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**Tim Ruzicki**

"A Traditional African Concept of Community Related to Ethical Intuitionism"

This paper is concerned primarily with articulating a concept of community found in traditional African philosophy and relating that concept to the Western view of ethical intuitionism. In this manner, I hope to strengthen ethical intuitionism and introduce this particular form of African communitarianism as a viable ethics philosophy. In no way is this paper intended to establish any type of hierarchy between Western and African thought. It is not my intent to call into question the validity of either philosophical sphere, or the beliefs found therein. There are, however, certain contrasts that are fundamental to the basis of my argument, and for these I make no apology.

**The African Community**

It is first necessary to establish the conception of community upon which my arguments are based. To the ethnicities from which this conception comes, community is paramount, fundamental, and that which defines the individual. It serves as the foundation upon which the individual is built and gives that individual a framework, indeed the only framework, in which s/he exists. As Ifeanyi A. Menkiti points out in his article, "African Traditional Thought,"

...the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the enviroing community (p. 171).

This view is perhaps best articulated by John Mbiti when he writes, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Menkiti, 171). By this, Mbiti clearly shows the depth of the communal identity.

An important point to consider here is that in this view, the individual cannot exist as a person without the community. The community is indeed the framework through which the individual exists--without society we are little more than base animals. As John Stuart Mill points out,

The social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man that...he never conceives himself otherwise than as a member of a social body; and this association is revealed more and more as mankind are further removed from the state of savage independence (Stephen, 223).

It may be argued, however, that there exist individuals who choose to live outside of society, quite contentedly and without the stigma of "base animals." Yet, it is important to realize that these hermits are still products of a community, or social understanding. They may choose at some point to alienate themselves from their community, yet they exist as they do by virtue of the fact that they come from society. David Spitz affirms this in *The Real World of Liberalism* when he writes, "A

man is what he is by virtue of the fact that he was born into, and raised in, a community" (Spitz, 7).

In this African conception, then, a person takes his/ her basic identity from the community. However, there is one element to this idea that begs attention. That element is the importance placed on the notion of taking one's identity from the community. In the African mind, this means that if an individual does not identify with a social structure, that individual is not a Person. This contrasts heavily with Western conceptions of what it means to be a Person, a human-being, etc. As Menkiti points out, "...in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory" (Menkiti, 172). Therefore, personhood is almost a status. An individual may or may not be a Person, even though s/he is human. Furthermore, this notion logically leads to the idea that "...personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse" (173). Thus, in the case of the Hermit, the individual who chooses to leave the community fails at this concept of Personhood. Although s/he is still defined as a social animal, and takes much of his/her base identity from the community, the status of Person cannot be attained outside of the community.

This conception almost surely springs from the utility of each person within a community. The question becomes, "In what ways does the individual add to, or benefit society?" If an individual does very little for society, then s/he is less of a person (if a person at all) than an individual who greatly benefits society. In this way, everyone within a community benefits from everyone else's utility, as they ask themselves, "In what way can I improve/aid/benefit my community?" I believe this is a very natural, and also very unconscious, tendency. It comes from the knowledge that if I aid my community, my community will be a better place, and thus my life will be improved. However, this sense of utility only works if everyone within the community participates, which is precisely what the African conception of community stresses. Furthermore, the participants within a community must not view themselves as self-interested individuals who hope to improve their own lives via improving the community, but as wholly fused parts of the community who do what they do because they are communal creatures. This is what is meant by taking one's identity from the community. Again, however, even though the end result is a better society, and even though each constituent member may be inherently and unconsciously self-motivated, the community is nonetheless paramount. Menkiti argues that this unconscious understanding gives rise to "an organic dimension to the relationship between the component individuals...[and] asserts an ontological independence to human society, [which] moves from society to individuals..." (180).

At this point, however, another observation can be made about the African conception of community. This is that individual rights, if they do in fact exist, are only afforded those constituents who are actually considered People. Natural rights, as they are spoken of, are always said to be inherent to humans because they are People. By virtue of being a Person, I am entitled natural rights. However, while

...most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or

essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have... (Menkiti, 171).

in the African conception it is far more difficult to be considered a "man," or a Person. Thus, natural rights are not inherent to all living human beings--only those considered People. This view is supported by Emil Brunner, who writes in *Justice and the Social Order*, "There is, however, a conception of the law of nature in which the rights of man have no place" (Brunner, 54). In terms of the question of utility, this view of rights makes sense. Those who earn the status of Person earn the rights that belong to it. This view is further expressed by Menkiti when he writes, "...African societies tend to be organized around the requirements of duty, while Western societies tend to be organized around the postulation of individual rights" (Menkiti, 180). This inherent difference between African and Western perceptions of community will be explored later as a large part of my argument with Rawls' Contractual Theory.

Furthermore, in regard to rights, as well as justice, there exists in both this African conception of community as well as in several circles of Western thought the notion that "Equal justice is owed to those who have the capacity to take part in and to act in accordance with the public understanding..." (Rawls, 505-506). However, the crucial difference between the two philosophies is again how the Person is viewed. To the African mind, the Person exists, and is thus capable of sensing and understanding justice, only through his/her bond to the community. As Menkiti writes,

...personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense--an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one (Menkiti, 176)

Clearly, rights and justice are afforded to those who have the moral and ethical sense to understand them. Also, and I cannot stress this point enough, this moral and ethical sense is attained as the individual grows within his/her community and achieves the status of Person. Thus, the community teaches morality and ethics to its members.

### **Ethical Intuitionism**

This African view of community and person that Menkiti articulates can also be used to make sense of the otherwise puzzling concept of intuitionism. This Western view states that "each of us has a power of 'moral intuition'" (Wolff, 12). That is to say that in choosing a path of action or thought that is most moral, one has only one's intuition with which to consult. This intuition is then the soul guide after

which an agent is to follow. To the intuitionist, following one's "gut feelings" serves as a type of "rationality," thus validating it as a moral theory in Western thought. Without much more study into the idea of intuitionism, however, the theory seems remarkably absurd. It has nothing to offer in the way of compromise between two individuals who possess different intuitions, nor does it provide a practical avenue for reasoning through difficult moral choices.

Yet, in looking closer at the theory, I feel there is an inherent connection to the African view of community and personhood. If we accept the view that personhood is attained through participation in communal life, and that this participation builds the individual's moral sense, then the connection becomes clear. Moral sense is not something of which Menkiti's Person is aware, but rather something unconscious, tied to the very nature of being a person. It is something that is learned unconsciously, and thus supplies the individual with a intuitive sense of morality. Therefore, morality is inherent, not because an individual is born with it, nor because that individual is human, but because the individual learned it in his/her quest for personhood. Menkiti agrees with this when he states,

...if an individual comes to deserve the duties of justice (and the confirmation therein implied of the individual's worth as a person) only through possession of a capacity for moral personality, then morality ought to be considered as essential to our sense of ourselves as persons (Menkiti, 176).

The next logical step to take is that which the intuitionists took, to prescribe following one's intuitions in determining the most moral path of action. However, I would argue that rather than consciously using intuitions as guides for determining this path, people do so unconsciously. This unconscious inclination would also logically be stronger in individuals who come from a fused community of the type Menkiti describes. Therefore, those individuals who choose to follow their intuitive moral sense (or who follow it unconsciously, because they possess it) would logically act in accordance with that intuitive sense. Menkiti is quick to point out that "...once morality is conceived as a fundamental part of what it means to be a person, then an agent is bound to feel himself incomplete in violating its rules..." (Menkiti, 176). Therefore, intuitionism seems to possess some substance after all.

### **Conclusion**

In supporting the concept of ethical intuitionism with a traditional concept of African community, I believe that intuitionism is not only stronger, but also a more viable ethics philosophy. However, it is uniquely African in that it uses an African communitarian argument as its main strength. In this way, both African communitarianism and intuitionism enter the field of ethics philosophy.

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