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APPRAISING THE IDEA OF PERSON IN LOCKE'S THEORY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY AND AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

The idea of person continues to elicit elucidation in social and philosophical discourses. This is because it is only person that asks questions about itself, other beings and the entire cosmos. The assertion by Protagoras that man/person is the measure of all things no doubt depicts the rational cognitive capacity that nature has bestowed on man/person. The meaning accorded to the idea of person varies from one philosophical orientation to another and this disparity seems not to be a settled issue. It is in this regard that this paper is aimed at examining the idea of person in African ontology and Locke's theory of personal identity. The goal is to critically expose the inclusive and exclusive features of the idea of person in African ontology and Lockean notion of person in his theory of personal identity. It remains unclear how person in African ontology can be referred to as a soul, spirit and body whereas in Locke's notion, a person is strictly a moral agent capable of thought and a conscious entity. The paper therefore argued that it either African ontological notion of person is mistaken or Lockean notion is right. Conversely, it is either the Lockean notion is mistaken or the African ontological notion is correct. Albeit the discrepancy/inconsistency, the paper concludes that, that the idea of a person is largely a moral one in both conceptions— underpins the foundation upon which the generic/universal idea of a person should be conceptualized. The paper employed the method of analysis.

Keywords: **Person, African ontology, Personal Identity, Consciousness.**

Introduction

Philosophy in classical era presented the picture/scene of man raising questions about the cosmic-universe where the cosmos becomes the subject of focus. However, the Aristotelian era, also known as the Golden Age, shifted attention from philosophizing about the environment/universe to man. The objective was to properly understand the nature of reality and the primary/fundamental stuff that gave rise to the cosmic universe/nature. Heidegger's departure and the search of the ultimate Being from the notion of Being to the idea of concrete being also attests to the importance of the idea of person. Various scholars have contemplated on the idea of person without an acceptable consensus with regard to the clear-cut

conception/nature of what a person is, though the notion of person remains central in the discussion of anthropology, psychology, religion and the branches of philosophy— metaphysics, epistemology, logic and axiology.

This paper's focus is on the African ontological notion of person and Locke's theory of personal identity. A person's identity in African ontology and Locke's theory differs sharply though with some homogeneity of features, especially in relation to the idea of a person as a moral agent who is conscious and morally responsible for his actions. The paper proceeded with the conceptualization and meaning of a person, x-rays some western and African views of person, Locke's personal identity theory, the exclusive and inclusive features and in the conclusion remarks that, the notion of a person as a moral agent should be taking as a fundamental foundation upon which subsequent discussion(s) and the deciphering of the notion of a person should be hinged and understood.

Statement of the Problem

The concept or idea of a person can be very challenging to explicate or define. Often times, the attempt to define a person ends up mostly in descriptive basis. We cannot precisely say this and that is what a person is. The question— what is a person is more metaphysically demanding than who is a person, which is more or less epistemological. Almost all the attempts to define a person end up in both metaphysical-cum-moral underpinnings. The question is who is a person? What are the bases upon which a person should be described? The spiritual/immaterial, psychological and physical/concrete descriptions attributed to the concept of a person vary from one scholar/cultural/religious orientation to another. To attain a precision has been difficult. This difficulty therefore calls to question if there is a uniform conception of the idea of person at all? The challenging issue of not reaching objectivity implies that the subject-matter should be approached from a relative and "anarchical" perspective, referencing the word of Paul Feyerabend. Thus, to leave the important issue of the idea of person to philosophical speculations and at the corridor of relativism will be rather unwitting and ambiguous than intelligible. It is in this light that attempt will be made in this paper to sift out the exclusive and inclusive bases of the concept of person. To achieve this, we shall therefore begin by examining the meaning of the term person.

On the Meaning of the term "Person"

According to De Craemer (1983:19-34), "a person is a being that has certain capacities or attributes such as reason, morality, consciousness or self-consciousness, and being a part of a culturally established form of social relations such as kinship, ownership of property, or legal responsibility." This definition brings out essential features that portray a person. Remarkably, a person is also pictured here as someone with a social colouration and someone who has legal and social responsibilities.

Similarly, humans or persons have been described as "social animals" who have an inescapable moral and spiritual dimensions, adding that persons are profoundly morally oriented (Smith, 2003:1). Hardly is there any conception of person that does not have as its foundation metaphysical and moral underpinnings. In Western as well as African ontology, the idea of person is majorly tailored towards rational and moral or ethical concernment, in some cases both.

The Ancient Greek/Western View of Person

Boethius (1890:92-102, 279-97) in "De Persona et Duabus Naturis", viewed or defined person as *naturae rationalis individual substantia*; i.e. an individual substance of a rational nature. Boethius used the term substance to describe a person in the sense that it does not include accidents, because according to him, "accident cannot constitute person" (*ibid*.). To expatiate further, the sense with which the term "substantia" is used to describe person, Boethius remarked that "Substantia is used in two senses: of the concrete substance as existing in the individual, called *substantia prima*, corresponding to Aristotle's *ousia prote*; and of abstractions, substance as existing in genus and species, called *substantia secunda*, Aristotle's *ousia deutera*" (Geddes, 1911).

Person in the definition of Boethius is the only being that is predicated of *rationalis naturae*, i.e. intellectual being. From this definition, according to Geddes (1911), the following five notes is said to comprise the idea of a person: "(a) *substantia*— this excludes accident; (b) C*ompleta*— it must form a complete nature; that which is a part, either actually or "aptitudinally" does not satisfy the definition; (c) *Per se Subsistens*— the person exists in himself and for himself; he is *sui juris*, the ultimate possessor of his nature and all its acts, the ultimate subject of predication of all his attributes; that which exists in another is not a person; (d) *Separata Se*cunda, which has no existence apart from the individual; (e) *rationalis naturae*— excludes all non-intellectual *supposita*."

Boethius denied that the soul is the same thing as person. John Locke also expresses this thought in his theory of personal identity. For Boethius, the human soul belongs to the nature (of person) as a part of it, and is therefore not a person. In other words, as illustrated above, a person must form a complete nature; the soul on the other hand is only a part of his nature, i.e. it is only a part of the nature of person.

In a more recent line of discourse, especially with regard to the moral status of persons and in the abortion's debate arena, attempts have been made by scholars to describe and conceptualize the idea of person— making a distinction between what it is and what is not. The aim is to draw a line or differentiate between humans that are categorized as persons and humans that are categorized as non-persons. For Locke and other psychological approach proponents of the personal identity debate, the conclusion that what defines a person's identity is memory or consciousness, inevitably raises the question who is a person? Against this backdrop, "several factions in the abortion argument have drawn battle lines around various proposed criteria for determining what is and what is not a person" (English, 1975:152).

A prominent figure in this regard is Mary Anne Warren (1973:45), she listed five characteristics or criteria and rendered the argument thus: "the traits which are most central to concept of personhood… are, very roughly, the following: 1. Consciousness… and in particular the capacity to feel pain; 2. Reasoning (the developed capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems); 3. Self-motivated activity (activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control); 4. The capacity to communicate by whatever means, messages of an indefinite variety of types…; 5. The presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness…" Anne Warren submitted that at least some of these are necessary, if not sufficient criteria for personhood, thus eliminated foetuses from the category of person.

Included also in this elimination are those who have lost their capacity for rational thought or have become permanently unconscious.

More so, Warren seems to believe that reasoning is both a necessary and sufficient condition for personhood. This raises not only the intriguing possibility that some non-human animals like chimps and dolphins might qualify as persons but also the disturbing implication that some human beings would not qualify. In other words, if we set the bar as high as Warren has, we logically exclude portions of vulnerable human population from the category of persons, and thus exclude them from the rights we ascribe to persons. This could be very troubling (Perry, 2001). It therefore follows that "human beings can only sensibly be said to be persons to the extent that they are capable of conscious experience. That capacity first emerges in the human foetus between 20 and 32 weeks gestation, and can be irreversibly lost if the cerebral cortex permanently stops working, even if the brainstem continues to function with respirator support" (*ibid*.).

Warren's argument is quite plausible because a cardinal requirement which Locke thought is the hallmark of a person's identity over time is consciousness. Locke may have settled for consciousness as the defining quality of a person's identity over time since it is intuitively implausible to see a person who possesses the other four qualities of personhood without consciousness. It therefore implies that to aver that a person is conscious, is in other words, to affirm that he/she is rational, self-motivated, able to communicate and possesses self-awareness. To this end, Warren may have listed these other qualities for the sake of emphasis. Strawson conceives a person from a corporeal stand point. Much as he acknowledged that a person is a conscious being. Strawson (1959:102) defines a "person" as "a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type." In annotation to this, Herbert Feigl (1958:474-475) holds that where mentalistic terms are appropriate, the basic and underlying reality is mental, and physicalistic terms refer to this mental reality. Jerome A. Shaffer (1993:279), reflecting on Feigl's submission reasoned that "Feigl seems to admit a dualism of attributes, mental and physical. Yet, this is an identity theory both in the sense that the basic subjects of consciousness are bodies and in the sense that certain mentalistic and physicalistic terms have one and the same referrent, pointing out that although some of these terms will have a mental referent." In all of these, the argument seems to deny that personal identity consists in identity of an immaterial substance alone as well as the view that personal identity consists in bodily identity alone. Rather, it is both mental and physical; a sort of a middle approach to the personal identity debate.

The African Notion/View of Person

In African ontology, an individual or person is by nature a social and communal being. Besides these, he possesses other attributes which inevitably constitute his nature. From this African idea/conception, a person then must be understood as possessing not just an ontological status but also normative status (i.e. a moral seeking being) and communal status (i.e. a being who is inseparable from the community). It is along this light that Menkiti (1984:176) avers thus: "the various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms

one from the it-status of early child-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense— an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one." In what follows, Africans accord identity to person based on the level of participation in the community life. A person is not viewed as an isolated member of the community; to be relevant as a person and to attain personhood, one must participate in communal life. Hence, Menkiti argues that an individual or person "becomes persons only after a process of incorporation… into this or that community" (*ibid*.). The process of incorporation involves performing some rites. Thus, a person is a person if and only if he has gone through different rites of incorporation. According to Menkiti, a person becomes "a full person in the eyes of the community", only after undergoing the process of socialization in the African society and going through different rites of incorporation.

Apart from performing these rites, as a requirement to becoming a person, there is also normative requirement. To be a person, one must be a moral agent. Therefore, we can sum up the African understanding of a person in two ways: (i) participation in community life and (ii) properly groomed and living up to the moral values and virtues of the society. Gyekye delineated the moral features of personhood in Akan thought by examining the meaning of the term "person" in Akan language. According to Gyekye (1997:49), "the word used for "person" in Akan is *onipa*. But this word also means "human being", and the plural form of it can also mean "people". Thus, *onipa* is a highly ambiguous word. As with ambiguous words in many other languages, it depends on context for its meaning. Thus, the meaning of the word in reference to "person" can be delineated from the context of its use, and analysis of a concept of a person linked to that meaning can be made."

The ambiguity, in terms of the words used in many cultural settings to refer to the idea of a person beckons for attention and clarity. However, the meaning of the various words is easily deciphered when examined in the context of their usage. There appears to be a common denominator, which cuts across the meaning of words in all African cultures, this is that the term "person" is associated with moral norm or behavioural conduct. It is for this reason that the Akan people of Africa made a separation of the understanding of the term "person" from "human being". According to Gyekye (1997:49-50):

> when an individual's conduct consistently appears cruel, wicked, selfish, or ungenerous, the Akan would say of that individual that "he is not a person" (*onnye onipa*). Two important things can be said to be implicit in this statement. The first is that, even though that individual is said not to be a person, he is nevertheless acknowledge as a human being, not as a beast or a tree. A clear distinction between the concept of a human being and a concept of a person is thus deeply embedded in that statement: an individual can be a human being without being a person.
>
> Second, implicit in that statement is the emphatic assumption that there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behaviour of an individual, if he is a person, ought to conform. The language expresses the notion that there are moral virtues that an individual is capable of displaying in his conduct. Considering the situations in which the judgment "he is not a person" is made about individuals, these moral norms and virtues can be said to include

> kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, and respect and concern for others; in short any action or behaviour conducive to the promotion of the well-being of others. And the reason for that judgment is that that individual's actions and conduct are considered as falling short of the standards and ideals of personhood. I must add, though, that the individual to whom the judgment "he is not a person" is applied would be one whose conduct is known to the community to be generally unethical, not one who occasionally experiences moral lapses or failure of moral commitment. There is no implication, however, that an individual considered "not a person" losses her rights as a human being or that she losses her citizenship or that she ceases to be an object of moral concern from the point of view of other people's treatment of er. Only that she is not a morally worthy individual.

What is distinct here is the analysis made between the concept of a "person" and "human being", otherwise, the understanding of a person as a moral agent is also embedded in John Locke's analysis of the idea or concept of a person as a forensic agent; one who is capable of moral worth. There seems to be an agreement or consonance in the African understanding of a person and the western understanding in terms of moral and ethical grounds. Another explicit agreement which resonate in Aristotle's analysis of man and society and also African understanding of person is that "if a human being lives an isolated life, a life detached from the community, he would be described not as a person but as an individual. A life detached from the community would be associated with an egoistic life. An individual detached from the community would not be considered a responsible moral agent. Thus, a distinction is made also between the notion of a person— a concrete being situated in a social context— and that of an individual— a being detached from the community" (*ibid*, p. 50). The schema or logical position is rendered thus, "that: for any *P*, if *P* is a person, then *P* ought to display in his conduct the norms and ideals of personhood" (*ibid*).

This therefore means that to affirm that "he is a person" means, 'he has good character,' 'he is peaceful— not troublesome', 'he is kind', 'he has respect for others,' 'he is humble'"(Ahene-Attoh, 1976:51). Thus, a moral conception of personhood is held in African thought: personhood is defined in terms of moral achievement" (Deutsch, 1982:126-8).

Inclusive and Exclusive features of the idea of person in Locke's Personal identity theory and African Ontology

With regard to Locke's doctrine of personal identity and African ontology, the inclusive or common feature to both is that a person is substantially a moral being. Behan (1979:67) noted that "Locke used "person" in two ways within *Praktike*. First, he used "person" to refer to moral man, the individual. Second, he used "person" to refer to what is owned by that individual— his moral property, which I shall call the forensic personality of moral man." Accentuating further Behan (1979:68) noted that:

> These two concepts are reflected in Locke's two uses of the word "person". Used substantively, "person" refers to a moral man, i.e., an "independent and fundamentally unchangeable individuality." In its second use, however, "person" refers to the forensic personality of moral man established through "social relationship and voluntary activity". "Persona", related to "prosopon",

> carries with it the implication of a role one plays as agent within community. The person as agent stands in relation both to other members of the community and to the laws of the community. In another sense, "person" refers to the individual accountability— the forensic personality— of the two person as agent.

In African ontology, what confers the identity of person on any human being is that the individual must be morally integrated to his/her community. According to Kinoti (1992:84), all persons must possess the following traditional values; honesty, charity, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, respect for nature, elders and God in order to be properly referred to as a human person. The emphasis is on character and one's obligation to one's community. It is in this regard that Wiredu (1998:305 & 312) described African traditional morality as "quintessentially social" and that "the communalistic orientation … means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his/her actions benefit others rather than him/her self …" and "… the central moral norms were the maintenance of harmonious relationships within the community …" (Motlhabi, 1986:95).

Clearly, from the foregoing, there exist some similarities between Locke's and African conception of person. Both accept that a person is a moral being, one who is capable of taking decision and distinguishing what is right from what is wrong and taking responsibility for his actions. Both believe that a person cannot evade his/her moral consequences. Thus, the moral consideration of the idea of person is maintained by both. What also somehow appears common to both is the idea of person as metaphysical entity. Though, this is somewhat implicit in Locke's theory, some scholars have tried to remove any metaphysical consideration from Locke's conception of person.

The exclusive features can be highlighted as follows; while Locke's personal identity theory focuses on consciousness as the sole basis for the re-identification of the individual, African ontology accepts body theory, soul theory and conscious theory of personal identity. The idea of person held by the African world-view is somewhat a contradiction to Locke's conception. For instance, the Africans conceive a person to be a combination of matter and spirit; that is, body and soul or spirit, whereas, for Locke the idea of person arises from his idea of consciousness. Another point of divergence is Locke's distinction between the idea of man and person. For the Africans there is really no clear distinction from the idea of person and the idea of man. More so, while the Africans, especially the Akan people of Ghana maintained a distinction between the idea of person from human being, Locke was not quite assertive of this.

In African ontology, personhood is not merely being a person that exists and that is conscious of him/herself as him/herself and being able to extend one's memory to past events as Locke wants us to accept, a person must be a "being-with", a being with others and must exist in a community and the African self is rooted in the family-hood, participation in communal life is very germane. It is apparent that while Locke's view tilted towards individualism and individual consciousness, African's view of person is oriented towards communalism and collectivism.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Locke's idea of person as well as his theory of personal identity is purely psychological in approach. To be a person and the same person from one day to another, the person must possess consciousness and the same consciousness of the past, now and the future. Essentially, for Locke, consciousness is the determinant of a person's identification over time. This approach has been refuted by the proponents of bodily criterion and somatic criterion approach to personal identity. According to the former, body features are enough to establish the identity of a person and the latter view advances the metabolic and other life sustaining organs of a functioning human animal as constituting the basis for a person and his identification over time. This line of thought is somewhat in consonance with African belief in reincarnation; where for instance, birth marks (on the person's body) are used to establish the identity of a person who reincarnated.

It appears the African conception of person is an aggregation of both psychological and bodily criteria of personal identity. It combines and recognizes consciousness, soul/spirit and body in the notion of person. It strongly emphasizes morality and communal existence in the conception and definition of person. This eclectic approach seems to appeal to sound logic than any idea of person that is subjectively conceived. More so, a human person is more than just a thinking being— in a sense; following the doctrine of intentionality — which states that every mental act possesses content; consequently, a person is not only mental act but also content of mental act. Hence, a person is both consciousness and content of consciousness. If this view is sustained, then it is admissible to perceive a person's identity both mentally and physically. The justification is that there exists theories buttressing the physical nature of human person and there exists also theories buttressing the mental nature of human person. These theories neither sufficiently or wholly affirm nor also sufficiently or wholly deny the physical and mental nature of human person.

In all, we see that the idea of person examined above though differs from one conceptual and cultural context to another, the fundamental component and hallmark in the definition of person is morality. To be a person, one must be morally responsible and living a moral/upright life, not in isolation but collectively and communally— a being with others.

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