

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE AND THE IDEA OF AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Humans are complex in nature and unlike other non-human beings, they are difficult to comprehend fully at any given time. Throughout known history, philosophers, psychologists and indeed social scientists have made the task of understanding human nature one of their major concerns. For example traditional philosophical concerns such as the apparent conflict between ‘free-will’, determinism and moral responsibility, the nature of consciousness, the origin of language, the basis of values are all issues that weigh into the understanding of human nature. The ordinary person equates human nature with human character and feels that he understand human nature through the character and conduct of the people he meets. However studies especially in African philosophy reveal that in Africa, just like in the West, human are seen as composite beings with defined qualities, the only difference being that in Africa, human nature is better appreciated within the context provided by culture and society. In African context, human nature is seen, not as a static phenomenon with defined characteristics, but as a dynamic expression realized in faithful compliance with established cultural ideals, traditions and values. Thus man is defined in Africa as a cultural being. In this paper, we contend that some aspects of African culture, that is, culture understood in the normative sense as ideal values and rules for living can actually hinder the full expression of human nature and thus make for inauthentic existence, given the fact that authentic existence is better appreciated within the context of the distinction made between a reasoned choice and a blind or unreasoned conformism. We employ hermeneutic method in this paper.

Keywords: Human, Human nature, Authentic Existence, Africa, Culture.

Introduction

Concepts are meant to be clarified if discussions on them are to be meaningful and rewarding. This is very true especially in the case of human nature, due to its inherent complexities. The need for such clarification is borne out of the fact that there are different perceptions about human nature as is evident in different cultures of the world. To buttress this, Bhikhu Parekh (1997:15) opines that “just as the question of whether god exists cannot be discussed, let alone answered, unless we are clear about what we mean by god and exist, the question whether there is a human nature cannot be discussed unless we are agreed on what we mean by human nature”.

Interestingly, the entire history of philosophy presents a very little consensus on the term ‘human nature’, and this no doubt, explains the reasons why discussions on it often seem to lack focus and clarity. Meanwhile, the term, ‘nature’ is clearer to most

people as there seems to be a broad agreement on its meaning. Concerning this, Bhikhu Parekh (ibid) again notes that “some use it (nature) in a descriptive sense to refer to what all human beings can be shown to share in common. For others, it refers to what human beings are ideally capable of becoming. For Some again, to say that a particular tendency is natural to human beings is to say that it determines them to behave in a relevant way. Others take a weaker view of nature and think that the tendency in question only disposes or incline them to behave in a certain manner.”

The above clarifications point to the diversity associated with understanding the subject of human nature. There is therefore the need at this point, to try to explain the meaning of human nature from two perspectives, Western and African, in order to have a meaningful discourse on the subject. We therefore ask: What is human nature?

Human Nature form Western Perspective

The philosophers Aristotle, Rousseau, Descartes, Sartre and Locke, have all played prominent roles in explaining and defining human nature. In them all, the underlying characteristics of the nature of man include consciousness, freedom and autonomy. Aristotle for example, defined man as ‘the rational animal’, by which he meant a living being who possessed consciousness or reason as his specific and more important characteristic. Interestingly, Aristotle’s view on human nature was countered by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his ‘Discourse on the Origin of Inequality’, where he proposed a radically new solution to the problem of knowing human nature. According to Rousseau in Luc Ferry (2010:105):

... animals clearly possessed intelligence, sensibility, even the faculty of communication. Therefore, it is not reason or affectivity, or even language that differentiates the human being. On the contrary, everyone who has a dog knows perfectly well that the dog is more sociable and even more intelligent than in some cases, certain human beings. In terms of sociability and intelligence, we barely differ from animals.

Noteworthy is the fact that Rousseau is not alone in this line of thought, as contemporary ethology, that is, the scientific study of the function and evolution of animal behaviour, has confirmed that there exists a highly developed animal intelligence and affectivity, which in the case of the great apes includes the acquisition of fairly sophisticated language (Luc Ferry, ibid).

Therefore, shifting from Aristotle’s ‘consciousness’ or ‘reason’ as the essence or main component of the nature of man, which differentiates him from animals, Rousseau located the difference in terms of man’s liberty of action, what he called ‘perfectibility’, which in essence means, the capacity to improve oneself over the

course of life-time, unlike the animal which is guided mainly from outset by instinct'. On this matter of animal instinct, Luc Ferry (105 -106) further explains:

... it is common to all members of its species from which it can never really deviate. It is in this respect that the individual animal is deprived both of liberty and of the capacity to improve itself... It is programmed by nature and unlike man, cannot evolve further. Man on the contrary, has the capacity to forge a personal history, whose progress is by definition open-ended and unlimited.

The above submission implies that animals operate within an instinctual framework that condemns them to particular ways of behaving, unlike humans who due to their peculiar condition that gives them liberty of action, a kind of freedom to choose or not to choose, can improve themselves over time. In man, 'the will continues to speak when nature falls silent'. clarifying further Rousseau's distinction between the nature of man and animals, Ferry (107) highlights that "in the case of animals, nature speaks continually and forcibly, so much so that the animal can do nothing but obey this voice. In man it is a certain lack of determination that speaks the loudest".

This however, does not deny the fact that nature do speak also to humans as biologists have continued to remind us. Humans too can be conditioned to act in certain ways by genetic programming, the rule of DNA and of the genome transmitted by our progenitors. Nevertheless, "man can disregard these natural rules and even create a culture which opposes them virtually point by point –as we see in the culture of democracy which tried to thwart the logic of natural selection so as to secure the safety of the weakest" (Ferry, 108).

The summary of the foregoing illustrations is that what we ordinarily call human nature is understood especially by Rousseau and then Sartre in his postulation that 'existence precedes essence' as mere illusion. True human nature is that dynamic realization of one's potentials in liberty of action and choice.

Human Nature from African Perspective

Different languages and cultural groups in Africa with peculiar ideologies, have their metaphysical speculations about the nature of man. The Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria, for example, have their answer when the question 'what precisely makes the human person a person?' is posed. Normally, their answer lies in what they consider the ultimate identity of the human being (*mmadu*), in contradistinction from other beings. For the Igbo, that which when it leaves the body, results in death, lifelessness, corruption and disintegration of the person, is evidently an essential constituent of the human person –and this is the 'spirit' in man. Often, the Igbo would say '*mmadu bu mmuo*' that is, 'man is spirit'. And to the question 'without the spirit, what then is man

(mmadu)?', Iroegbu (1995:353) answers, 'mere body', a non-living body. He is therefore no more a person (mmadu). The spirit, designated as 'mmuo', was with the advent of Christianity in Igbo land, christened 'mkpuruobi' which in turn is used to translate soul. Expatiating further on this notion of 'mkpuruobi', Iroegbu (ibid) avers:

Mkpuruobi literally means 'seed of heart' for obi is heart. Since the heart is in everyone the source of physical life and physical energy, mkpuruobi is used to indicate that most fundamental aspect without which nothing functions.

Furthermore, the Igbo conception of the human person, like the Western conception points to a world-view that perceives the nature of man as unique and distinct from other beings. However, the difference is that from the Igbo (African) standpoint, the starting point of the definition of human nature is not the individual autonomous self, but the social, communal and relational self. For this reason Mbiti (1969:108) had declared: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". Therefore, 'community' is a category that is employed in defining human personality in Africa. To corroborate this assertion, Iroegbu (1995:79) reiterates:

The category of Being –with (Entre- -avec) is now popular in describing the fundamental relatedness that makes the person a person in African thought... The African existence is a relational existence. This is witnessed in his words, tradition and life –in –community.

Continuing, he notes that 'the relatedness is not merely horizontal (among human beings here and now). It is also vertical: with God, the spirits, the departed ones and ancestors' (Iroegbu, Ibid). The above submissions show that it is actually life-in-community, communalism, that defines and determines the human person in Africa. Perhaps, this explains the reason why Ifeanyi Menkiti in Richard Wright (1984:172-174), had written to the effect that:

- i. In the African view, it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory.
- ii. ...the African view supports the notion of personhood as acquired.
- iii. ...as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail...

In Africa, personhood is dynamic; it is not a natural or static phenomenon, but a quality acquired through conscious participation, internalization and commitment to societal norms, values, ethics and ideals. From this perspective therefore, Wiredu

(1998) in Onah (2002:98) submits that “a person in the true sense is not just any human being, but one who has attained the status of a responsible member of society”. Onah in Oladipo (2002) further informs us that “this definition excludes infants, the insane and the social misfits”. Going further on this, Wiredu (1998:139) explains:

To be a person in the fullest sense is to be an adult who works hard, thinks judiciously and is able to support conjugal household as well as fulfill a range of obligations to an extended group of kinfolk and to the civic community at large.

Corroborating the above view, Onah (2002, Ibid) avers:

The qualities associated with a person...thus include the right use of reason, relative success in family and successful adjustment of individual interest to those of the community. This therefore means that ...one cannot be a person without a community and that only those human beings are persons whom the community regards as such.

However, Wiredu (119), who obviously was describing than Akan thought system, noted that the above description of the human person, does not deny the fact that human rights and dignity are respected no matter what. According to him,

There is a strong sense of irreducibility of human dignity in Akan thought. However socially inept an individual may be, he or she still remains a being begotten of a direct gift of God... He or she remains in other words, a human being and as such deserving of a certain basic respect and sympathy.

The above submission can only be accepted with a pinch of salt. One may agree with Wiredu that the African society in general does not work to suppress human rights and dignity, but the question that agitates the mind always is: how does the African society perceive individuals who in trying to express their individuality and self-determination, choose alternative values that are not in agreement with established cultural values, and which they believe will help in the realization of their potentials? Here your guess is as good as mine, as instances abound of people who were banished from their communities because they exercised their liberty of action in choosing values not acceptable by the community, but which however enhance their potentials for independent and more productive existence.

Again, we have seen instances where, Africa being a patriarchal society, had nurtured the existence of various structures of oppression and subjugation especially against women. Mmadike (2014:99) for instance, tells us or perhaps reminds us that:

In the Igbo society for instance, sexist proverbs strongly stipulate that women are in all spheres of life inferior to men; justifying male power and traditional gender roles. This hostile sexism against women is evident in Igbo proverbs that maintain traditional prejudice against women. An instance is the assertion: O buru na nwanji asi na ya na nwoke ha, ya nyulie amiri elu (if a woman claims equality with man, let her urinate upwards).

The proverb above draws attention to the notion that if women claim equality with men, they must be able to do all that men do. Here, the fact that man stands erect while urinating is used to pose a challenge to the women-folk simply because they cannot do so due mainly to natural biological constraints.

Human Nature and Authentic Existence in Africa

Existentialist philosophers have articulated ideas and concepts in description of man and his existence. One of such is Martin Heidegger's concept of authentic existence, where he classified human existence into authentic and inauthentic. This classification is a philosophical attempt at showing the dual dimensions of human existence, and the fact that the ability to distinguish between the two manifestations of human existence, is a necessary requirement for authentic living. Heidegger tries to explain that to be authentic is to be one's own self rather than imitation of some other – a social group, family, institution and so on. Inauthentic existence implies a condition according to which man exists without the capability for independent decisions, conforming instead to practices, habits, conventions and customs that determine relative cultural conditions. The authentic condition, on the contrary, implies resoluteness in assuming the ability to make one's own choices and decision. Therefore, the issues of freedom, responsibility and choice are pivotal in living authentic life. Authentic existence is expressed in conscious exercise of freedom and responsibility. Freedom is a necessary condition for self-affirmation and discovery which define authentic existence. C.E Ekwutosi (2003:81-82) tells us that freedom is:

... the power of an intelligent being to act or not to act, to act this way or another way, without compulsion from within or coercion from without. It is precisely this freedom that makes his action essentially different from the operation of irrational beings that merely

respond to stimuli and are conditioned by sensory objects.

The above exposition, poses a serious question as to the type of life lived in African communities characterized as communitarian in nature and requiring a high level of conformity to set standards. African communal existence describes a kind of life embedded in a cultural context, which limits the full expression of freedom of choice and requires a very high level of conformism in order for one to be accepted as truly a human person. This is the tragedy of the much touted African communalism. Perhaps in view of this obvious scandal of African Communalism, C.B Guignon (1999:318-319) had warned that:

The embeddedness of our existence in a cultural context
explains our inveterate tendency toward inauthenticity.
as we become initiated into the practices of our community,
we are inclined to drift along with the crowd, doing
what 'one' does, enacting stereotyped roles, and thereby
losing our ability to seize on and define our own lives.

The whole philosophy of existentialism can be described as humanism, which in essence means that humanity is expressed in the choices we make. As a matter of fact, I have the right and the freedom to stand out of the crowd and express my unique individuality as long as I know the imitations of my freedom and the consequences of my choices. This is the essence of human existence and the meaning of authentic existence. And this is one fact that needs to be embraced by many Africans who see personality as unreasoned and blind conformism to cultural prescriptions and ideals no matter how inimical those prescription and ideals are to authentic human living.

S.A Kolawole (2018), was right in saying that, there is a need to balance between the communal understanding of life, which is part of the African heritage and the individuality of the human persons. Going further, he emphasizes that:

Those who have blazed the trail, made discoveries and
extended the frontiers of knowledge have been people who
dared to be different, those who think at the same level
with the crowd cannot rise above the crowd, nor make
significant impact on their generation.

Furthermore, the African deterministic view of life is a negative dividend of our communal heritage. Unfortunately, this view of life has hindered the full potentials of many Africans and changed the course of their lives. Many African communities like the Yoruba for instance, show a sufficient proof of their belief in individual responsibility. However, B. Adebola (2006:81) had rightly observed that:

...there is also ample evidence that the Yoruba believe
that each individual person is predestined in that her
life course has been predetermined by factors and forces

over which she does not have much control in life.

Unfortunately, this aspect of African communal belief has encouraged an uncritical view of life and has not promoted the ideals of authentic existence expressed in reasoned beliefs and decisions.

Conclusion

In as much as African communities promote the expected brotherhood in communalism and expect to have individuals whose ways of life are in total agreement with established societal behavioral patterns, they must not de-emphasize the need for a culture that promotes a more critical analysis of issues, expressed in rich debates, alternative view-points and critical evaluation of aspects of human existence. African cultural practices should be reviewed in ways possible, to see how our handling of them affects the individual, his independence, his creativity and his freedom. In effect, African culture should be founded on a concern for the individual and his right to fulfillment. This is the only measure that can guarantee authentic human existence in Africa and make for the much desired development in Africa.

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