings, and some particular embodiment of community values (1982, p. 179). But given that Sandel somehow also rejects the notion of the “sociologically conditioned subject” (p. 12) one could come to the conclusion that for Sandel insofar as ‘the individual’ possesses such a given “core self” it is at the very least partly socially constructed if not a radically “situated self” (p. 172).

MacIntyre, however, insists that, “my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity” (1984, p. 221) and thus, vehemently rejects as dubious individualism’s model of ‘the individual’ as the being who has natural rights with fundamental primacy prior to or detached from communal attachments. In his view, “the truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns”; that “natural or human rights... are fictions” (1984, p. 60).

In the view of Walzer, since there cannot be a meaningful, universal or absolute, yet *just* morality outside of specific community context, it is ‘the individual’s’ community that would have to prescribe and underwrite her moral values and moral autonomy. From this premise, Walzer (1983) seems to admit to the implied moral relativism entailed in his position that justice demands that general conceptions of value be expressed in particular community-specific terms even if such conclusions have problematic implications for social and political thought and practice.

It is worth noting that the communitarian notion of community is not to be regarded as a simple aggregate or mere association of ‘individuals’ with the character depicted in social contract theories, whose agreed cooperation is based on the search for mutual benefits. In the communitarian view, such a notion of community understood as causal dependency between ‘the individual’ and her ‘community’, defended by individualists like Gauthier, (1986, pp. 330-355) not only undermines the very identity

of ‘the individual’ but more fundamentally, detracts from the worth of community⁶, which communitarians hold to be desirable in itself. The conception of community as of intrinsic worth is well stressed by Walzer (1983), in his discussion on community-membership, where he reiterates the position that belonging to a community is not only valuable for the goods that it brings but more importantly and fundamentally, that the sense of communal belonging is itself a good that is worthwhile.

Examining ‘the individual’ in the communitarianism/ individualism debate

The foregoing overview thus unveils an apparent disagreement between the two schools of thought which seems to center on a postulation of an image of ‘the individual’ as an abstract, universal, rational, free and autonomous right-bearing being, who is an entity unto itself, and who has inalienable, deontological rights prior to and ‘outside’ of community. The communitarian disagrees with this image and the implications thereof.

Yet on closer inspection, when the individualist talks about ‘the individual’ he refers to and argues on the basis of appeal to consciousness, rights, autonomy, freedom, and so on. But these concepts only describe capacities, properties, qualities or states of being of a subject labeled ‘the individual’. These capacities or properties are themselves not the *subject* that bears them, whether or not this free rights-bearing and autonomous subject is a concrete, embodied human being (or soul/spirit/mind). In appealing to these properties or capacities, the individualist has not as yet defined *the* subject itself. At most, the individualist has offered a description of some properties or capacities of *individuality* that a certain subject, concrete or not, bears. So, to say that ‘the individual’ is a being defined by primacy of rights, autonomy and freedom is merely to ascribe some of the qualities that this subject, labeled ‘the individual’, bears. The individualist has thus specified the character

6 Another ambiguity in the debate as both debaters talk past each other with different senses of the term community: the communitarian sense of community, itself straddling between a closed social, linguistic or territorial unit in some contexts but in other contexts referring to the relational ties, attachments or bonds themselves; while the individualist argues with the mindset of ‘community’ as association or accidental collectivity of a kind.

of being *individual* that is the character of *individuality*; he or she has not specified *the bearer* of the character of individuality – whether concrete or not.

If the above analysis is correct, the individualist is not justified in equating the character of *individuality* (rights-bearing, free, conscious, autonomous), with the concrete human subject who bears it. Nor is it then accurate to label this being 'the individual'. In sum, the individualist has neither yet defined the subject who bears this *individuality*, nor has he shown why the *individuality* of this undefined bearer should be the defining feature of this subject and thus be accorded uttermost priority: by, and over, who or what?

Insofar as the subject in question does not, as it stands, warrant the label 'the individual', neither does this notion of 'the individual' address the fundamental concern of the communitarianism/individualism dispute so far discussed. That concern centers around the question of the nature of the being or subject who bears the quality(s) of *individuality*. The point of this objection is that this subject could bear some other qualities or could itself *be* some other thing(s) other than *individuality* bearing; - and especially so for this debate whose disagreements, centre chiefly on the concrete embodied human subject who necessarily belongs to and inhabits human society.

As it stands, without an accurate conception of the nature of this subject, individualist claims about rights, freedoms and autonomy would read, and *mean*, respect for the primacy of *individuality* and not respect for the primacy of 'the individual' over the community ontologically and/or morally. Arguments regarding the subject's ontological constitution, which must precede demands for its ontological or moral primacy, have not been argued for as yet by analytical reckoning. Neither would the claim of *individuality* of this individuality-bearing subject preclude the possibility of the subject bearing some other quality(s) or *being* some other thing than *individuality*-bearing, as already argued.

It is worth noting that, for the communitarian, the demand to respect individuality is not contentious. The communitarian objection is not to rights or autonomy per say. Even the strictest

communitarian critique upholds respect for *individuality*—rights, autonomy and freedoms— though it typically requires a connection of sorts to community and/or its attachments. Consider Taylor’s assertion that, “the identity of the autonomous, self-determining individual requires a social matrix ... which ... recognizes the right to *autonomous* decision and which calls for the individual having a voice”; similarly his claim that this “free individual who affirms himself as such already has an obligation to complete, restore, or sustain the society within which this identity is possible” (1992, p. 49). Similarly, Sandel’s intoned admission of the resort to individual rights even if only in circumstances when communal bonds have been distorted, expressed in his argument that in “a more or less ideal family situation... *individual rights* and fair decision procedures are seldom invoked, not because injustice is rampant but because their appeal is pre-empted by a spirit of generosity in which I am rarely inclined to claim my fair share” (1982, p. 33), supports this assertion.⁷ As well, MacIntyre’s hinted admission of individuality is granted in his insistence that “the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities... does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community” (1984, p. 221). In similar fashion, Walzer’s regard of national rights as originated from individual rights in his words, “territorial integrity and political sovereignty ... belong to states, but they derive ultimately from the *rights of individuals*, and from them they take their force.” ‘The duties and rights of states are nothing more than the duties and rights of the men who compose them’” (1977, p. 53; 1980, p. 219) should ground the position that communitarianism would not be antagonistic to rights, autonomies or freedoms as such and thus not to *individuality* properly understood. Likewise, even the relatively stricter African communitarian perspectives earlier referred to also admit of *individuality* (i.e. uniqueness, autonomy, etc.), either in relational terms to the ‘community’ or in terms of less priority to

7 In agreement with Hume’s intonation of justice as remedial, since “‘tis only from the scanty provision nature has made for his wants, that justice derives its origin’ (Hume, D. (1739).

'community'.⁸

The arguments so far show that the actual underlying question in the debate between communitarians and individualists is over the nature of the subject that is conscious, free, right-bearing and autonomous (Taylor, 1992, pp. 49-50); or in different terms, that bears the character of *individuality*. To this question, individualist postulated 'the individual', provides no answer. And here, the communitarian critique, once purged of its own linguistic ambiguities, comes into its own, for the communitarian contention is that this subject *is* definitely something more than a being that bears *individuality* or at the least, bears something more than *individuality*.

Taylor, for instance, conceives of this subject as a concrete *embodied* human being who inhabits human society, lives, moves and has its being so to speak, instead of individualism's "extensionless subject, epistemologically a *tabula rasa*" (1992, p. 50), subsisting, as it were, in a supposed state of nature⁹ or resident behind a claimed veiled world of ignorance. Further, for the communitarian, it would still not be accurate to conceive of the concrete, embodied human subject as 'atomic' – a being that can be autonomous and self-sufficient even when detached from community. Rather, the communitarian conceives of this subject not only as an embodied human *person* bearing the character of *individuality* but insists that this subject's bearing of *individuality* presupposes and is preconditioned by 'constitutive', 'embedded' or 'encumbered' community-ties of a sort, and with it its accompanying attachments and obligations. Accordingly, the challenge of the communitarian critique seems directed, although equivocally in my view, at the individualist conceived 'the individual'.

8 Mbiti and Kenyatta, respectively.

9 Alluded to by social contract theorists like Hobbes.

The ambiguities in the communitarian critique of individualism and implications

As earlier charged, the communitarian critique of individualism, as well as some of the individualist claims and responses, is saddled with a number of subversive linguistic imprecision and a resultant conceptual morass. This obscures its principal thrust which is directed at ‘the individual’ as the presumed right-bearing human subject. Apart from the lack of clarity of terms concerning the terms of the debate between the two perspectives, the uncircumspect *use* of the label ‘the individual’, makes the line of reasoning of the communitarian critics especially, but also the individualist response, somewhat confused and muddled, if not inconsistent. Upon closer examination, the communitarian critique of individualism harbors at least three such ambiguous uses: 1) the reference to individualists’ abstract image of *individuality* which is an abstraction and thus, meaningless or absurd; 2) the reference to individualists’ inadequately conceived *community-detached* human being which communitarians consider to be a falsity that must be corrected because of its dubious supposition of the possibility of an atomic self-sufficient man; 3) the reference to the duly *community-situated* human being who communitarian arguments suggest, is the actual resident of human society and thus should be the appropriate referent of the discussion.

Taylor’s critique of ‘the individual’ as an “*extensionless* subject, epistemologically a *tabula rasa*...” (1992, p. 50), for instance, employs the term ‘the individual’ to refer to individualists’ abstract image of *individuality*. Second, and in the same context he implicitly uses the term ‘the individual’ to refer to individualists inaccurately presumed *community-detached* though *concrete person* when he describes as ‘atomic’ individualism’s conception of *man* as “politically a presuppositionless bearer of rights.” (Taylor, 1992, p. 50). In yet a third sense, Taylor (1985) uses the term ‘individuals’ to refer to *men*, but this time to mean the duly *community-situated concrete human persons* when he regards as ‘atomist’ the view that takes as at least a,

fundamental, principle of their political theory the ascription of certain *rights to individuals* and which deny the same status to a principle of belonging ... that is a principle which states our *obligation as men to belong* to or sustain society, ... Primacy-of-right theories in other words accept a principle *ascribing rights to men* as binding unconditionally,... [b]ut they do not accept as similarly unconditional a principle of belonging or obligation. (p. 188, emphases mine).

This third sense of linguistic ambiguity, where the term 'the individual' is used to refer to the community-situated person, is also expressed in Walzer's definition of states' rights as ultimately deriving "from *the rights of individuals*"; Walzer goes on to say that "the duties and rights of states are nothing more than the duties and *rights of the men who compose them*" (Walzer, 1977, p 53¹⁰; 1980, p 219) Here, both Walzer and Taylor equate 'individual' with '*man*'. But if such an equation is acceptable to the communitarian, then the communitarian complaint against individualism is undermined. This is because the thrust of the communitarian critique is to argue that it is *men* –community-situated concrete human persons– who live in human society, not *individuals*–an abstract image of *individuality*, nor a notion of atomic community-detached concrete persons.

The tension that arises from this ambiguous usage for Taylor, for example, is what justification he would now adduce to deny *men* (whom he now equates to 'individuals') the primacy of their rights, since per his communitarian argument *man*, unlike 'the individual', is not what he describes as an "extensionless subject, epistemologically a *tabula rasa* and politically a presuppositionless bearer of rights" (1992, p. 50). Nor is man the free individual "...in a state of nature where he could never attain this identity and hence never create by contract a society which respects it" (p. 49). According to Taylor, men, unlike 'individuals', already have their identity "partly defined in conversation with others or

¹⁰ My emphasis.

through the common understanding” (p. 49); they are therefore firmly constituted in a social matrix which “recognizes the right to autonomous decision” (p 49) as well as obligations. Yet the labeling of individualism as ‘absurd’, on one hand, and as ‘atomist’, on the other, is sustainable only so long as Taylor can distinguish ‘the individual’ from ‘man’, and his or her *individuality*. The critique fails when it equates ‘man’ to ‘the individual’ or worse still to ‘individuality’. In the same vein, in questioning the rationale for starting “a political theory with an assertion of *individual* rights” (1985, p 189) the intended target of Taylor’s objection, *individuality*, is confused with ‘the human subject’ to give the impression that Taylor objects to *humans*’ bearing rights. But upon careful examination, it comes to light that what Taylor contests is why the assertion of *individuality* should start a political theory, given that the human person in a political setting is also naturally communal, if not fundamentally communal. Likewise straddling the concepts undermines the potency of Taylor’s contention that “the whole effort to find a background for the arguments which start from rights is misguided” (1979, p. 42).

Nevertheless, Taylor’s conceptual difficulties in the face of the conflation of ‘the individual’ with ‘the concrete person’, as already indicated, seems to be the least problematic among the communitarians discussed and thus, could be salvaged by a linguistic clarification of the differences between ‘the individual’ he rejects and ‘the individual’ he admits in his communitarian critique. Perhaps this was what the term ‘atomist’ was intended to do but it seems that has not been completely successful. But the same cannot be said in this regard for other communitarians such as MacIntyre who unequivocally states from the same obfuscated presuppositions about the concept ‘the individual’ that: “the truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns”; that “natural or human rights... are fictions” (1984, pp. 69-70).

It is worth asking that on what basis would the communitarian have raised issue with individualism if not to indicate that there is more to *personhood* than individualism’s notion of a self-

sufficient 'individual' or the mere idea of *individuality* expressed as autonomy, right-bearing, freedom, and rationality. It is the perceived inadequacy in the individualist's seeming conception of 'the individual' as self-sufficient alone that attracts the criticizing label of 'atomist', for instance, to argue that such embodied yet community-detached 'individuals' portrayed by individualists do not exist in human society, if they exist at all; neither does a presumed abstract and incorporeal notion of *individuality*— autonomy, right-bearing, freedom, and rationality.

After all, the general communitarian argument from 'constitutiveness' through 'embeddedness' to 'encumberedness', is meant to highlight the necessary *communality* of persons. For the communitarian, it is concrete human persons who inhabit human society, and such human persons are at the least communally-situated, if not communally-conditioned, regardless of how strong or weak these communal bonds are. But if the problem that initiated the debate in the first place was the concern that neither an abstraction – *individuality* – nor an isolated 'individual' can rightly represent the concrete human person, then there is a severe incoherence entailed in communitarians' implicit admission to that same presupposition in the bid to critique the individualist notion of 'the individual'.

The challenge for the communitarian thus becomes how to ground the critique against individualism. For, by implicitly assuming that 'the individual' equates to the concrete person, the communitarian forfeits the legitimacy to question the faulted individualist thesis. Such a critique remains potent only if 'the person' can be properly delimited, conceptually and substantively, from 'the individual', since it is the person whose personhood, per communitarian reckoning, is preconditioned by communal belonging.

Nonetheless, such an error would not have arisen in the first place if the individualist primacy-of-right thesis had itself not employed the ambiguous linguistic construct 'the individual' which lent concreteness to a notion that should reflect a dimension of the person and not the concrete person herself. After all,

individualism could not have been thought to have meaningfully denied that people belonged to community even if only for mutual advantage and other instrumental purposes. (Gauthier, 1986, pp. 330-55). Not even Nozick's minimal state which is "limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on" (1974, p. ix) could *meaningfully* claim to have been constituted by 'individuals' who do not belong to, and thus owe some form of obligation to a community of a kind as queried by communitarians.

Subsequently, by arguing for various forms of community- 'embeddedness' or 'encumberedness' with such an ambiguous use of the term 'the individual', to mean *individuality* in one instance and *a person* in another, the communitarian critique backfires and exposes itself to a misconceived individualist rebound critique which inquires of the communitarian what the place of rights, conscious responsibility and creative novelty would be at all in the 'communitarian community' which as it stands, individualists argue, denies *individuality*. And to this conclusion the individualist would find evidence in MacIntyre's explicit rejection of natural or human rights earlier referred to.

Diagnosis and consequences

From the discussion so far, one observation worth-making is the diagnosis that many of the difficulties of communitarian arguments stem from proponents' self-assigned task to improve the individualist conception of 'the individual' by arguing for a restoration of its natural and necessary community, communal ties and obligations. But although the communitarian vision to correct this misnomer may be valuable, the project cannot be discharged fruitfully in the individualist's conceptually tangled vocabulary 'the individual' without attracting criticisms that question the place of *individuality* in the context of community-embeddedness of 'that individual'.

To avoid being misunderstood or yet still confusing her own project, the communitarian need not make it a preoccupation to seek to improve upon individualist conceived 'individual' in the

very terms of individualism. Such a project is unsuccessful given the communitarian conception of the concrete human person. Besides, the alternative approach of making it a preoccupation to over-emphasize the *communal* aspects of persons in the rather lopsided attention towards the negation of individualists' construal of rights and morals seems to submerge *individuality* of persons into 'the communitarian community' to the point of non-retrieval. This portrays a false image of the communitarian ideal which opens it up to a myriad of legitimate opposing challenges to what should rather have been a worthwhile task of correcting a distortion in the conception of the concrete human *person* who should be conceived of as a composite right-bearing and relationally-obligated subject whose conditions of human agency, thus, necessarily encompass *individuality* and *communality*.

Yet, presupposing 'the individual' as the concrete object of existence, which elicits the communitarian critique and, therefore, initiates the debate in the first place, seems to be the underlying error whose reversal remains an unrelenting project of any communitarian perspective. For, if individualism from the onset conceived of its supposed disembodied, unrelated and abstract 'individual' rather as an embodied, relational and concrete autonomous 'human *person*', then this debate would not have arisen at all, or would have rather engaged the deeper question of how to mitigate the 'internal' opposing dimensions of a person. The outcome would have translated to how to mediate inter-person and inter-collective interactions. But resorting to the use of the linguistic construct 'the individual' which bears a misleading borrowed concreteness, and with it its convoluted conceptual ambiguities that equate it to 'the person' in some contexts and 'individuality' in others, tends to undermine the potency of the real communitarian ideal, shifts the focus of the debate itself, and rather exposes communitarianism to legitimate criticisms arising from its undesirable consequences.

Accordingly, more substantive are the woes of the worthwhile communitarian agenda aimed at a community-situated conception of the human person and her *individuality*. For, not only does it generate similar ambiguities and conceptual difficulties

which have been well stressed so far, but it also yields fundamentally undesirable consequences, including but not limited to relativity of fundamental moral values and the challenge of determination of the legitimate scope and limit of community. More importantly and often overlooked is the undesirable consequence of individualistic power-control couched in the name of community-consensus, which itself does not negate the dominance of certain person's *individuality* over others. This is a central concern of individualists which features prominently in Nozick's *State, anarchy and utopia* (1974) Nozick there argues emphatically that, "there is no *social entity* with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. ... Nothing more. ... Talk of an overall social good covers this up" (pp. 32-33). On such an individualist assumption, a communitarian perspective that defines *individuality* as, at the very least, a communal-construct would have much to answer for.

Besides, the fundamental challenge remains regarding the *source* and place of *individuality*—critical reflection, originality, capacity for moral judgment—in the communitarian context. There, *individuality* is defined in terms of community-embeddedness, community-constitutiveness or community-encumberedness.¹¹ The individualist legitimately asks how critical reflection on communal values is possible, if communitarianism is right in its claim that persons are not free to choose but rather that the choices persons make, and the moral worth of these choices are determined by their communal-constitutiveness. Not only would there be no reason to question one's community and its values, standards or practices – it would seem that criticizing 'the community' would not even arise at all, since one, by such a conception of *individuality*, would think and evaluate in terms of 'the community' and therefore, could not conceive of an alternative standard to serve as grounds to examine, and consequently criticize her own community(s)' 'goods'. Individualists contend that should such alternative standard even

11 Coined in opposing terms to communitarian critiques captured in Sandel's 'unencumbered self', Taylor's 'constitutive identity' and MacIntyre's 'embeddedness'.

arise from sources external to the community(s), persons within that community, by the communitarian thesis as presented, *cannot* access, assess and apply such values to a critical evaluation of their own community so far as *individuality* is accounted for in the light of community-embeddedness. The fact that this does not seem to be the intention of communitarian thought, as argued, can be seen from its attempt to account for individual rights, autonomy and freedoms, albeit in terms of community of a sort. Yet, failing to clearly define its conceptual terms of reference distinctly from the erred individualist model of *individuality* as equal and same as the concrete person generates such besetting challenges whose detrimental effect could make the very avowed advocates of the communitarian ideal denounce the label of a 'communitarian' in preference for 'a liberal' or 'a republican'.¹²

Nevertheless, this study contends that, if the communitarian critique, as well as the individualist claims and responses to this critique, is disambiguated of its linguistic and conceptual incoherencies and inconsistencies, it would become self-evident that communitarians and individualists alike seek a synthesized thesis that advocates for the person, not 'the individual' nor 'the community', as the object of socio-political philosophy.

Personism as a response

The thesis of personism, whose espousal has been implicit all this while, states that actual human society is not inhabited by atomic 'individuals' nor abstract individualities but is constituted or inhabited by human persons whose personhood is naturally and necessarily *already* both individual *and* communal, whether or not the persons themselves conceive it as such or, accept it to be the case.

In other words, personism holds, in agreement with the core of the individualist argument, that a person *naturally* and necessarily has autonomy, freedom and dignity; and that these

12 Sandel adopts the tag 'republican' instead in his *Liberalism and the limits of justice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 2nd ed.; In (Gutmann 1992), both Taylor and Walzer identify themselves as liberals; MacIntyre's claim that "in spite of rumors to the contrary, I am not and never have been a communitarian", in his 'Letter', in *The responsive community*, Summer 1991.

are values, emanating from his or her given individuality, that are not only worth respecting and preserving by society but are also inviolable. But at the same time personism also holds, in agreement with the core communitarian argument that a person is at the same time *naturally* and necessarily communal or relational.

It bears noting that personism conceives of individuality and communality as dual dispositions or dimensions of one entity ‘the person’ who is naturally and necessarily both individual and relational and interrelated at different levels with other such persons all at once. This is unlike the doctrines of individualism and communitarianism, both of which conceive of ‘the individual’ as an entity whose rights¹³ are to be accommodated and respected, for different reasons though, by a supposed ‘the community’ or ‘the communities’ for some, which is another entity.

The difference is if *communality* is conceived of as ‘the community’, it makes it a matter of choice whether persons would want to belong to ‘the community’. But, personism defends the view that communality, like individuality, is not optional to the person. That is to say, for the personist thesis, the person does not choose to be *individual*. Neither does s/he choose to be *communal* (i.e. relational). S/he is at once both individual *and* communal outside of his or her choice. And therefore, it would not be a question of mediating between two distinct *entities* so as to give rise to liberalist or ‘moderate communitarian’ arguments such as advanced by the renowned African philosopher, Gyekye (1995, pp. 154-162)¹⁴. According to Gyekye, ‘moderate communitarianism’ expresses the idea that although the African society is communitarian in character, it also grants some individuality and/or individual rights. But Gyekye’s view has been saddled with the critique of incoherence in his conceptions of ‘person, personhood and community’ as a result of “difficulties existent in Gyekye’s own arguments” resulting in lack of clarity (Majeed, 2018, p. 36). The same is confronted with the challenge of subsuming individuality into ‘community’. The contention here is that ‘moderate communitarianism’, as Gyekye

13 Which will be defined as ‘individual rights’ (so will exclude the very essential *communal* rights which are equally constitutive of the person’s nature).

14 A more elaborate exposition of this is done in his *Tradition and modernity*, pp. 35-75.

presents it, is not as moderate as he believes it to be; that the supposed gap between his view and the 'radical communitarian' view he criticizes may not be as wide as he opines (Famakinwa, 2011).

However, that one is naturally and necessarily communal, related or naturally relational, in the personist view, need not translate as the need for a person to be *solely* tied to, bonded by or embedded in a collective, bounded and enclosed 'communitarian community' within which the *individuality* of persons expressed as autonomy, rationality, creativity, among others, would be non-existent or inconsequential. For, the argument of personism is that a person's *individuality* is not only inaccessible and non-transferrable to others; it is actually inalienable as well. Not even the person herself can negate or dispense with her *individuality* understood in this sense since, one's attempt at suppression of her *individuality* would itself be the very expression of that *individuality*.

Yet, personism insists that the force of a person's natural and necessary *communality* or relationality cannot be downplayed either: first with herself; then with immediate 'significant others' such as family, the 'communitarian community' and its essential systems, structures, language, history, culture and particular forms of life that contribute to forming her identity; but then also with the external world and several others in different ways some of which might be distant and yet very significant. This is so because, just like individuality, *communality* is itself inalienable and not transferrable to others even if some aspects of the 'communitarian community', defined in terms of kinship-ties, common history, territorial and linguistic boundaries, could be said to be to a certain degree.

The given *communality* of a person is, thus, distinguishable from her natural membership in a specific community defined by kinship-ties, language, culture, history, territory, among others, yet not totally detached from 'community' of a kind at any point in time. Therefore, *communality* will entail community-membership but community-membership will not necessarily entail *communality*. That is to say, *communality* would transcend the boundaries of

belonging together as members of a geographical, linguistic, biological or ancestral community since persons necessarily share in values, aims, goals and aspirations of others who may not necessarily ‘belong’ to the said communitarian community. Besides, in a fast-globalizing world, different persons would necessarily affect and be affected by the values, aims, goals and aspirations of such ‘others’ who are presumed to be external to their ‘community’. The ties and boundaries of community then would themselves not only vary but would be very elusive. Thus, it would be more defensible to think of persons as communal beings than as beings defined by and restricted to linguistic, ancestral, geographical or some such ‘communitarian community’, and this is what personism stands for.

Conclusion

This paper has been committed to exposing the source of disagreement between individualists and communitarians. It has argued that the apparent disagreement is as a result of the debaters’ inconsistent and incoherent *use* and conceptualization of the term ‘the individual’. The proposed way out espoused in this paper is the thesis of personism. The advantage of personism over both communitarianism and individualism is seen in its ability to contest individualism’s labeling and conception of the person as ‘an individual’, without denying her *natural* and necessary character of *individuality*—autonomy, freedom¹⁵ and right-bearing—on one hand, and at the same time advocate a consistent and pragmatic defense of her equally *natural* and necessary *communality* or relationality without restricting it to a fixed immutable conception of a unitary or fraternal ‘community’.

Upholding this thesis of personism does not only dissolve the pseudo-disagreements entailed in this debate but would more importantly, expose the actual concern of both perspectives which reads in simple terms as how, and who, to govern the natural and necessary individuality *and* communality of persons: first, within the person herself; second, inter-persons; and third, among inter-related persons or collectives.

¹⁵ Including freedom to think, analyze, and criticize.

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