

The Critique of the Communitarians Arguments from an African Perspective

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Abstract

The communitarians claim that the individual is a natural member of the human society, but that he needs the society and all the opportunities it makes available for the realization of his potential for living a life that is meaningful. This claim is synonymous to African conception of individual and the community. Thus this work set out to carry out the critique of some notable communitarians such as: John Dewey, Fredrick Hegel and Michael Sandel, Macinyre Alasdair, Charles Taylor. We discovered in the work that the claim of these theorists on individual and community is identical to African ideal. And the critique exposes the inadequacies in their claim as well as the African ideal because development today is beyond the narrow context of communal life which puts African under the illusion that communities constitute a 'paradise lost'. As such there is the need for African to seek their rights; this will enable them to function properly in the global scheme of things.

Index terms— africa, community, communitarian, development, individual, government, society.

1 Introduction

ommunitarianism emerged as a response to the limit of liberal theory and practice. While Liberalism affirms belief in individual freedom or liberty, it also believes that it is desirable to maximize the amount of liberty in the state. Communitarian advocates for equal placement of individual rights with social responsibilities, and the autonomous selves should not exist in isolation, but shaped by the values and culture of communities. Communitarians suggest that unless we begin to redress the imbalance towards the pole of community, our society will continue to be norm less, self cantered, and driven by special interests and power seeking. Invariably these facts instigate the search for communitarian society where there will be a correct balance between individual autonomy and social cohesion.

In this paper, we shall cursorily examine the works of communitarian scholars such as John Dewey, Fredrick Hegel and Michael Sandel, Macinyre Alasdair, Charles Taylor. Their contributions shall be considered in turns.

Communitarians emphasize the fact that an individual needs the society and all the available opportunities to realize his aims. This literally suggests that the community should be the main stay of the individual. As such, Dewey believes that the community needs the individual in order to perform the numerous functions before it. His philosophy is greatly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. Through the Darwin's theory, he acquired the notion that a human being is like a complex natural organism that functions within its environment. To function successfully, the organism must adapt itself either passively to its environment in order to meet its needs and desires or actively to transform its environment.

Dewey further believes that for the community to progress, it needs individuals to perform a large array of functions. One of which is, a healthy relationship. Dewey described the healthy community as "one in which the individual is neither boss over other nor bullied by others" (Alfred, D.1985). This invariably suggest that the individual shares similar aspirations and responsibilities, which enables him to take decisions that enhance the development of the community. As a neo Darwinian, Dewey knew the key to survival is diversity not

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homogeneity. As such, the idea of segregation may not produce the cooperation that is expected to move the community forward. Observation reveals that Dewey's ideal community is a society where the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities is seen in the full sense of that word, so that an organized articulate public is realized.

Dewey thought that the best kind of community for social self-realization is a participatory democracy, where every individual have a stake. In this system of governance, public spiritedness, productive of an organized self-conscious community of individuals responding to society's need, will be inculcated in the individuals in the society.

Hegel in his phenomenology of spirit shows how rationally self-conscious individuals must interact with one another to raise their subjective reasons to a universal, transpersonal level. Only then will individuals be able to act freely, since the spiritual essence or substance of their common ethical life is the means by which they can escape mere conformity to custom as well as their own subjective prejudices. By ethical life, Hegel means the most fully and immediate identification with the community. That is, ethical life must be 'based on or identification with others in a particular common enterprise' ??Taylor, C.1989).

Hegel claims that strong identification is the appropriate orientation towards one's ethical tradition. It was his attempt to portray the state as an inherently rational entity that made him to suggests that a community's ethical tradition must be rational in order to satisfy the needs and desires of its members"(Hegel, G.W.F.1981). In addition, the individual must learn how to recognize precisely, what right is and evaluate the rationality of their ethical tradition. He rejects the authority of the abstract to undermine the validity of tradition. For example, he rejects Kant's notion of abstract rational principle or "universal fixed rule" (Hegel, G.W.F.1979), such as the law of noncontradiction. Hegel did not argue that individuals should simply identify with the positive contents of their legal tradition but he requires the individual to assess the rationality of this tradition and in the process, such a tradition should not be compare with any abstract principle or any set of principles. He maintains that philosophy must recover the sense of "solid and substantial being" (Hegel, G.W.F.1979) that the modern spirit has lost. In order to achieve "substantial being", the individual must identify with the ethical judgments of their community as embodied in laws and customs. Hegel sees the community as something that is good for the individual because, according to him, it is only by virtue of this that we can find a deep meaning and substance to our moral beliefs. And since the individual; can only maintain his identify within a society/ culture of a certain kind, he is concerned with this society and interested in having certain activities, institutions, and even some norms in the society flourish (Pitkin, H. 1967). Michael Sandel in his own case holds the view that, an individual cannot be described independently of his life goal and the values which determine them. He argues that every person has been shaped by some life goals, constitutively to the extent that a person cannot adopt a distant attitude towards all possible life goals. So, it is not possible to talk of a subject that is situated and ethically neutral; we can only talk of a radically situated person. Thus, our social circumstances are part of the meaning of our lives. It is not possible to understand the individual apart from the particular social contexts in which he is inevitably embedded.

So, the identity generating life goal, can only be acquired inter-subjectively through cultural socialization. The idea of independent subjects who are isolated from another person is untenable because no matter how distinct a person may be, he must draw the understanding of him from inter-subjective cultural values and orientation. It is not possible to conceive of the human subject as a pre-societal being.

However, what is crucial for the communitarian is that these features of our lives are not chosen by us nor can we detach them from us. They are there already. Macintyre puts it in this way:

We all approach our circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's causing or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, this tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles. These relations thus provide a sort of moral compass; we inherit from our social and traditional context a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations which constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point (Axel, H. 1995).

Our language, heritage, ethnicity and our locality thus encumber us. Our community is part of our life. What is good for my community is good for me. What is good for me has to be good for another person who inhabits these roles; the people in my town are all part of who I am.

In his communitarian discourse, Macintyre has tended to argue against both liberalism's method-logical individualism and the priority it places on individual rights over public goods. Macintyre argue that an individual could not be understand apart from his particular social context "the identities and attributes with which she find herself encumbered her language, her ethnicity, her locality" (Avineru S. and De Shalit. 1996). All the features of our lives are not chosen by us or detachable from us, instead, they are already there, we cannot do without them. But modern liberal life puts that claim under threat, in fact it has led to an erosion of the fact that, we may have unchosen or chosen responsibilities or that we may even 'owe' the community whose tradition and resources have helped make us what we are anything. Macintyre tend to overthrow the liberal capitalist ideology that has dominated the world, both in the realm of ideas and in its manifestations in political and social institutions. He intends to do this by changing the way people think, the way they understand and act in the world. In his effort to show that the changes he wants are possible and desirable he returns to an older conception of morality.

MacIntyre built his moral theory around Aristotle. Aristotle claims that; the basic harmony exists in nature and that species are fixed. An individual human's purpose is attached in achieving or fulfilling the telos or purpose of the species ??MacIntyre, A.1985).

He revises Aristotle's claims and holds that conflict, not harmony, is inevitable in life and the rules of morality emanated from it. In addition, species do not have a fixed, identifiable nature or purpose, each human person engaged in a quest for meaning in life. According to MacIntyre, the life of human person; is a narrative quest for the meaning of his or her life. To engage in the quest is to place oneself within a practice. Purpose in life is not created in a void. To enter a game, an art, a science or to engage in making and sustaining a community is to enter a practice(Alasdair 2005.).

Morality according to him sprang up from practices, individual action are performed on a particular occasion, but are judged in relation to standard. In the process of practice, a situation of teacher and learner exist. MacIntyre, notes that when a learner first start to engage in a practice, he must accept external standards for the evaluation of his performances "a practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievements of goods"(Alasdair 2005). An individual become an apprentice/ learner and with the development of skills, he will be able to locate his place. MacIntyre makes a distinction between the "goods external to and goods internal to a practice" ?? MacIntyre, A.1985). The external goods include, fame, power and wealth. The internal goods also include, the acquisition of a specific skill necessary for a particular practices and the development of those skills. The internal goods are goods for those who are engaged in a practice in a particular country, while the external goods are privately own goods. The more an individual acquire, the less will be left for others. MacIntyre gave a central place to the internal goods and link it with virtue.

Furthermore, MacIntyre believes that politics can only be played effectively in a small community, because politics is more healthy there, that is the reason why he advice us to focus our energies on building and maintaining small communities, where practices and virtue have a place, and also to protect them from depredation of modern state and modern capitalism. "Small communities will also make it possible for people to evaluate political candidates in varieties of setting and judge them on the basis of integrity rather than adaptability"(MacIntyre, A.1999).

In his hermeneutic epistemology, Taylor claims that; man as the self-possessed interpretative capacities assume the centre stage. He holds the view that human beings are self-interpreting animals, which understand and reflect upon the meaning of their lives as well as their relationship with others.

This kind of self-interpretive activity is not based on priori epistemological principles, but on practical knowledge and everyday encounters with cultural framework (MacIntyre, A.1999).

Taylor marks himself as a philosopher of morality by arguing that, interpretation necessarily involves evaluation of moral worth. According to him, "Human beings are not simply self interpreters, but they are the kind of interpreters for whom things matter" (Taylor, C. 1985). Precisely, what matter is worked out as individuals articulate their position within the moral spaces of the society.

Taylor believes in the community, because whatever a man wishes to be can only be accomplished within the community. He sees the community as good because only by virtue of our being members in communities can we find a deep meaning and sustenance to our moral belief. He talks on ethical life and by ethical life, he means, the most fully and immediate identification with the community. That is, ethical life must be "based on or identification with others in a particular common enterprise" (Taylor, C. 1985). It is only through our identification with others within the community that the desired objectives can be attained. That has been the reason why Taylor was against Rawlsian liberalism, because, it rested on an overtly individualistic conception of the self. Rawls argues that, we have a supreme interest in shaping, pursuing, and revising our own life plans, he neglected the fact that the human being is constituted by various command attachments such as a tie to the family and a tie to religious tradition which are so close to the extent that they are only set aside at a great cost.

Furthermore, Taylor attacks the liberal self. In an influential essay entitled 'Atomism', Charles Taylor objected to the liberal view that men are self sufficient outside the society. Instead, Taylor defended the Aristotelian view that "man is a social animals, indeed a political animal because he is not self sufficient alone and in an important sense, he is not self-sufficient outside a polis"). To Taylor, people depended on each other as well as on the community in which they live in order to live a fulfilling life. ??ven and meaning, without this background and meaning, life choices are vulnerable to a nietzschean reduction.

Taylor, in the Source of the Self, eloquently attacks the cult of the self that arose during the sixties, and he explores the illusion that human beings can 'choose' their values, or find their fulfilments simply by enhancing the means of self-expression. Yet the community that he wishes to recommend in place of the old liberal has a decidedly liberal aspect. For example, he defends 'multiculturalism' against the tyranny of majority values, the welfare state against the 'selfishness' of unbridled capitalism, and participatory democracy against the shadow machination of institutional power.

However, Taylor put forward the following proposal. He imagines a cross-cultural dialogue between representatives of various traditions. Instead of arguing for the universal validity of their views, he suggests that the participants should allow for the possibility that their own belief may be mistaken. In this way, according to Taylor, the participants will be able to learn from each others, 'moral universe'. Along the line there will definitely come a point when differences will not be reconciled. Again Taylor himself recognizes the fact that, different

groups, countries, religious communities, and civilizations hold incompatible fundamental views on theology, metaphysics, and human nature.

Taylor argues that a 'genuine unforced consensus' on human rights norms is possible, if only we allow for disagreement on the ultimate justifications of those norms. Instead of defending contested fundamental values when point of resistance is encountered and started condemning those values we do not like in other societies, Taylor said we should try to abstract those beliefs for the purpose of working out an overlapping consensus of human rights norms. As Taylor puts it, "we would agree on the norms while disagreeing on why they were the right norms, and we would be content to live in this consensus undisturbed by the differences of profound underlying belief" (Avineru S. and De Shalit. 1996).

2 III. t Critique of the Communitarians Theorist

In our discussion so far, we have carried out a critical analysis of some communitarian Philosophers such as John Dewey, Fredrick Hegel, Michael Sandel and Macintyre Alasdair, Charles Margrave Taylor. We found out that communitarianism is synonymous with African ways of life because an authentic African is known and identified through his community. We shall now pick them one by one.

It should be noted that Dewey's formula is most difficult to apply to the great community because the self-governing and tightly knit localities of those days are gone. Today, the population is so large that many people may not be ready to participate in the building of any community. Our society is decaying, and our education is not well organized. People think more of themselves than of the community. Furthermore, Dewey fails to recognize the threat that unplanned technological, economic and political development may pose to the future of democracy both in the developed and developing worlds.

It is necessary to note that Hegel's account of trust seems to be inconsistent with his theory of strong identification because individual members of an ethical community do not identify themselves spontaneously with their ethical tradition nor do they necessarily identify with the content of that tradition. It should also be noted that the consequences of accepting any community as constitutive of the self is odd. Members of the community have conflicting desires and ends that can change. And even identifying the boundaries of the community is also difficult. If my talents are to be used for the good of the community because the community is part of me, it remains to be determined how far reaching the community is. In any case, membership in the community changes through death and procreations. On inter subjective view; we are frequently changing and potentially different from moment to moment.

Furthermore, Sandel fails to tell us why it is important that these particular aspects of our identity are inter subjective rather than random. If occupying a given social role can be morally obligatory for me simply because it is an overriding desire of mine, then the question is, could not other fail to give us an account of why these convictions have moral force? The only thing I think is that such convictions can only have psychological force given the fact that human psychology is profoundly shaped by experience. We do not need any moral theory to explain our feelings of attachment to a family or community; what we need is an explanation of why or whether the action we take based on those feelings will be morally acceptable. If no such explanation can be provided, or if the acts are not morally acceptable, then Sandel cannot possibly be advancing a non-liberal theory of rightness.

However, the claims of the communitarians that the features of our lives are not chosen by us or detachable from that and us they are always already there in the individual person may not be attainable because modern life has put that significance under threat. The liberal approach to issues now permeates contemporary civil society to the extent that it has led to an erosion of the sense that we might have unchosen responsibilities and that we might 'owe' something to the community whose traditions and resources have helped make us what we are. People tend to be more individualistic. Today we think of the self-first before other. The Critique of the Communitarians Arguments from an African Perspective he Philips(1993) in his appraisal of communitarian position criticizes Macintyre for "ascribing supreme value to the community itself rather than to its individual members" because the community placed constrain on individual, since the community believe that individual rights are better protected within the community. This constrains has been responsible for a lot of noticeable inadequacies in African societies. But what we are saying is that the individual and the community are very important, there should be a solid band between the individual and the community, all member will have the same basic moral, social and political standing, value and policies will be formulated in a free give and take; it is then that the individual rights can be guaranteed in the community.

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Moreso, Macintyre, places more emphasis on the establishment of small communities, because he thought that, it is the only place where practices and virtue have a place. Beside this, there is more intimate in the communities which truly define human fulfilment and individuality. But there is the possibility that small communities may not be compatible with human fulfilment, that has been the reason why many seek protection from constrains of the small communities in large communities. Evan in today's world many find it more convenient to stay put in the large cities no matter their condition, than coming back to small communities (villages).

Macintyre also faces difficulty with relativism, we find out that he cannot distinguish between evil and good practices; he failed to specify the different categories of standard. In other words, he seems to be giving them

same moral footing, for example, the standard that arises from a charitable organization and the standard that arise from a criminal organization. But the fact is that, not all practices have the same moral footing, Macintyre needs to differentiate the different categories of practices, and the idea of classifying all practices as one delimits his theory.

Taylor's proposal on the universal human rights faces certain difficulties, because it may not be realistic to expect that people will be willing to abstract from the values they care deeply about during the dialogue on human rights. Even when people agree to abstract from culturally specific ways of justifying and implementing norms, the likely outcome is a withdrawal to a highly general abstract realm of agreement that fails to resolve actual disputes over contested rights, for example, the participant in a cross-cultural dialogue can agree on the right not to be subject to cruel and unusual punishment. But a committed Muslim can argue that theft can justifiably be punished by amputation of the right hand while a non Muslim will definitely label this as an example of cruel and unusual punishment.

Taylor is associated with other communitarian political theorists like Michael Walzer and Micheal Sandel, most especially in their critique of liberal theory's of the self. To them, "communitarianism is said to emphasize the importance of social and communal arrangements and institutions to the development of individual meaning and identity" ??Taylor, C.1999). The individual need the society and all the opportunities that are available for the realization of his goals. In his 1991 Massey lectures "The malaise of modernity" ?? Taylor, C.2007). Taylor addressed what he saw as the central problems or "malaises" plaguing modern societies. He argues that traditional liberal theory's conceptualization of individual identity is too abstract, instrumentalist, and one dimensional. For Taylor, theorists like John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin have neglected the individual's ties to the community, because they assigned more value to the individual in the society than the community itself. That is the reason why, Darek Philips in his appraisal of the communitarian position criticizes Charles Taylor for "ascribing supreme value to the community itself rather than to its individual members" ?? Taylor, C. 1991).

With all the sort comings of communitarian as attested to the critique above, one would have thought that probably liberalism would have being the next option. But to an African, the community is the custodian of the individual; hence, he must go where the community goes in spite of his material acquisition. Africans believe that every normal individual has three levels of existence as an individual, as a member of a group and as a member of the community. These three levels are fused together through the belief that all forces are perpetually interacting with one another and inter-penetrating each other. So there is nothing like solitary individual in African society. This is simply because the life of the individual is the life of the whole society, whatever an individual does affects the whole web of social, moral and ontological lives. Anyanwu and Omi have opined that; while the individual strives to satisfy his personal desires, and to develop his abilities he must see all his efforts and aspiration in the light of the whole (Omi, R; and Anyawu, K.C1984). ??biti (1970) has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). The community, according to Pantaleon (1994), therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. Thus in the Yoruba land (a tribe in Nigeria-Africa), no one can stand in an isolation, all are members of a community; to be is to belong, and when one ceases to belong, the path towards annihilation is opened wide. According to Azeez (2005), "When the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, we-feeling is destroyed and kinship bond broken, then the individual sees no meaning in living. In the Yoruba society, everybody is somebody; everyone Volume XVI Issue IV Version I

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has commitment towards the other, and shares in the experience of the other. Yoruba community is so personate with the issue of the source (Orirun eni); the community gives each person belongingness and cultural identity for self-fulfillment and social security. That is why individualism as an ideology and principle may not succeed in Africa. In the words of Steve Biko;

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence, in all we do always place men first and hence all our action is usually community-oriented action rather than the individualism ??Onwubiko, O. A.1988).

At this stage what can one say is the way out? Liberalism cannot work, and the communitarian nature that African is well known of fail to work. The African situation is palpable; the continent of Africa is confronted with numerous challenges which impede their development socially, politically, technologically and economically. These have resulted into; an unending circle of violence with its attendant destruction of lives and properties, abject poverty, devastating diseases, a troop of corrupt leaders as well as a citizenry that has lost total confidence in them. Surely African needs a way out.

5 IV.

6 Conclusion

Therefore, there is the need for African to discard those constraints that have been imprisoned them. To do this, Africans should no longer confine themselves to the narrow context of communal life which puts them under the illusion that communities constitute a "paradise lost". As such there is the need for them to seek their rights; this will enable them to function properly in the global scheme of things. There is also the need for the state as an institution to provide the essential foundation for the pursuit of such public benefits as peace, welfare, and the opportunity for the individual to pursue their own happiness. Africans should stop living in the shadow of the past and move with the world in the new millennium.^{1 2}

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Figure 1:

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