Kwame Gyekye

Analysis of text

In view of the different approaches to the problem of personhood and community in African thought, Gyekye finds it necessary to clarify some commonalities and differences among the different approaches within communitarianism, thus opening the way for further debate in this area. Although Gyekye focuses his analysis on Menkiti’s ideas he pauses to consider the ideas of those he calls radical communitarians, such as Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere. Gyekye does not consider the community as the alpha and omega in determining personhood. Without playing down the importance of the community, Gyekye brings into the debate the problem of rights. His primary concern is with the space that is given to the human person for the exercise of his or her individual rights within the terrain of communitarianism. He examines the question of rights in relation to duties.

So, let us first look at Menkiti’s ideas. The picture Menkiti paints about the relationship between the community and the individual, forms the basis of Gyekye’s criticism of Menkiti. As far as Gyekye is concerned, “Menkiti maintains that the African view asserts the ontological primacy, and hence the ontological independence, of the community”. According to Menkiti, the African view supports the following notions: (1) “it is the community that defines the person as person”; (2) “personhood is acquired”; (3) “personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed”; (4) “personhood is something at which individuals could fail”.

Gyekye critiques Menkiti’s way of examining personhood in African thought – in which the primary focus is on the community as opposed to the individual – as unnecessarily overemphasised. In Gyekye’s opinion, emphasis is done at the expense of many other equally important human features.

One of Gyekye’s main concerns is the risk of failing to see the bigger picture if everything is narrowed down to the community. According to Gyekye, Menkiti’s approach makes the community an all-powerful structure in such a way that anybody who functions outside it may run the risk of being punished by failure to achieve personhood. Gyekye’s concerns become clear when he writes:

A person is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but he/she is by nature other things as well (i.e. a person possesses other essential attributes). Failure to recognise this may result in pushing the significance and implications of a person’s communal nature beyond their limits, an act that would in turn result in investing the community with an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all things about the life of the individual person. One might thus easily succumb to the temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person, and thus obfuscating our understanding the real nature of the person.
Menkiti attempts to show the acquisition of personhood in African thought by referring to the use of the neutral pronoun “it” to refer to children and new-borns, but not to adults.

Here Gyekye criticises him on the point that he has not investigated how the neutral pronoun “it” is used in a number of African languages. According to Gyekye, it is Menkiti’s hasty attempt to show that children and new-borns are not persons yet (the community has not yet conferred personhood on them) that makes him use a non-African language (English) as the basis of his argument. He further points out that if Menkiti had examined how the neutral pronoun “it” functions in some African languages, he would not have arrived at the above conclusion. In Menkiti’s attempt to consolidate his argument about acquisition of personhood, he argues that “the relative absence of ritualized grief over the death of a child in African societies” further proves that the community does not confer personhood on a child. Menkiti points to the elaborate burial ceremony and ritualised grief following the death of an older person in African societies as a counterexample. The reason for the reaction being so different in the two cases is that the community has already conferred personhood status on the older person.

However Gyekye rejects Menkiti’s point of view, stating different reasons for elaborate burial practices when older people die. Gyekye refers to the Akan people, who believe excessive demonstrations of grief over the death of a child may result in (1) the mother becoming infertile or (2) the dead child being driven away, thus inhibiting reincarnation and rebirth. Gyekye states his rejection of Menkiti’s approach as follows:

... no distinctions as to personhood can be made on the basis of the nature and extent of ritualized grief over the death of a child or of an older person. A human person is a person whatever his/her age or social status. Personhood may reach its full realization in community, it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he/she, qua person, becomes the subject of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he/she cannot be defined by what he/she acquires. One is person because of what one is, not because of what one has acquired.

The above citation shows that Menkiti’s attempt to portray personhood in African thought as “processual” does not hold. Remember that for Menkiti personhood “is not given simply because one is born of human seed”. Now, by arguing that children and new-borns go through the “process” of becoming persons, Menkiti denies personhood to children and new-borns But as Gyekye argues, a human person is a person regardless of age. In short, Gyekye rejects the processual view of personhood. According to Gyekye, some morally important expressions in the Akan language – for example “He (or she) is not a person” – are intended to suggest that an individual has failed to show the expected moral virtues in his or her conduct.
As Gyekye argues, these expressions suggest “a conception of moral personhood; a person is defined in terms of moral qualities or capacities: a human person is a being who has a moral sense and is capable of making moral judgements”.

But Gyekye believes this conception of a person does not nullify the case of children or infants as persons. The fact that children or infants are not yet considered as moral agents does not rule out the fact that “they are morally capable in potentiality”. As children grow, they reach a stage in their lives when they become moral agents and are capable of making moral judgments. Taking moral capacities as a point of departure in explaining personhood does not necessarily imply that the community confers personhood, warns Gyekye. As he points out, the community plays a limited role in a person’s moral life because moral capacities are not conferred by the community.

One of the issues on which Gyekye does not agree with Menkiti is that personhood is something at which individuals could fail. For Gyekye it is not personhood, but social status, at which individuals could fail. One of the main goals of Gyekye’s essay is to dispel the myth that in an African setting, human persons have no lives of their own. Despite being “a communitarian being by nature, the human person is, also by nature, other things as well”. For Gyekye, the human person has rationality which gives him/her the opportunity to make moral judgments. Therefore the human person is capable of choice. Because individual persons are born within a communal structure does not necessarily mean they cannot question some of its practices. The capacity to assert themselves gives them the opportunity to question and even to reject some practices.

In clarifying this point further, Gyekye argues as follows: The development of human, that is communal culture, results from the exercise by individual persons of this capacity for self-assertion; it is this capacity which makes possible the intelligibility of autonomous individual choice of goals and life plans.

Gyekye’s approach – a restricted or moderate communitarianism – gives a comprehensive account of the self as a communal as well as an autonomous being. Gyekye regards himself as a moderate communitarian thinker, because for him personhood is not entirely “defined by membership of the community”. According to Gyekye, the moderate or restricted communitarianism recognises the self as “a communal being and as an autonomous, self-determining, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice”.

The moderate view differs from Menkiti’s view, because the latter gives the community “an all-engulfing moral authority that determines all things about the life of the individual person”. In his discussion on the doctrine of rights, Gyekye argues that there is a place for rights in moderate communitarianism. This idea comes into play because “rights belong primarily and irreducibly to individuals; a right is a right of some individual”. For Gyekye “the respect for human dignity, a natural or fundamental attribute of the person which cannot, as such, be sat nought by the
communal structure, generates regard for personal rights”. Gyekye explicitly points out that radical communitarianism does not allow for rights because it gives priority to the community over the individual person. But in the case of moderate communitarianism, recognition of the self as “an autonomous, self-determining entity capable of evaluation and choice and as a communal being” shows that it would be immoral not to allow rights. Gyekye is of the idea that the community’s cultural development and success rests on the realisation that it is important to allow for the exercise of individual rights.

These are some of the reasons that motivate Gyekye to consider moderate communitarianism as a viable option as compared with radical communitarianism. But despite its recognition for individual rights, the communitarian structure also focuses attention on other communal values for the good of society as a whole. As Gyekye points out, communitarianism will not separate “rights from the common values of the community ... conferring on them a pre-eminent status”. Therefore Gyekye argues that “in the communitarian political morality, priority will not be given to rights if doing so will stand in the way of attaining a more high ranked value or a more preferable goal of the community”. At this stage it becomes clear that rights will always have a place in the communitarian theory, although they will not be held as absolute.

As we have already noted, Gyekye states that communitarianism will not give priority the individual rights. But he is emphatic that “duties that individual members have or ought to have toward others will be given priority”. The doctrine of duties becomes clear when Gyekye writes: Concerned, as it is, with the common good or the communal welfare, the welfare of each and every member of the community, communitarianism will, perhaps undoubtedly, consider duty as the moral tone, as the supreme principle of morality. By “duty” I mean task, service, conduct, or function that a person feels morally obligated to perform in respect of another person or other persons. The duties, which some members of the community feel they owe others by reason of our common humanity and should demonstrate in practice, are such as the duty to help others in distress, the duty not to harm others, and so on. The success of communitarianism in advancing duties such as caring for one another will depend, to a greater extent, on not being obsessive about individual rights, argues Gyekye. An individualistic system like the Western system does practise the above duties, but with less success – because the system itself is, according to Gyekye, obsessed with individual rights. Responding to the question why duties are given priority over rights, Gyekye takes the position that this is required by “the demands of the relational character of the person in the wake of his [sic] natural sociality”. Gyekye explains further when he writes:

*The sociality of the person immediately makes him/her naturally oriented to other persons with whom he/she must live in relation. Living in relation with others directly involves a person in social and moral roles, duties, obligations, and commitments which the individual person must fulfil. The natural relationality of the person thus immediately*
plunges him/her into a moral universe, making morality an essentially social and trans-individual phenomenon focused on the well-being of others. Our natural sociality then prescribes or mandates a morality that, clearly, should be weighted on duty, i.e. on that which one has to do for others. One of the priorities of the communitarian structure is to promote communal living.

As Gyekye maintains, the success of communal living depends on the realisation of each community member that he or she has the moral responsibility to actively care for the needs of others. This care has to show itself when members of the community pursue their duties. Gyekye says that “the social and ethical values of social well-being, solidarity, interdependence, cooperation, compassion, and reciprocity ... primarily impose on the individual a duty to the community and its members”. He seems to adopt Kant’s ethical approach, who encourages the carrying out of duty for duty’s sake. Gyekye states that you should carry out your duty not because someone has a right against you, but because you consider the person worthy of moral consideration.

As we have already shown, communitarianism embraces rights – which alone should indicate that, by prioritising duties over rights, communitarianism does not imply rights are not important. Gyekye is emphatic that

... in the light of the overwhelming emphasis on duties within the communitarian moral framework, rights would not be given priority over the values of duty and so would not be considered inviolable or indefeasible: it might on this showing, be appropriate occasionally to override some individual rights for the sake of protecting the good of the community itself.

The emphasis on duty does not imply that one should focus on caring for the needs of others without considering one’s own needs. Communitarianism encourages striking a balance between your needs and the needs of others.