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Beyond Fractured Epistemology: A Discourse of the Idea of Personhood and Personalism in Igbo and Yoruba Moral Systems

Abstract

The fundamental argument of this paper is built around the importance of de-emphasising the use of Western moral categories as found in personhood and personalism in addressing moral and practical issues in some parts of Africa; specifically, among the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups of Nigeria. Essentially, personalism as an ethical theory promotes the value and dignity of human beings which makes it an attractive moral theory that is likely to be applied universally to moral issues. However, there are some dangers in the universal applicability of the theory, as knowledge of certain moral issues is perceived by different societies and cultures. As an instance, the African conception of the human person as represented in the Igbo and Yoruba moral systems has no strict categorical difference between the transcendental, spiritual and the material, as it is in the Western conception, which emphasises the material, the functional and the physical dimensions. It is, therefore, to be seen that a discourse of this sort is pertinent and instrumental in providing the values and needed framework to interrogate the myriad of problems faced in the African continent.

Keywords

personalism, Africa, morality, culture, knowledge

Introduction

This paper discusses personalism and its implication for the notion of *human person* as conceived in the Western philosophy and African philosophy respectively. It attempts to compare the knowledge about human person across cultures, especially in the West and in some parts of Africa (Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups of Nigeria). Because they are different it would be erroneous to adopt the same language and methodology to express certain moral realities about the human person. Specifically, the paper suggests that African intellectuals and philosophers need to promote personalism and values of persons in language that expresses African reality and culture. The paper also notes that one of the defining characteristics of personalism is its emphasis on the dignity, uniqueness and moral values of the person as evident in the nature of the personhood within the context of the Igbo and Yoruba moral systems.

The Idea of Personalism

Essentially, the subject of personalism is the human person. It is a social and philosophical system developed in the nineteenth century, with great emphasis

sis on the value of the person as the key notion that gives meaning to reality.¹ Robert Solomon, as cited by Kleetus Varghese, stated that

“... personalism is a view which emphasises the importance of personhood (...) here personhood is seen as an ultimate fact (reality). This is in opposition to the naturalist reduction of the person to physical processes, but also to the idealist accounts of the person as merely a transitory less-than-real manifestation of the absolute.”²

The crucial and underlining point in the above definitions is that the human person’s prominence and role in the universe and scheme of things are second to none. The human person is a fundamental entity whose existence cannot be relegated to the background. In furtherance to this, Battista Mondin states:

“Man is the supreme question for man. That this is the principal and fundamental question for us as men is an obvious thing, because every other interrogative, every other question (about the earth, the sky, the moon, the stars, the air, the water, atoms, cells, etc., even about God) acquires relevance only with reference to our being (...). Who is a man?: this is the interrogative of all interrogatives—the most pressing and piercing of all. It is an old interrogative, yet it is always new; it is concrete, not abstract; personal, not generic.”³

Joseph Selling added a similar perspective to the notion of personalism by stating that

“... a more philosophical understanding of personalism as it is employed in a personalistic ethics stresses the function of the notion of person as the ultimate criterion for defining all subsequent ethical concepts.”⁴

Furthermore, Joseph Selling also conceives personalism as a philosophical and ethical system which is fundamentally phenomenological, based upon descriptions of our observation of and participation in reality, as opposed to being based upon reality-in-itself.⁵ Description from the phenomenological perspective as offered by Joseph Selling does show that the understanding of the person is all-inclusive and participatory. This is why Selling added that the ‘content’ of personalism insofar as this constitutes a person is always changing. Simply, it means that what we understand by the notion that a person does not remain static and closed.⁶ Jan Olof Bengtsson affirms that “personalism develops a worldview that begins with immediate, self-conscious experience and interprets not only the life of the individual but the world at large in personalistic terms”.⁷ Bengtsson concluded so because basic categories or fundamental concepts of our thoughts should be understood in terms applicable to persons and experience. Tadeusz Biesaga affirms that

“... the dignity of the person is the foundation for personalistic norm (...) it precedes that it is the person who is the basis for our moral behaviour and not some non-personal reality, e.g., some legal, social and customary imperatives.”⁸

One thing is clear here, and that is the fact that we cannot separate our understanding of persons from their experiences. Experience plays a major role in interpreting the human person as they are. What Tadeusz’s comment tells us is that the human person’s existence is vital as against placing importance on certain realities that may not elevate the dignity and uniqueness of human persons.

Thomas D. Williams rightly observed:

“... personalism also embraces different schools of thought or intellectual movement (such as speculative thought, theology, economy, psychology and politics), that focuses on the reality of the person (human, angelic, divine), and on his unique dignity, insisting on the radical distinction between persons and all other beings (non-beings).”⁹

Personalism derives its foundation from human reason and experience, though historically, personalism is said to have a strong affinity with biblical theism and insights drawn from revelation.¹⁰ Similarly, Jacques Maritain as cited by Thomas Williams opines that

“... personalism represents a big tent under which many different lines of thought take refuge (...) personalism splits into multiform manifestations, each with its own particular emphases, such that it is more proper to speak of ‘personalisms’ than personalism.”¹¹

The issues as presented by Thomas Williams and Maritain is that personalism as a philosophical movement has the capacity to be applied to different and other branches of knowledge and disciplines. The reason is not far-fetched; any discourse on any discipline be it theology, psychology, chemistry, economics, anthropology, sociology etc., has a direct bearing on the human person. The human person is at the receiving end, and this further echoes Battista Mondin’s earlier submission that every other interrogative, every other question about our reality, even about God acquires relevance only concerning the human person.

Similarly, Yandell Keith opined that personalism means that “only (self-conscious agents) and their states and characteristics exist, and that reality consists of a society of interacting persons”.¹² Keith sounded in the same manner with Thomas Williams by asserting that a personalist who considers himself a finite being, would always depend on God who is the Supreme Person, having intelligence and volition, for his existence. The problem with Yandell Keith’s submission is that not all personalists believe in God. Some personalists are atheists, and as such, they see no reason why they would have to depend on God for their survival and existence. On the other hand, Christian personalists will have no problem submitting to the will of God and depending on Him for their existence and survival. Beyond this, Yandell Keith’s central thesis is that persons have intrinsic value that ought to be respected, dignified and placed above all other things.

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Kleetus K. Varghese, *Personalism in John Paul II: An Anthropological Study of his Social Doctrines*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 2005, pp. 59–60.

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See: Robert Solomon, “Personalism”, in: Thomas Mautner (ed.), *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1996, p. 316.

3

Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, Theological Publications, Bangalore 1985, p. 1.

4

Joseph Selling, “Is a Personalistic Ethic Necessarily Anthropocentric”, *Ethical Perspectives* 6 (1999) 1, pp. 60–66, p. 60, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2143/ep.6.1.505367>.

5

Ibid.

6

Ibid.

7

Jan Olof Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Early Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 24.

8

Tadeusz Biesaga, “Personalism versus Principlism in Bioethics”, *Forum Philosophicum* 8 (2003), pp. 23–34, p. 29.

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Thomas D. Williams, L. C., “What is Thomistic Personalism”, *Alpha Omega* VII (2004) 2, pp. 163–197, p. 164.

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Ibid.

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T. D. Williams, L. C., “What is Thomistic Personalism”, p. 165.

12

Yandell Keith, “Personalism”, in: *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, as cited in: J. O. Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism*, p. 31.

Historically, the discourse of personalism, according to Thomas D. Williams, became prominent simply because of

“... the different forms of determinism and materialism influenced by the scientific method; some followers of Isaac Newton posited theories of human nature that blurred the distinction between man and the rest of nature, depriving him of his spiritual characters and free will.”¹³

Similarly, Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengston captured this way:

“Personalism became prominent (...) as a reaction to perceived depersonalising elements in Enlightenment rationalism, pantheism, Hegelian absolute idealism, individualism as well as collectivism in politics, and materialist, psychological, and evolutionary determinism.”¹⁴

These different theories and ideologies were seen as a threat to the nature and development of the human person. The different responses in defence of the person gave birth to different strains of personalism. For instance, Robert Kraynak argues that the basis of personalism, especially Christian personalism lies within the ethical and political teaching about human dignity and human rights. Here, a human being is perceived as a moral agent, possessing traditional attributes of spirituality, rationality and sociality as well as claiming new respect for personal identity as a matter of right, including a host of economic and political rights.¹⁵ Here, we see a striking similarity in the submissions of Thomas Williams and Kraynak, it point to the fact that the dignity of persons necessitated the rise of what I would call modern personalism. Also:

“In its various strains, personalism always underscores the centrality of the person as the primary locus of investigation for philosophical, theological, and humanistic studies. It is an approach or system of thought which regards or tends to regard the person as the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological, and axiological principle of all reality, although these areas of thought are not stressed equally by all personalists and there is tension between idealist, phenomenological, existentialist, and Thomist versions of personalism.”¹⁶

All of these different strains are merely attempting to study and interpret the same reality which is the human person.

A Discourse on the Western Idea of the Person

The Western ontology examines the idea of the person from three broad perspectives: the Judaeo-Christian, secular humanistic tradition, and the individualistic philosophical tradition. The Judaeo-Christian perspectives based their submissions on the fact that the human person was created in the image and likeness of God, therefore the person (beginning from conception) deserves respect and dignity in all ramifications. The secular humanistic tradition though argues for the respect and dignity of persons, but depart entirely from the fact that the person was created in the image and likeness of a Supreme Being who is not visible empirically. The individualistic philosophical tradition simply explains that there is no common conception of the human person except individual philosopher’s conception and they belong to different schools such as idealism, materialism and realism. These three broad categories have influenced the definition and description of the human person in the history of Western philosophy.

According to Stanley Rudman, in *Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics*, the discourse concerning the person has been about the Trinitarian nature of God and the comparison between human and divine personhood in terms of relationality.¹⁷ He added that the concept of

“... person is socially constructed. It embodies social and religious values about the nature of human personality and individuality about society. They are usually associated with other significant ideas about the nature of the self, such as mind, body or soul; or freedom, responsibility and accountability; personal identity and survival; relation to others including non-human animals and the environment and belief in God.”¹⁸

Discourse on

“... personhood has also occupied a place of importance in ethics. It is widely accepted in recent ethical discussions that ‘person’ is a moral concept and that the criteria for differentiating ‘persons’ from other living and non-living entities must be moral. However, some scholars are sceptical about using moral criteria in defining the person because they believe such value is elusive, vague and ambiguous.”¹⁹

Rudman added that contemporary discourse about the nature of the person is viewed from the perspective of personal identity, with the central question being about how should the person be defined; should it be defined in terms of material criteria such as body or brain; mental criteria such as self-consciousness, rationality or intentionality; moral criteria such as rights or respect; or religious criteria such as soul or relationship with God? Some feminists have argued against what they consider as the unjust assumptions of Enlightenment thought, which has extended and exalted rationality and human rights as criteria and marks of personhood. For them, personhood should be defined and understood primarily in terms of embodiment and relationality.²⁰ This conception of the person as a relational being has been emphasised by thinkers such as Karol Wojtyla, Emmanuel Levinas, Emmanuel Mounier and Martin Buber.

The word ‘person’ assumed its enduring philosophical definition when Boethius defined it as *persona est rationalis naturae individuae substantiae* – the person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Here, three key concepts are prominent; substance, rational and individual.

“Substance in the Scholastic meaning is that which exists on its own and not inhering in another. The substance is contrasted to accident, which is a reality that exists but not independently, but rather inheres in another reality.”²¹

For instance, a colour which inheres in the paper. Substance, on the other hand, has a self-independent existence, and is either first or second substance.

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T. D. Williams, L. C., “What is Thomistic Personalism”, p. 167.

14

Thomas D. Williams, Jan Olof Bengtsson, “Personalism”, in. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999.

15

Robert P. Kraynak, “The Influence of Kant on Christian Theology: A Debate about Human Dignity and Christian Personalism”, *Journal of Markets and Morality* 7 (2004) 2, pp. 517–525, p. 518.

16

Thomas D. Williams, Jan Olof Bengtsson, “Personalism”, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personalism/>

(accessed on April 10, 2018).

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Stanley Rudman, *Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 2.

18

Ibid.

19

Ibid.

20

Ibid., p. 4.

21

Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Kpim of Personality: Treatise on the Human Person*, Eustel Publications, Nekede Owerri 2000, p. 30.

Furthermore, Iroegbu stated that the first substance is an independent concrete reality that exists on its own, for example, paper or tree. In other words, the first substance is the reality that we touch. The second substance, on the other hand, is a mental abstraction from the first substance, like paperness or treeness. Paperness does not concretely exist; yet it is an existing reality, existing in the human mind and abstracted from real and concrete existing paper. If Boethius meant the first substance, then adding an individual to it is superfluous because a first substance is always an individual. But if he meant the second substance, it would be impossible because the second substance is never individual but abstract.²² The second aspect of Boethius' definition of the person is rationality. Basically, rationality is the ability or power to think, to reason, to reflect, etc. Thus, an individual of a rational nature would then mean a being that is in itself rational. The problem here is that

"Boethius' definition of person as an individual substance that is of a Rational-Nature conspicuously excludes non-rational beings like lower animals and plants. But he fails to limit it as it concerns higher beings; for instance, God. It fails to tell us the category of reasoning that is required for there to be personality. This is because divine reason/rationality is not human reason."²³

Again, the third element of his definition, which is individuality, is also problematic. According to Iroegbu, we now know that legal persons exist who are not individuals in the sense of being singular persons. These legal persons in the form of groups and associations are recognised as persons with rights and responsibilities, exactly like individual persons. Hegel corroborated this when he gave a legal definition of the human person "as the most abstract and external expression of morality".²⁴

St. Thomas Aquinas' definition of the person is derived from Boethius. He says the person is, *persona est subsistens distinctum in natura rationali* – that is, the person is a distinct subsistent in a rational nature.²⁵ This is rather an improvement on Boethius' definition by adding distinct subsistent as against individual substance. The difference is the following:

"Aquinas attempted to resolve or correct what he thinks was vague in Boethius by replacing individual in Boethius with distinct and substance in Boethius with subsistent. Thus, subsistent in Aquinas' thought is an actual existing being in itself. It is a separate being or entity with its own act of existence."²⁶

By implication, to be a person is not merely to possess a complete individual intellectual nature, which all admitted was an essential requisite. To be a person in its own right such a nature would have to possess or 'own' its act of existence (*esse*).

"The human person is not only an essence, a substantial form or a soul; rather the human person is *actus essendi* – an act of existing, an act of being. It is this act of being that makes the human being to be. Put simply, essence makes a thing what it is, but the act of being makes to be, to exist."²⁷

Therefore, for Aquinas the person could be defined as an "intellectual nature possessing its own act of existence, so that it can be self-conscious, responsible source of its own actions".²⁸

René Descartes' notion of the person was visibly expressed in his version of dualism, labelled after him as Cartesian dualism. He affirms that

"... a person is one and the same thing as an incorporeal soul, an immaterial logical substance devoid of material bodies and in particular, extension. The soul has neither length, width nor breadth, and thus occupies no volume of space; a person is also totally distinct and different in kind from his or her extended space occupying physical body."²⁹

In Descartes' *Meditations* he asserts:

"Thinking is another attribute of the soul; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am – I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true."³⁰

The conclusion as conceived by Descartes is that thinking is a necessary part of human being; as such it is impossible to think outside the existence. However, took a step further by stating that they are two different substances. The body as a substance is divisible because it is material. He substantiated this by saying:

"By 'body', I understand all that is capable of being bounded by some shape, of being enclosed in a place, and of filling up a space in such a way as to exclude any other body from it; of being perceived by touch, sight, hearing taste or smell; of being moved in several ways, not of course by itself but by whatever else impinges upon it. For it was my view that the power of self-motion, and likewise of sensing or of thinking, in no way belonged to the nature of the body."³¹

Descartes believed that the mind is a substance on its own, which does not influence any material nature. It is immaterial. It is through the mind that the comprehension of self is ascertained. The essence of this immaterial substance is thinking. It can subsist on its own without the body. The mind is indivisible, for it must be of an entirely different nature from the body, that is, it must be essentially incorporeal.

Joseph Fletcher argues that in understanding the nature of the human person, synthetic concepts such as "human", "man", and "person" must be defined. It is then we can get to make normative decisions. To this end, he proposes the following criteria for personhood. The first is minimal intelligence.³² Here,

"... any individual of the species homo sapiens who falls below the I.Q. 40 mark in standard Stanford – Binet test is questionably a person; below the 20 mark, not a person. Thus, mere biological life before minimal intelligence is achieved or after it is lost irretrievably is not a person. Following minimal intelligence, is self-awareness."³³

For Fletcher, self-consciousness is one of the qualities we can observe being developed in a baby. It is an essential role in personality development and a basic datum of psychology. Those who are suffering from neurological cases of irreversible damage to the brain cortex cannot be said to be persons. From

22

Ibid., 31.

23

Ibid., 32.

24

Ibid.

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Ibid., 37.

26

Ibid.

27

Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Burn and Oates, Kent 1955, p. 102.

28

Norris W. Clarke, *Person and Being: The Aquinas Lecture*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1993, pp. 27–28.

29

Keith T. Maslin, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 38.

30

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress, Hacket Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1998, p. 88.

31

Ibid., 64–65.

32

Joseph Fletcher, "Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man", *The Hastings Center Report* 2 (1972) 5, pp. 1–2, p. 2, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3561570>.

33

Ibid.

consciousness, he moved to self-control. He says that if an individual cannot control him/herself and others cannot except they apply force; and if such behaviour cannot be reversed by medicine, then such an individual cannot be called a person.³⁴

Peter Singer is known for his view that not all human beings are persons. Being a human being has of itself no moral significance. He says that those

“... who believe that membership in the human species is of great moral significance are guilty of speciesism, a prejudice similar to such immoral prejudices as racism.”³⁵

Singer holds a non-speciesist view of ethics and does not consider human life to be of absolute value, but instead teaches that what has the most value is the life of the person; hence, the definition of the person is paramount and fundamental to his ethics. Singer argues that “there could be a person who is not a member of our species. There could also be members of our species who are not persons”.³⁶ Singer defines “person as an intelligent thinking being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places”.³⁷ To buttress his point, Singer used the analogy of a non-human entity, for the reason that non-human entities like chimpanzees and gorillas demonstrated the abilities to use sign language. Singer argued that:

“If human life does have special value, it has it insofar as most human beings are persons. But if some non-human animals are persons, too, there must be the same value in the lives of those animals (...). Hence we shall reject the doctrine that places the lives of members of our species above the lives of members of other species. Some members of other species are persons; some members of our own species are not. No objective assessment can give greater value to the lives of members of our species who are not persons than to lives of members of other species who are persons. On the contrary, as we have seen, there are strong arguments for placing the lives of persons above the lives of non-persons. So it seems likely that killing, say, a chimpanzee is worse than killing a gravely defective human who is not a person.”³⁸

This view clearly shows his argument for animal rights and that to model ‘person’ on ‘human being’ was ‘speciesistic’. Besides, not all human beings are human persons. Singer applies this same idea and argument to justify abortion and argues in the following syllogism: it is wrong to kill an innocent human being; a human foetus is an innocent human being. From this, it is concluded that it is wrong to kill a human foetus. Singer’s attention is on the first premise rather than the second premise. He again posited that “that there is a distinction between being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* and being a person and that injunctions against killing should only apply to the killing of persons”.³⁹ He says, if ‘human’ is taken as equivalent to ‘person’, the second premise of the argument, which asserts that the foetus is a human being, is simply false. This is because one cannot safely argue that a foetus is either rational or self-conscious. On the other side, if ‘human’ is taken to mean no more than ‘member of the species homo sapiens’, then the conservative defence of the life of the foetus is based on a characteristic lacking significance, and so the first premise is wrong.⁴⁰ It is worthy of mention that many scholars have criticized the reductionist submissions of Singer on what constitutes the human person.

Personhood in African Ontology

It is desirable at this point to outline the nature of African reality or ontology. This exposition enables to have a comprehensive understanding of the idea of the human person in the African worldview. Here the author would expose

and analyse the Igbo and Yoruba conceptions of the human person. These ethnic groups are found within the South Eastern and South Western parts of Nigeria respectively.

Essentially, there is sufficient proof that traditionally, many if not all Africans uphold a dualistic conception of reality. They perceive existence as partly physical and partly spiritual. They also accept the reality and the intrinsic interrelationship of both a sensible (perceptible and physical) and a nonsensible (nonperceptible and spiritual) aspect of reality. (This view is generally accepted among African traditional philosophers). Elvis Imafidon made a similar point when he asserted that

“... there exists a universe of two realms of existence in African ontology; the visible and invisible; independently real but intrinsically linked to form a whole (...). The beings or entities existing in these two realms of existence are lively and active in varying degrees because they are vitalized, animated or energized by an ontological principle or essence or force given to them by the Supreme Being.”⁴¹

Personhood in the Igbo society occupies a prominent place in their quest to know and understand the cosmos. The Igbo notion of person is basically metaphysical. Etymologically, *human being* means *mmadu* or *madu*, depending on the dialect.⁴² It is a combination of two words: *mma* and *du* or *di*, meaning *beauty* or *goodness*. The *mma* as aforementioned denotes *good, a good or the good*. Then, *di* is from an Igbo verb *idi*, meaning *to be*.⁴³ Thus, *mmadu* and *mma di* actually mean the same thing, which could be *beauty* or *goodness*. Chielozona Eze emphasizes that “there is no doubt that there is beauty in creation and no doubt that creation is good; thus, *mmadu* as the Igbo hold is the hallmark and ultimate proof of the existence of beauty and goodness”.⁴⁴ It is also important to point out that

“... *mma* which is derived from another dialect as *madu* means *muo* (spirit). This implies that spirit is seen in the person too. From this, we could understand that the Igbo also refer to both of them as persons, *ndimmadu na ndi mmuo* – human persons and spiritual persons.”⁴⁵

Justin Ekennia submitted that the strict biological and scientific analysis is almost absent in their reflections on human being and on human person. The

³⁴

Ibid.

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Peter Singer, *Practical ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 73.

³⁶

Ibid., 97.

³⁷

Ibid.

³⁸

Ibid., 119.

³⁹

Ibid.

⁴⁰

Ibid.

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Elvis Imafidon, “On the Ontological Foundation of a Social Ethics in African Traditions”,

in: Elvis Imafidon, John Bewaji (eds.), *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in Africa Metaphysics*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2014, p. 38.

⁴²

Emmanuel M. P. Edeh, *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1985, p. 100.

⁴³

Chielozona Eze, “Man as *mma-du*: Human Being and Being Human in Igbo context”, *The West African Journal of Philosophical Studies* 1 (1998) 1, pp. 27–48.

⁴⁴

Ibid.

⁴⁵

Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, Imico Press, Jos 1991, p. 109.

human person is essentially an integral being, constituted of physical, spiritual and metaphysical elements.⁴⁶

According to Emmanuel Edeh, the Igbo sees man as composed of body and soul. The body is *ahu*. The *ahu* denotes man's corporeal component which could mean either of two things. It could refer to the externally visible part of man, that is the flesh. This explains the hypothesis that *ahu* has its etymological derivation or identity with *ihu* – face. Secondly, the concept of *ahu* could also be used to refer to the entire human person/man.⁴⁷ It is seen more clearly in an Igbo interrogation: *ahu gikwanu?* – what of your body?. The simple understanding of this question is *how are you?* or *ahu adighi m* – transliterally, it means my body is not well. These are circuitous forms of using *ahu* to refer to the entire person. Above all, *ahu* simply means body, which is perishable.⁴⁸

However, the concept of the soul has no unanimous original vocabulary among the Igbo. Among concepts like *nkpuruobi* (seed of the heart), *chi* (destiny spirit), and *mmuo* (spirit), Edeh thinks that *mmuo* is the most suitable word that conveys the Igbo concept of the human soul. The soul for them is immortal; it suggests that which is invisible in contradistinction to that which is visible. This means that all activities that are not of the *ahu* are necessarily of the soul; that is, thinking as an act is attributable to the soul.⁴⁹

According to Metuh, *mmadu* (man/person) is endowed with three principles and they include the following: *Obi* – Heart or Breath; *Chi* – Destiny; and *Eke* or *Agu* – Ancestral Guardian. The *Obi* is the man's life force, the animating principle that links *mmadu* with other life-forces in the universe.⁵⁰ The *Chi* is said to be an emanation of the creator which is in *mmadu*, and *Eke* or *Agu* is the ancestral guardian which links *mmadu* with his family and clan. Put simply, *obi* stands as the animating principle and the seat of affection and volition. The *chi* has dual ambivalence conceptions; the parcel of destiny, and the guardian spirit who chooses the destiny parcel. At death, it is one's *chi* that goes back to its creator.⁵¹ Justin Ekennia submitted that

“... the *chi* is a unique life force, which each person possesses. No two individuals have the same *chi*. It is considered as the Igbo principle of individualisation. Thus, each person is unique and irreplaceable.”⁵²

Chi is present at birth. He argues further that the *chi* is present in the human embryo/foetus. The Igbo believe that a child is a gift from God (*nwa sin a chi*), the reason the *chi* is called ‘a personal god’. *Chi* is described as the supreme God as shared by each but more especially in his capacity as giver and author of destiny. By this same fact, *chi* is an emanation or participation of the supreme God. According to Ekennia, the Igbo construes the foetus as a human person, and it automatically shares the life force of the Supreme Being right from the moment of conception.⁵³

Among the generality of the Yoruba, the word for person is *eniyan*. According to Segun Gbadegesin, the word *eniyan* has both normative dimension and ordinary meaning.⁵⁴ This is generally acceptable among the Yoruba. Ebunoluwa Oduwole buttressed this when she said:

“This normative aspect of a human being in Yoruba society describes man, his behaviour (Ihu-wasi) and relationship with other (Isesi). The Yoruba consider in strong terms human relationship with each other in the society. If one shows good human relations in society, he is considered as a good person. Thus they say *o s'enya* – he acts the person or he behaves as a person should. This means that he shows in his life and personal relations with others the high qualities of a person. The opposite description *ki s'enya; nse lo fi awo enia bo ra* (he is not a person; he merely assumes the skin of a person) means that the person is socially unworthy. So in his character, he is not fit to be called a person, even though he goes about in the semblance of one.

When the Yoruba says *enia k'enia*, they mean a mere caricature of a person, a reprobate. It is this social aspect of man that is linked with good character and it is that which distinguishes a person from a brute.”⁵⁵

Besides the normative aspect of the person in Yoruba ontology, there are prominent elements that substantially describe and define *enyan*. These include *ara*, *okan*, *emi*, and *ori*. It is worthy of mention that majority, if not all thinkers on Yoruba literature, agrees that a human person is made up of three basic elements or parts: *Ara* (body), *emi* (breath) and *ori* (the inner head or personality).⁵⁶ Gbadegesin, however, thinks these elements have a lot of confusion surrounding them when we attempt to explain what each means and the relationship that exist among them. The *ara* is the physical-material part of the human being, which includes the external and internal components. These components include flesh, bone, heart, and intestine to mention but few. It is further described in physical terms as heavy/light, strong/weak, hot/cold.⁵⁷ Oduwole citing Bolaji Idowu says:

“... the *ara* can also be described in a general way or analytically by anatomy. It is a creation of the arch – divinity, *Orisanla*, who was assigned by the Supreme Being to do the moulding of human bodies.”⁵⁸

The *emi* has been translated as spirit, which is invisible, soul or identified as the active element of life. It is believed that it gives life to the whole body, and thus can be described through its causal functions. Its presence in or absence from the human body is known only by the fact that a person is alive or dead. It is believed that, although the body is created by *Orisanla*, the arch – divinity, it is *Oladumare*, the Supreme Being alone, who gives the *emi* to man thus giving him life and being. The *emi* is said to be the active principle and the life-giving element that makes human beings the creatures of *Oladumare*.⁵⁹

Gbadegesin added by affirming that the *emi* being the active element of life is thus a component common to all human beings. It does not only activate the body by supplying the means of life and existence but also guarantees such conscious existence as long as it remains in force. However, two claims have been made about the nature of *emi*: that it is spiritual and it has an independ-

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Justin Nnadozie Ekennia, *Bio-Medical Ethics: Issues, Trends and Problems*, Barloz Publishers, Owerri 2003, p. 26.

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E. M. P. Edeh, *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, p. 90.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 80–82.

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E. I. Metuh, African in Western Conceptual Schemes, pp. 110–111.

51

Ibid.

52

J. N. Ekennia, *Bio-Medical Ethics*, p. 27.

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Ibid.

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Segun Gbadegesin, “Enyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person”, in: Pieter H. Coetze, Abraham P. J. Roux, *The African Philosophy Reader*, Routledge, London 2003, pp. 208–228.

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Ebunoluwa O. Oduwole, “Personhood and Abortion: An African Perspective”, *LUMINA* 21 (2010) 2, pp. 1–10, p. 5.

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S. Gbadegesin, “Enyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person”.

57

Ibid.

58

E. Oduwole, “Personhood and Abortion”, p. 4.

59

Ibid.

ent existence. This is subjected to philosophical debate. According to Gbadegesin, Yoruba conceive of *emi* as a lifeline of human existence and also as a portion of *Olodumare*'s divine breath. If *Olodumare* is conceived as spiritual, it also implies that the portion of this source of being which is given to the human being must also be spiritual. Again, it is also recognised that it is the possession of *emi* that makes humans children of *Olodumare*. It is the logic of the source of *emi*, therefore, that suggests its nature as spiritual.⁶⁰

Another important feature or component of the person in the Yoruba world-view is the *ori*. The

“... *ori* is the individuality element or that which is claimed to be responsible for one's personality. It is the real essence of being, the personality of the person before he/she is born; it rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of the person and also serves as a man's double or guardian angel.”⁶¹

Oduwole asserts that the “*ori* suggests that man is a person with individuality before birth with spiritual life; thus has a right to live”. The implication, she says, is that “life begins before birth, as soon as one acquires *ori* which is one's individuality”⁶²

The point of emphasis here is that the *ori* is a spiritual dimension of the person. It determines a person's personality or individuality. Similarly, Bolaji Idowu acknowledged the fact that *ori* is the “inner person”. It is the personality-soul and the very essence of personality. He added that in the belief of the Yoruba, *ori* is considered as that, which rules, controls, and guides the “life” and the activities of the person. Bolaji Idowu agrees and asserts that it is the *ori* that comes into the world to fulfil a destiny. It is believed that because of its pure origin, no *ori* is essentially bad because *ori* is inextricably bound up with the person's destiny.⁶³ Awolalu and Dopamu corroborate Idowu's position that *ori* is closely related to God himself, the source from which being originated.⁶⁴ This implies that it is only the Supreme Being that can put *ori*, the essence of being or personality-soul into the human being.

A Comparative Analysis of Personalistic Elements in Western and the Igbo and Yoruba Ontology of the Person

This paper has been able to expose the nature of person and personalism, the Western conception of the human person, the African conception of the human person with emphasis on the Igbo and Yoruba worldviews. The highlights on the discourse of personalism are that as a philosophical system, it focuses on the human person with special emphasis on dignity, intrinsic value, respect, human experience, freedom and human uniqueness. Secondly, personalism has different strands and cuts across different fields of epistemology such as idealism, existentialism, theology, ethics, phenomenology, politics, anthropology, economics, etc. Simply, personalistic principles have been applied to these various fields of knowledge in an attempt to have a deeper and comprehensive nature of the human person. Thirdly, personalism, as conceived in the West, emerged and became popular as a result of different ideologies like (individualism, evolutionary determinism, Hegel's absolute idealism, materialism informed by the scientific method) propounded by some thinkers before the nineteenth century and beyond. These perceived ‘ideologies’ were considered injurious to the human person.

Be that as it may, some fundamental questions are germane as we proceed. How does the discourse of personalism and personhood as conceived in the West differ from the Igbo and Yoruba conceptions of the human person? What

are the implications of using Western categories of personalism and personhood to describe the idea of the person in the Igbo and Yoruba ontology without committing categorical fallacy?

In an attempt to provide some answers to the above questions, which can be collapsed into one, it is important to state that there are limitations in the language of expression. Importantly, there is no way an African philosopher who has been trained in Western philosophy using Western language can sufficiently analyse, and explain the idea of a person using foreign categories without loss in meaning. The analysis cannot be exact because the foreign language conditions one's thinking and worldviews. For instance, the word *ori* in the Yoruba ontology, earlier mentioned as one of the features of personhood, can be translated to mean *head*. But, the meaning of *ori* goes beyond that. *Ori* means the inner head; it is spiritual; it is a guide; a ‘guardian angel’, some people even worship the *ori*. Simply, the implications of using foreign categories to describe some African concepts remain problematic because of the reasons adduced. However, these limitations should not in any way nullify what has been done by African and Western philosophers.

Furthermore, in an essay titled “The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy”, Kwasi Wiredu contentiously argued that African philosophers must begin to philosophise by paying attention to African languages and indigenous conceptual schemes in describing our realities rather than using Western concepts. He alluded to the fact that African philosophers must think through or meditate on foreign concepts (like Being, Reality, Existence, Person, Truth, Death, Morality, Life, Freedom, Knowledge, Spirit, Opinion, Belief, Community, Religion, God, Justice, Mind, Idea, etc.) in our African language. This would enable African philosophers to perceive reality differently and have solutions to most of our problems when we examine these concepts in our language and within our cultural background.⁶⁵ On this basis, one can easily see that African reality and Western reality may look similar but are different in many respects. Going back to the analysis of personalism and personhood, this work observed that all the philosophers cited above, seem to agree that, the human person is a living organism. The medieval philosophers like Boethius and St. Thomas Aquinas submissions of the description of the person did not strictly polarise between a person and a human being. They simply emphasised the fact that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. For them, to be a human person is not only an essence, a substantial form or a soul, rather the human person is an act of existing, an act of being. Some modern and contemporary Western philosophers not only emphasise the description of a person but polarise between a person and a human being, contending that an individual can be a person and not regarded as a human being and vice versa. Again, some of the Western philosophers (materialists and idealists) showed that for an individual to be regarded as a person, such an

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S. Gbadegesin, “Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person”.

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Ibid.

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E. Oduwole, “Personhood and Abortion”, p. 4.

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E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, Longman, London 1962, pp. 170–172.

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For details on the position of Awolalu and Dopamu, see: Joseph Akin Omoyajowo, “The concept of man in Africa”, *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 9 (1975) 1, pp. 34–44.

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Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonisation in African Philosophy*, Hope Publication, Ibadan 1995, pp. 22–23.

individual must possess characteristics or be able to carry out such functions as, reasoning (rationality), memory, communication, conscious, intelligence, care for others and self-motivation. This position is adopted by several contemporary philosophers and scientists, especially in the field of bioethics. The implication of this position on the essence of the person is that a permanently comatose and disabled human being is no longer a person, nor is the foetus or the infant. But not all scholars agree that there is a necessary connection between consciousness and personhood, or between rationality, intelligence and personhood.

On the other hand, it is observed that the Igbo and Yoruba conceptions of a person reveal that the man is a composite of different entities. Again, it is observed that even though there are differences concerning the constituting parts of a person according to the different worldviews, there is an agreement that the person consists basically of a material aspect and spiritual aspect. This presupposes dualism. However, what is unique about the Igbo and Yoruba understanding of the human person is that there is no strict categorical difference between the spiritual and the material. The Igbo and Yoruba conception of the human person, therefore, differs in context and degree from the Western conception. That is, the African idea of the person transcends the physical. It is a composite of the physical and metaphysical. Therefore, this is opposed to the Western notion of the person that revolves around materialism, functionalism and physicalism. George Ehusani structured it this way:

"Africans are complete strangers to both the metaphysical and anthropological dualism that seem to constitute the subterranean structure upon which Western philosophy, Western science, and to an appreciable extent, Western theology have been built. This 'notoriously religious' African acknowledges the often intersecting co-existence of both the physical and visible, and the spiritual and indivisible forces of the universe, and yet sees no contradiction in them. Rather, the African is constantly engaged in the search for harmony and equilibrium among these forces, and see ill-health, epidemics and natural disasters, as the fruit of discord in either the anthropological or cosmic order."⁶⁶

Again, in the Igbo and Yoruba perception of the person, the individual is sometimes understood as subsumed under the community. This is as a result of their belief that it is the community that shapes, determines the social, religious, political and as well as moral status of every human person. Besides, personhood is seen as an inherently intrinsic attribute of individuals since each possesses a soul which, being a speck of the divine, has the divine nature of God. These expressly summarize the Igbo and Yoruba conceptions of person as being different from the Western conception.

From the Ontology of the Person to Bioethics

In order to concretely situate my arguments better, this section of the paper briefly attempts to justify the importance of person by drawing examples and lessons from bioethical discourse. This section emphasises that the Yoruba and Igbo idea of personhood is weaved around the concept of human dignity and respect for persons existing and yet to be.

Specifically, Elvis Imafidon stated that in the case of patient-doctor confidentiality in traditional African bioethics, the traditional medical personnel only require the patient to confess and open up to family members and in some cases, the entire community before commencing treatment. This is considered a vital procedure for a healthy recovery.⁶⁷ However,

“... this contrasts with Western bioethical perspectives on patient-doctor confidentiality which places emphasis on the right of the patient’s to privacy of information such that a doctor who reveals a patient’s information to anyone without s/he consent is said to violate the right of the patient.”⁶⁸

Again, Igbo and Yoruba personalistic principles as revealed in the ontology of the person does not in the strict sense engage in arguments about the beginning of human life and person or whether the human embryo is a human being or person as we have it among Western bioethicist and scientists. For instance, in the case of abortion and personhood, Oduwole asserted in the Yoruba ontology that, although the embryo or foetus could not qualify for the normative aspect of man, the foetus qualifies for the structural and religious aspect of man or person in that it possesses the structural and religious elements.⁶⁹ Oduwole premised her argument on the fact that since the foetus possesses the *ara* (the body which is a concrete, tangible thing of the flesh and bones created by arch-divinity, *Orisanla*); *emi* (life force, spirit which is invisible and intangible. It is that which gives life to the whole body), and *ori* (the inner head or personality soul), which are important and necessary to be able to achieve the normative as one goes interacting within the society. Oduwole added that *ori* simply suggests that there are life and individuality before birth that needs to be actualised, thus the foetus has a right to live to actualize this destiny.⁷⁰

In the same line of thinking, John Igbogo Ebeh alluded to the fact in Igbo ontology “the human being is accepted and humanized from the moment of pregnancy and various rites of passages are carried out to externalise and socialise that human being”⁷¹ Ebeh explained further in the Igbo context, the ancestors, the cosmos, the parents, and the clan, pass on life to the on-coming generation that is newborn child. The life the new child enjoys is not merely biological but meta-empirical; it is not just a fruit of physical conception but a sacred gift and most precious good, an African human rights par-excellence.⁷² Gyekye upholds that Africans view human persons as theomorphic being and that they have their nature as an aspect of God. Beyond this, Gyekye asserted that there is no distinction regarding the ontological status of the human person. He said:

“... the person is a person no matter the age and social status (...) personhood is not acquired or achieved along the line of life but it is intrinsically part and parcel of the human being by the mere fact of being human which could have started from the moment of conception.”⁷³

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George Omaku Ehusani, *An Afro-Christian Vision; ‘OZOVEHE’: Toward a more Humanized World*, University Press of America, Lanham 1991, pp. 219–220.

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Elvis Imafidon, “Life’s Origin in Bioethics: Implications of Three Ontological Perspectives: Judeo-Christianity, Western Secularism, and the African Worldview”, in: E. Imafidon, J. Bewaji (eds.), *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in Africa Meta-Ethics*, pp. 133–149, p. 145.

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Ibid.

69

E. Oduwole, “Personhood and Abortion”, p. 6.

70

Ibid.

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John Igbogo Ebeh, “African Concept of Life, Person and Community: Contribution to Global Bio-Ethical Discourse”, in: Martin F. Asiegbu, J. Chidozie Chukwuokolo (eds.), *Personhood and Personal Identity: A Philosophical Study*, Snaap Press, Enugu 2010, p. 74.

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Ibid.

73

Ibid.

It can be deduced that the human person is metaphysically conceived as more than just material or physical object. It is debatable or contentious when precisely a human being becomes animated with force (at conception or any other particular stage of the development of a human being), one can safely argue that life is given by the Supreme Being and that life starts at the earliest stage of conception.⁷⁴

For the majority of Africans, human life and the human person are sacred, valuable and deserving of respect and dignity always. According to George Ehusani, biotechnological practices like experimentation with foetuses, wilful destruction of human embryos, commercialisation of the womb, experimentation with foetal parts and euthanasia are unethical and unacceptable to African personalistic principles. Consequently,

“... the African sees as utterly degrading, the scientific approach to the human person which sees him or her as an animal little separable from the anthropoids. Besides, definitions of the human being as, for example, a ‘rational animal’, are very offensive to the traditional African who prefers to use divine as the points of reference for the human person.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

There are similarities in the idea and knowledge personalism and personhood as perceived in the West and Africa, but fundamentally, it is important to state that the knowledge of the person differs and varies from culture to culture and from tradition to tradition. This does not mean that there are no points of convergence as it were. The paper also emphasised that using foreign categories and concepts to interrogate fundamental philosophical and social issues would amount to a distortion of reality and truth. Philosophy is universal; for instance, the prisoners in the allegory of the cave were neither Greeks, Africans nor Asians. They were prisoners of the universe. So to philosophise is to wonder about life and the fundamental problems of human existence. However, the main difference is that Westerners wonder and interpret western problems and Africans should also wonder and interpret our problems using a methodology that suit our worldviews. There are different approaches to problems. Concepts such as death, life, person, justice, freedom, democracy, adultery, abortion, etc., are universal but are interpreted differently. Africans must begin to contextualize issues as related to African and avoid or reduce the use of foreign concepts, methodology and framework. Education (knowledge) must be made culturally, contextually and environmentally relevant. We should be moving towards an indigenous epistemology and education for Africa. Our training in Western philosophy should be deployed to produce African philosophy rather than endless debate on issues foreign to us. Besides, this work does not totally reject foreign language or concepts.

Personalism in Africa as established in this paper seeks to strike a balance between the divine to the detriment of the human person and the human person to the detriment of the divine. Africa’s personalism seeks a holistic approach to life and rejects both the metaphysical and anthropological dualism that seems to constitute the structure upon which western philosophy and science is built.

Philip Edema

**Onkraj razlomljene epistemologije:
rasprava o ideji sebstva i personalizma
u sistemima morala Igbo i Yoruba naroda**

Sažetak

Temeljni argument ovog rada izgrađen je na osnovi važnosti ublažavanja korištenja zapadnih kategorija morala kako ih se može naći u konceptu sebstva i personalizma pri apostrofiranju moralnih i praktičnih problema u nekim dijelovima Afrike; specifično u etničkim nigerijskim skupinama Igbo i Yorube. Sažeto, personalizam kao etička teorija promiče vrijednost i dostanjanstvo ljudskog bića, što je čini atraktivnom teorijom morala koja se lako primjenjuje na općem planu problema morala. Međutim, s tim dolaze neke opasnosti jer je znanje o nekim moralnim problemima drugačije pojmljeno od različitih društava i kultura. Primjerice, afrička konцепција ljudske osobe, kako je predstavljena u moralnom sistemu Yoruba i Igbo naroda, nema oštro kategoričko razlikovanje između transcendentnog, duhovnog i materijalnog, kako je to slučaj u koncepcijama Zapada koje naglašavaju materijalnu, funkcionalnu i tjelesnu dimenziju. Predstoji vidjeti da rasprava ovog tipa ima instrumentalnu važnost u pribavljanju vrijednosti i potrebnog okvira za ispitivanje bezbroj problema s kojima se susreće afrički kontinent.

Ključne riječi

personalizam, Afrika, moralnost, kultura, znanje

Philip Edema

**Jenseits der zerbrochenen Epistemologie:
Diskussion zur Idee des Selbst und des Personalismus
in Moralsystemen der Völker Igbo und Yoruba**

Zusammenfassung

Das zugrundeliegende Argument dieser Arbeit baut auf der Wichtigkeit der Minderung der Verwendung von westlichen Moralkategorien auf, wie man sie im Konzept des Selbst und des Personalismus bei der Apostrophierung moralischer und praktischer Probleme in einigen Teilen Afrikas, kennzeichnend in ethnischen nigerianischen Gruppen von Igbo und Yoruba, antreffen kann. Kurzum, der Personalismus als ethische Theorie fördert den Wert und die Würde des menschlichen Wesens, was ihn zu einer attraktiven Moraltheorie macht, die leicht auf das allgemeine Gefilde des Moralproblems angewandt werden kann. Damit gehen allerdings etliche Gefahren einher, da das Wissen über einige moralische Probleme in diversen Gesellschaften und Kulturen unterschiedlich ausgedeutet wird. Beispielsweise verfügt die afrikanische Konzeption der menschlichen Person, wie sie im Moralsystem der Völker Yoruba und Igbo präsentiert wird, über keine scharfe kategorische Differenzierung zwischen Transzendentem, Geistigem und Materiellem, wie das in den Konzeptionen des Westens der Fall ist, die materielle, funktionale und körperliche Dimension hervorheben. Es bleibt zu sehen, dass die Diskussion dieses Typs von instrumentaler Wichtigkeit ist bei der Wertbeschaffung und beim notwendigen Rahmen zur Untersuchung unzähliger Probleme, mit denen der afrikanische Kontinent konfrontiert ist.

Schlüsselwörter

Personalismus, Afrika, Moralität, Kultur, Wissen

Philip Edema

**Au-delà des épistémologies morcelées :
débat sur l'idée du soi et du personnalisme au sein
des systèmes de la morale des peuples Igbo et Yoruba**

Résumé

L'argument majeur de ce travail se construit sur l'importance de diminuer l'utilisation des catégories occidentales de la morale telles qu'on les trouve dans le concept du soi et du personnalisme lorsque l'accent est mis sur les problèmes moraux et pratiques dans certaines contrées africaines ; spécialement chez les Igbos et les Yorubas appartenant aux communautés nigériennes. En résumé, le personnalisme en tant que théorie éthique promeut la valeur et la dignité de l'être humain, rendant cette théorie de la morale attractive et facilement applicable à un niveau général du problème de la morale. Cependant, cela s'accompagne de quelques risques puisque la connaissance des problèmes moraux n'est pas conçue de la même manière au sein des diverses sociétés et cultures. Par exemple, la conception africaine de la personne humaine, à savoir la manière dont elle est représentée dans le système de la morale des peuples Yoruba et Igbo, ne possède pas de différenciation catégorique stricte entre le transcendant, l'esprit et le matériel, à l'instar des conceptions occidentales qui mettent l'accent sur la dimension matérielle, fonctionnelle et corporelle. Il reste à voir si un débat de ce type a une importance instrumentale dans la production des valeurs et d'un cadre nécessaire pour étudier les innombrables problèmes avec lesquels le continent africain est confronté.

Mots-clés

personnalisme, Afrique, morale, culture, savoir