The Concept of Person in African and Chinese Philosophies: A Comparative Inquiry

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Abstract

What or who is a person in traditional African communalistic societies and in ancient Chinese Confucian thought system? In response to the question, the paper is a critical analysis of the concept of person/individual in African and Chinese philosophies. In particular, it examines the ontological and normative underpinnings of the concept of person or the individual within the context of African and Chinese traditions. As a cross-cultural exercise, the paper brings to focus some existential issues surrounding the varied perspectives of the human person in those traditions. It aims at establishing some theoretical premises or grounds on which one might appreciate the similarities and differences between African and Chinese traditional cultures. The paper adopts the analytic and expository method of philosophy.

Keywords: Traditional African Philosophy, Ancient Chinese Philosophy, Communalism, Confucianism, Person

1. Introduction

Over the years, works in African and Oriental philosophies have had to contend for recognition as authentic philosophy in the face of the biased Eurocentric claim that only works in the Western philosophical tradition are truly so. In other words, Western philosophy has for long served as the sole yardstick for determining the philosophic content of other acclaimed philosophies in the African and in the Eastern worlds.

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The consequence of this experience is that Africa and the Eastern world has suffered from lack of a desirable holistic cross-cultural understanding of the varied philosophies of the world.

With shared experience of underestimation and denigration, African and Chinese philosophies, like other similar philosophies, are persistently on edge to defend, invent and re-invent their authenticity and relevance. And the most plausible, probable way to do this in the circumstance is to always discuss and examine concept(s), issue(s), doctrine(s) and method(s) vis-à-vis those in Western philosophy. This sort of intellectual mood or temper is evident in several works and writings in African and Chinese studies, including, for example, the preface to *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* where JeeLoo Liu (2006:xii) argues:

> In the Western world, Chinese philosophy has often been misrepresented as "non-philosophy," as a form of religion. Two leading schools of thought in Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Daoism, are often taught as part of the curriculum of *World Religion*. But Chinese philosophy is not simply a way of living, a doctrine inviting believers or followers. It has its cosmological speculations, ethical principles, epistemo-logical arguments and its methodology. It challenges thinkers to build on philosophical assumptions and to engage in philosophical debates. In comparison to Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy is based on different metaphysical assumptions and it takes different approaches to deal with the same social and moral concerns.

Similar intellectual effort characterizes Mark Elvin's "Between the earth and heaven: conceptions of the self in China," in which Elvin (1985:157) argues:

> Mauss also denies China any historical development.
> Its culture, he says, "conserved the notions of archaic times."
> On the contrary, as in the West, older strata were constantly being overlaid and metamorphosed even destroyed altogether.

African philosophy is not different in that it is replete with similar sentiments of defensive philosophy. A classic example is contained in Joseph Omoregbe's "Africa Philosophy: Yesterday and Today", perceived as a ground-breaking philosophical essay in defense of African philosophy. In the essay Omoregbe (1998:4) argues:

> Human nature and human experience are basically the same all over the world, and the tendency to philosophize is part of human nature. Hence the German philosopher Karl Jaspers says that 'man cannot avoid philosophizing.' In a certain sense, that is, in a loose sense, everyman at one time or another in the course of his life reflects on some of the fundamental philosophic questions about human life or about the physical universe…However, in the strict sense of the word, a philosopher is one who devotes a good deal of his time reflecting on these questions and who frequently and habitually does this. There are such people over the world; they are found among all peoples, in all civilizations and in every part of the globe. It is not only in the Western world that men reflect on the fundamental questions about human life or about the universe .

It is this archetype defensive philosophy that has influenced and shaped in significant way the volume of works and writings in African and Chinese philosophies.

This paper[1] is a significant departure from this tradition of philosophy cast in mode of the West-and-the Others. While reference is made to Western philosophy where it is intellectually fruitful and absolutely necessary to do so, the focus of the paper is on African and Chinese philosophies as it relates to the concept of person. In this sense, the paper attempts to mitigate the obvious gap of cross-cultural understanding presently evident between other philosophies beside Western philosophy. In particular, it critically examines the idea of person in its ontological and normative underpinnings, using the traditional African thought (African communalism), and ancient Chinese philosophy as represented in Confucianism as its discursive paradigms.

The paper underscores the fact that while the question about the nature of person is universally a fundamental question, its description and interpretation vary from one philosopher to another and from one culture to another.

As a cross-cultural exercise, the paper brings to sharp focus traditional Africa's vis-à-vis ancient China's varied conceptions, descriptions and interpretations of the fundamental issue of person in existential philosophizing. The aim in the final analysis is to come to terms with some theoretical premise(s) upon which some possible convergence(s) and divergence(s) can be established as a way of understanding and appreciating what it means to be person in Africa and China. While there is obvious divergence in their ontological account, African and Chinese philosophies, the paper concludes, are homologous in the conclusion that normative elements (human dignity or virtues) are crucial defining elements of person. In other words, a person lacking in moral worth and integrity is less than a person, and is at best not better than a beast.

The paper is organized under four sections. Section one is devoted to the critical analysis of the general idea of person in Africa. In doing this, the section reviews some conceptions of person in African philosophy in order to engender a general African sense of what it means to be called "person". Section two considers the Chinese perspective on person with a similar aim of crystallizing the general Chinese sense of the ideal person. Section three highlights areas of convergence(s) and divergence(s) between African view of person and that of Chinese's for possible comparison. Section four concludes the paper.

2. Person in African World

Since the publication of Fr. Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (1949), perceived somewhat as 'a recreation of a traditional African metaphysics', there has been increasingly a barrage of works and writings,[2] devoted to analysis of who is a person in African traditional thought systems.

Resulting from the increasing volume of works and writings is a plethora of conceptions of person to such degree that the number of philosophical theory of person is close if not equal to the number of societies or cultures in Africa. This brings to fore the question of the desirability or otherwise of the appropriation of unanimist prefix 'African' to draw generalization about obvious diverse peoples in terms of worldview or culture.

In other words, there is possible objection(s) of the use of the appellation 'African' to make generalization; for more than 3000 ethnic groups of people with obvious differences in their thoughts, mode of production and world-views.

Notwithstanding the perceived variations in African cultures, works on African history, anthropology, archaeology, religion and philosophy are replete with notorious facts of sufficient significant similarities and relative unanimity in the thought systems of Africans. Femi Otubanjo (1989:15) argues that there are unifying elements in the beliefs and ideas of the innumerable social groups in Africa to enable them to be identified as being one genre.

This paper argues to show that one such idea or belief on which generalization of a sort can be made about Africans is the concept of person. The reason is that from the whole gamut of varied conceptions of person, it is less a contested issue that a person in the African world is both a normative and metaphysical being. To speak about the normative aspect is to argue that being a person in African world is beyond a descriptive reference to certain biological constituents. This means that in Africa, a person is not defined or discussed by referring to the natural sciences, but to traditional and everyday opinions as they can be found in oral traditional and ordinary language, especially in proverbs (Kimmerle, 2008:508). Ifeanyi Menkiti (2006:236) explains that the approach to person in African traditional thought is generally speaking a maximal, or more exacting, approach, insofar as it reaches for something beyond such minimalist requirements as the presence of consciousness, memory, will, soul, rationality, or mental function. This point of view is further stressed in Tempels' (1959) concept of *Muntu. Muntu* literarily means 'the human person'. Here, Tempels emphasizes the fact that the question of being a person within the African traditional framework stretches beyond the raw capacities of the isolated individual and the simple reference to individuals considered as crude existents (ibid).

Implicit in all this is the fact that one may be biologically qualified in terms of having body, consciousness, memory, will, soul, rationality, mental functions and so on, yet not recognized or considered person in typical African setting. Little wonder it is not uncommon to hear Africans describe someone who may be biologically qualified to be a person as "not a person" or "not a human being."

For instance, among the Owan, [3] like other Africans, an individual may be referred to as "not a person" if his or her conduct is considered repulsive and at variance with the values and norms of the family, the clan and the community.

Further illustration can clarify this point of view. In traditional African setting a wayward son or daughter is often referred to as "not a child." In Owan dialect or lexicon it is said: *'omo kor'* or *'oiwor-omon,'* meaning "he or she is not a child." To pass such moral judgment does not suggest that the child is suffering from some psycho-physical disability, rather it is that he or she is suffering from some moral amnesia. By this we mean that he or she has acted or behaved contrary to acceptable norms and values. Such shortcoming or misdemeanor may include disrespect for the elderly, refusal to perform domestic assignment such as washing of plates, cooking, sweeping and cleaning of house. It could also include, in some cases, refusal to marry in time. It could also be that he or she refuses to participate in communal duties. The elderly ones are also expected to live up to expectation of the family, the clan and the community, failing which they may be disregarded as person.

The degree of respect for and observance of one's communal norms and values is crucial to one's essence as person to the extent that the achievement of personhood in the final analysis depends on one's ability to use communal norms to guide one's actions. In this sense, Menkiti argues that the notion of an individual who is not shaped by his community, its norms, and interests does not make sense in African cultures (Quoted in Ikuenobe, 2006).

It is for this reason that a person in Africa is (so properly) defined in relation to community. This point of view is less contested among scholars and philosophers of African studies. Levy-Bruhl, John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, Menkiti and several others agree that community or group solidarity is the defining element of person in Africa. Levy-Bruhl, the master of racist theory of 'primitive Africans,' underscores the depth of communal underpinning in the whole idea of person in Africa. He argues that the individual is apprehended only by virtue of his being an element of the group of which he is a part, which alone is the true unit (Quoted in Lienhardt, 1985:144).

In the words of John Mbiti (1969:108):

> The individual owes his existence to other people. He is simply part of the whole… whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am."

Wiredu has this to say:

> The integration of individuality into community in African traditional society is so thoroughgoing that, as is too rarely noted, the very concept of a person has a normative layer of meaning. A person is not just an individual of human parentage, but also one evincing in his or her projects and achievements an adequate sense of social responsibility (Quoted in Bell, 2002:63).

In form of summary to all that have been said, Menkiti argues that a person's identity in Africa is impliedly part of a thoroughly fused collective 'we'. He further argues:

> The community's interest involves the interests and responsibilities of individuals, because without the community, one is nothing but a dangling and socially disembodied metaphysical entity. Such a "dangling person" is not able to apply communal norms to guide his conduct for personal interests and communal needs; he is not truly a person in the African view (Quoted in Ikuenobe, 2006).

The communal concept of person so formed is an essential part of what is variously referred to as "collectivist philosophy," "philosophy of we," or "African communalism" in African scholarship. Communalism in this sense refers to the idea that community values take precedence over individual values to the extent that the welfare of the individual must be seen from the standpoint of the welfare of the community, since the individual cannot exist without the community.

In the contrary, some scholars and philosophers including Godfrey Lienhardt and Fredric Jameson have argued that the so-called 'collectivist philosophy' or 'philosophy of we' is not completely a true reflection of African life, given that it portrays Africa as a communal enclave, lacking not only in personal self but laying too much on collectivism in interpretations of African thought. In particular, Lienhardt (1985:145) argues that much of what has been written about African ideas of self, rightly putting to the fore the importance of a person's group and status-the public self- for defining what and who he or she is, can deflect interest from the African concern for the personal self and autonomy.

Similarly, Fredric Jameson raises the question about possible denial of individual subjectivity in collectivist philosophy.

He argues that in such philosophy, the story of individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the pubic and the "individual is seen as situational and materialistic despite itself, and where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" (Quoted in Hui, 2000:232).

The concern here is that the collectivist orientation of African ideas is overemphasized to the extreme that it is used to justify the thesis that there is no sense of personal self, inwardness and autonomy in African reality. What Lienhardt and Jameson are saying is that it is a mistake to think so.

Following Lienhardt, Kwame Gyeyke (1997:54) argues for moderate communitarianism. Defined in broad terms, moderate communitarianism means that a person is only partly constituted by the community. Gyeyke maintains that the individual cannot be fully absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus as implied by the collectivity philosophy. The reason, he argues, is that "he or she can to some extent wriggle out of it, distance his or herself from it, and thus be in a position to take a critical look at it; it means, also, that the communal structure cannot foreclose the reality and meaningfulness of the quality of self-assertiveness that the individual can demonstrate in his or her actions" (Ibid).

The argument here is that communalism is not consisting in complete loss of the personal self. Rather, the proviso often frequently emphasized is that while recognition is granted individual autonomy, it should not override that of community. In other words, it is true that the individual has his individuality, his volition, and his personal identity within the community, but as Richard Bell (2002:64) rightly say: "to hold the value of the priority of community does not necessarily deny an individual of his own identity, his potential creative role in a community, nor does it absolve he personal responsibility for his actions toward the whole community."

What is clearly defined, therefore, is that in Africa a person may possess his inwardness but cannot so properly be regarded as person in isolation of communal ethos or norms of community he or she belong. This encapsulates the normative meaning of person in Africa.

Ontologically speaking, however, Africans consider someone to be a person based on his or her biological or metaphysical make-up.

Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006) argues that the normative perspective is dependant on the metaphysical in that we cannot claim to be successful in the normative if the descriptive metaphysical is not satisfactorily considered. The descriptive metaphysical approach embodies analysis of essential ontological make-up of person. It seeks to answer interrelated questions about whether a person is essentially material or immaterial or both. It is also concerned with the problem of mind - body dichotomy and the relationship between them.

Segun Gbadegesin, John Oniamhwo, and Kwame Gyekye are among scholars and philosophers who render metaphysical explanation or account of person in Africa. A theoretical survey of their respective accounts will help to throw light on the African ontological characterization of human person. Gbadegesin (1998) explains that among the Yoruba[4] a person is called *eniyan*. In the Yoruba's scheme, *eniyan* or person is made up of four elements, namely *Ara*, *Okan*, *Emi* and *Ori*. *Ara* is the human body comprising all physical-material parts like the head-*ori*, neck- *orun*, trunk – *iyoku ara;* all of which form the aspect of human entity that is perceptible by sense and described analytically in anatomical terms (Ademuleya, 2007: 213). In Yoruba rendering the *Okan* is a physical organ which serves a dual function of circulating blood as well as serving as a source of emotional and psychic reactions (Kaphagawan, 2006:334). The *Emi* is nonphysical and is described as the principle of life, the life-giving element put in place by the deity (Gbedegesein, 1998:153).

Similarly, among the Etsako[5] a person is called *Oya*. Person or *oya* is said to be a combination of body and soul. The body is called *egbe,* comprising *uso* (head), *Oregbe* (truck), *abo* (hands), *aghwu* (stomach) and *awe* (legs). John Onimhawo (2000:86) argues that the *uso* (head) is considered to be the most important part because on it depends the other parts for their existence. The *uso* or head is also perceived as the centre of coordination and the place from which the functioning of the whole *egbe* (body) is controlled. However, Onimhawo's analysis does not explain how and through what means the coordination is done or carried out. But he further argues that blood is called *orai* and is regarded by the Etsako as the vital element that sustains human life. According to him, the physical parts of the person (body) work in unity and are equally important because they perform different roles in the coordination of the living process of person or *oya*. Beyond the body or physical elements is the soul which is in two types with different names and connotations.

Onimhawo argues that the first sense of soul is called *oye*, meaning 'breath' or a reference to the whole mechanism of breathing. The absence of breath signifies death among the Etsako. Onimhawo further argues that "when the Etsako say *'oige ye'* (his breath has stopped), this means that the person is dead" (Ibid: 88). The second word or sense of soul is called *oreghe*. *Oreghe* is regarded as the essence of being, the personality soul, and the vital principle.

Among the Akan of Ghana a person is a composite of three primary elements, namely, *nipuda* (body), *Okra* (life-giving entity), and *Sunsum* (that which gives a person's personality). Anthony Appiah (2004:28) summarizes the Asante version in the following quotation:

> A person consists a body (*nipadua*) made from the blood of the mother (*the mogya*); an individual spirit, the *Sunsum*, which is the main bearer of one's personality; and a third entity, the *Okra*. The *Sunsum* derives from the father at conception. The *Okra*, a sort of life force, departs the body only at the person's last breath; is sometimes, as with Greeks and the Hebrews, identified with breath; and is often said to be sent to a person at birth, as the bearer of one *nkrabea*, or destiny, from *Nyame*. The *Sunsum*, unlike the *Okra*, may leave the body during life and does so, for example, in sleep dreams being thought to be the perceptions of person's *Sunsum* on its night peregrinations.

Since the *Sunsum* is a real entity, dreaming that you have committed an offence is evidence that you have committed it, and, for example, a man who dreams that he has had sexual intercourse with another man's wife is liable for the adultery fees that are paid for day time offences.

There are other several metaphysical accounts of person in Africa. This paper does not claim to exhaust all the theories. Suffice it to say that a detailed analysis of the various ontological conceptions of person in Africa will reveal some complexities and controversies, especially as it relates to the nature of the constituent elements of person and their linguistic significations or equivalents. Such difficulty or complexity is not just between societies or cultures, but in some cases within the same culture or worldview. Of particular source of dispute is 'soul' and its proper nature. In other words, while it is less a contested issue that most Africans, if not all, define person ontologically in terms of 'body' and 'soul' 'material' and 'spiritual', there exist some disagreement among thinkers and philosophers about the nature and appropriate linguistic translation of the term "soul" as a distinct entity. There is also the question about how many 'souls' a person possesses.

More so, there is the unresolved question about whether Africa's conception of person, in the final analysis, is of a dual or tripartite nature. Even the relationship between soul, breath and body is not clearly defined. For example, what can we say is the clear relationship between mind and body, having agreed that person exists in two different constituent entities? Lienhardt (1985:148) argues that in Dinka traditional thought, the breath/life comes from and in some way returns to God, but otherwise little resembles the 'soul', understood as a ghostly counterpart of the living person, the 'ghost' in the machine' as Ryle called it, which atheists as well as theists could imagine to be morally good or bad, and doctrinally consigned to heaven or hell. What he is saying, in other words, is that a person has a body which is animated by breath/life, but that body and breath are not in apposition as 'body and soul' are in English. Is contradiction not implied here? What is the clear-cut connection and relation between these two entities? Granted that the soul, breath, life or whatever it is called has its distinct ontological status, what is its status in relation to the body? Is the soul diametrically opposed to the body or they are different but in unison?

The general African explanation seems to point to the fact that the relation between the soul and the body is so close that they comprise an indissoluble or indivisible unity. Yet Africans cannot hold the theory of the unity of soul and body, given that it involves the impossibility of the doctrine of disembodied survival or life after death, which they strongly believe and tenaciously hold (Gyekye, 1998:63). Indeed, the belief in life after death is notoriously pervasive in all African cultures or societies. Mbiti (1969:157) argues, for instance, that belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies. Similarly, Kwasi Wiredu (1992:142) says "this life is a preparation for the next but not only that; it is a waiting for the next. That still is not all; the very meaning of life consists in the fact that there is a next one."

Apart from the foregoing, the appropriate nature of *emi* is a source of disputation among the Yoruba. While some argue that it has an immaterial and independent existence, others maintain that it is merely a principle or force which brings about various activities and actions in human beings without itself being an entity. In the Akan thought, the term *Okra* is unclear and also a contested issue given that Wiredu and Gyekye, for example, are locked in ontological and translation problematic about the nature of *Okra* and what it represents, connotes or means in English.

While Wiredu argues that *Okra* should not be translated as 'soul' on the grounds that in Western philosophy the term refers to a purely immaterial entity that somehow inhabits the body; Gyekye in the contrary says the *Okra* can be considered as the equivalent of the concept of the soul in other metaphysical systems. To be sure, Gyekye (1998:65) argues that *Okra* can correctly be used as "soul" in English.

The question about the nature of soul is made complex by a situation where in some African societies the "soul" is associated with more than two distinguishable spiritual forces in a person like what obtains among the Etsako. Some scholars are not sure and certain about the number of 'souls' in a person as evidently contained in *African Traditional Religion,* where Imasogie, O. (1982:57) argues that "man has what may be called a tripartite soul consisting of life-force, personality and alter-ego sometimes called "guardian genius". Others see more than five components of man's soul but I believe that they all can be reduced to three in order to avoid duplication." Lienhardt (1985:147) argues that some African peoples have ideas of a soul-body dichotomy analogous to that which is generally assumed in Christian Europe, but differing from it, importantly, in allowing for the presence of several distinct 'souls' in each person.

Ademuleya (2007:213) points out that while for some it is 'ego' or 'soul stuff', 'man's double' or 'over soul', others do not have a word for describing what others term the soul. D.A Masolo's (2006:101) argument buttresses this point of view further. In his analysis of the Luo idea of what happens when one dies, Masolo argues that "in a general way, the Luo appear to believe that something in the nature of persons survives the death of the body. Whatever it is that survives, the Luo appear not to have a term for it that signifies its nature."

Uncertainty or speculation also characterizes the African concept of person, specifically as it relates to the question about the number of entities a person is made up of. Leken Adeofe is among scholars and philosophers who argue for a tripartite conception of person as a defining element of African thought. Speaking as a Yoruba analyst, Adeofe (2006:59-70) argues that a person is conceived to be the union of *ara* (body), *emi* (mind/soul), and *ori* (inner head), and that unlike *ara* which is physical, both *emi* and *ori* are mental (or spiritual). He argues that this dichotomy might induce a conclusion to think of the African view as dualistic. Adeofe describes any affirmative answer as a mistake. The reason, he argues, is that since *ori* is conceived ontologically independent of the other two elements, the African view is properly thought of as triadic.

In sharp disagreement with Adeofe, Gyekye (1998:65) argues that the Akan conception of person is dualistic and interactionist, not tripartite, even though the spiritual component of a person is highly complex. In his words:

> It seems to me that an interactionist psychophysical dualism is a realistic doctrine. Even apart from the prospects for disembodied survival that this doctrine holds out-   prospects that profoundly affect the moral orientation of some people- it has had significant pragmatic consequences in Akan communities, as evidenced in the application of psychophysical therapies.

The deriving aftermath of counter and cross-counter metaphysical accounts is that person is a complex psycho-physical being and source of boundless speculations. What need to be emphasized in the African situation however is that obvious disagreements and variations in the concept of person do not overreach the unanimity of belief among Africans that there is a kind of transcendental self in person which is real (Ademuleya, 2007: 213).

In sum, a person in Africa is both a metaphysical and normative being. And to that extent, one cannot be so called a person if he or she loses his or her ontological or metaphysical essence. Neither can he or she be regarded as a person if he or she fails in normative and communal consideration. As we have seen, a person's relation with society is crucial in defining who he or she is and what he or she is, given the belief held in nearly unanimistic way, that is, that Africans do not think of themselves as discrete individuals but rather understand themselves as part of a community. As J.O Awolalu will say:

> In Africa nobody rejoices alone and nobody suffers alone. When a child is born, all the members of the family and neigbours are informed and they come to share the joy with the particular family. When a person dies in a family, it is not only the immediate members of the family that share the sorrow and in the funeral ceremonies, but all those who are in any way connected with any of the members of the family also rally round to give a befitting burial to the deceased (Quoted in Omoyajowo, 1975:42).

This encapsulates the general African belief that person is created for the purpose of fellowship and mutual help.

 Is it the same in ancient Chinese thought? What is a person in ancient Chinese thought? What is his or her relation to others? What is the ontological make up of person in Chinese philosophical scheme? Is person a constituent of "soul" and "body" as distinct entities or categories? These questions can only be sufficiently answered after the consideration of the classic Chinese perspective on man or person

3. The Idea of Person in Ancient Chinese Thought

From the outset it is important to clearly delineate or define the theoretical framework and time within which to examine the concept of person in Chinese philosophy. The reason is that Chinese ideas about the self or individual from the archaic times to the present day are extraordinarily varied (Elvin, 1985:186). Unlike African philosophy where discussions on person right from time has revolved substantially round communalism as single thought system of common African heritage, Wang Hui (2000:232) argues that from the late Quing onward, many different concepts of the individual and self emerged in Chinese philosophical history with each denoting a particular socio-political and cultural content.

According to Mark Elvin (1985:169) the mainstream view of person as it developed towards the end of the first millennium B.C was very different. In his words:

> It can be found most succinctly expressed in the syncretistic metaphysics of the various commentaries that had gathered around the old core material of the Scriptur of Changes (*Yihjing*), the divining-manual of the Jou dynasty. At its heart was a science of sequential situations, expressed in terms of the transitions from one to another of sixty-four archetypal situations, the "Great Patterns" of Wang Shijy's poem.

This summarizes why the concept of person in Chinese philosophy appears to obviously defy holistic explanations under a single system (Hui, 2000:232). In ancient Chinese philosophy, however, there are clear-cut philosophic thought systems with clear concept of person. The major ones include Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Mohism.

This paper examines the concept of person in Chinese philosophy within the framework of Confucianism fundamentally because of its wide-spread significant influence and revolutionary impart on the Chinese people and their contemporary world-view.

Confucianism as a philosophical thought is a complex system of moral, social political and quasi-religious thought that influenced the culture and history of East Asia. Its main or outstanding ideal is the cultivation of virtue and development of moral perfection.

Our aim therefore is an exposal of the concept of person in Confucianism for possible comparison with Africa. What need to be emphasized is that while the focus of the paper is on ancient Chinese philosophy, with particular reference to Confucianism, the paper is not necessarily exclusive of other philosophical thoughts and the views of other scholars and philosophers particularly as they relate to person.

This is so because in China's philosophical history the awareness or consciousness about the self or individual predates Confucianism and other related thoughts.

As far back as the second quarter of the first millennium B.C, the question about the conscious inner self or individual had already occupied the discursive attention of Chinese poetry. Relying heavily on ancient scriptures of poetry and philosophic insights, Elvin (1985:159) argues that the Chinese since (antiquity) time immemorial have had a clear inward vision of the self, person or individual as a relatively coherent, enduring, and self-contained entity that makes decisions, carries responsibilities, is possessed by feelings, and in general has a fate, a fortune, and a history. To be sure, the individual conceived of here is one with a distinct locus of decision-making, who experiences a life that is partly pre-determined and partly the consequence of his or her own choices.

This definition tends to lay much on subjectivity and uniqueness of person as defining element of person in Chinese dim past. This is not meant to be so. The reason why the definition emphasizes individuality can be explained in the context of derogatory characterization of Chinese in the classical and medieval times as lacking in conscious sense of self, individual. In other words, Elvin's account of self or person in China, though insightful, is chiefly a defensive effort in face of Mauss's sweeping derogatory characterization of Chinese in the classical and medieval times as lacking in conscious sense of the self, individual (*personne*). This is clearly the case in the following lengthy quotation:

> To imply that the Chinese in classical and medieval times did not make the human actor *(personne)* "a complete entity independent of any other except God" does not do justice either to the radical individualism of Yang Ju, or to the sense of personal isolation expressed by the poet Chiu Yuan, extreme but revealing cases… Likewise, to argue that "an Orient that has not attained to our understandings" has never made the self- as the West has- into "a sacred entity… a fundamental form of thought and action" is to ignore one of the two main traditions of Neo-Confucianism, that of 'mind' (*shin*). For thinkers like Luh Shianqshan (thirteenth century) and Wang Yangming (sixteenth century), the mind of the individual was not unlike Mauss's conception of the self in the Western Enlightenment. It was the carrier of conscious awareness, knowledge, and reason, as well as being the source of moral judgment and even, in a Berkeleyan sort of way, of the world's existence (Elvin, 1985:156-7).

So the aim of Elvin's analysis is not necessarily to portray individualism as the defining element of person in Chinese thought. For example, Hong-Hsin Lin (2010:45) argues that in a traditional Chinese society, community is emphasized at the expense of individuals. In comparison, Lin argues that "broadly speaking, the western tradition has focused upon the uniqueness of a person, but the Eastern tradition has paid more attention to the relationality of a person" (2010:33).

Similarly, Karl-Heinz Pohl (1999: 274-5) argues that if we understand "individual" in its modern atomistic sense as an autonomous entity, marked by its ability and right to choose freely between equal alternatives as well as its potential for unhindered self-fulfillment, then there is no equivalent in Confucianism to the modern Western notion of the individual. For him, the Confucian self, for instance, is not an 'unencumbered self.' Rather, it is defined through the social institutions and relationships in the midst of which it stands and which are instrumental in forming its character. Following the rendering of Pohl, therefore, the individual or person among the Chinese is considered part of a narrative continuity, a 'living tradition,' in which the ideas of a common good are transmitted.

Similar but more comprehensive conclusion about the Chinese person is contained in the work of Thome H Fang (1967:260). Here is his graphic summary of who a person is in China.

> As to the nature and status of man, the Chinese, either as a unique person or as a social being, takes no pride in being a type of individual in estrangement from the world he lives in or from the other fellows he associates with. He is intent on embracing within the full range of his vital experience all aspects of plenitude in the nature of the whole cosmos and all aspects of richness in the worth of noble humanity. Anything different from this would be a sign of miserably truncated in development. This accounts for the concerted efforts of Chinese philosophers to advocate the exaltation of the individual into the inward sageliness and the outward worthiness which together make up the intrinsic greatness of man as man.

The clear picture of Chinese concept of person from Lin's, Pohl's and Fang's analysis is one which places priority on relationality of person. To be sure, a person so conceived in traditional Chinese society is one who defines him/herself according to those relations with others.

The outstanding characteristic in ancient Chinese philosophy is that which emphasizes the ethics of human conduct. Donald Munro (1969:50) points out that "the early Chinese were also interested in a unity in the many, but the behavioural implications of the notion, rather than any epistemological implication were of primary importance." In critique of philosophy in China, Frederick Copleston (1980:39) says: "if we ask in what sense philosophy in China was this-worldly, we may be told that it was primarily humanistic, centring round man, man in his moral life and in his social relations." Little wonder that the question about the nature of person occupied the primary attention of different systems of ethics in ancient Chinese thought, including Confucianism, perceived as having made ethical humanism explicit, "by representing the moral life as the foundation of social unity, whether in the family or the state (Ibid:43).

To Confucius (551-479 B.C), all things somehow derive their being from a common source (Heaven). For this reason all things in the Confucian scheme are conceived as having equal possession of "Heavenly nature" *(tien-hsing)*, and to that extent equal. Mencius (371-289? B.C), a leading Confucian thinker, explains this principle of "Heavenly nature" in his theory of human nature to mean that everything created by Heaven is equal. However, Confucian thinkers believe that the human person is unique.

Though Mencius and Tai Chen (AD 1723-77) defined man or person as an animal with many of the biological traits found in other animals, the human person possesses some innate unique attributes, one of which is, an 'evaluating mind' that discriminates between the natural qualities of "noble" and "base", or "right" and "wrong" (Munro,1969:50). In other words, a person is so called person strictly speaking not on biological consideration but on the strength that he or she possesses a moral, ethical mind.

Thus a person is set apart from other animals by slight difference, yet it is precisely the small difference that makes him or her unique. Confucian thinkers and philosophers argue that the unique value of person lies not in his material body or biological components, but exclusively in his moral faculties as embodied in his heart-mind.

The heart-mind of person is conceived as the noblest organ endowed by human being and unlike the material body whose advantages are unequally inherited by different individuals, the moral heart-mind is endowed equally in all men and women. As a result, "everyone possesses in him or herself the noble value." This means that the individual moral differences lie not in the natural endowment, but in the posterior development of the innate potentials.

Apart from the 'evaluating mind', the Confucian person is also said to possess certain unique types of social behaviour (*hsing*). Mencius explains that *hsing* denotes, among other things, what is distinctive of the species *qua* species. He argues that *hsing* signifies certain unique sets of social behaviour that characterize the human *hsing*. One of such social behaviour is respect for the elderly. Mencius and the *Analects* argue that the exercise of reverence in the support of parents is one attribute of person not found in beasts (Munro, 1969:70).

It is not surprising then those values such as respect for the elderly, compassion, reciprocity, mutual sympathy, cooperation, solidarity, and social well-being continue to shape the moral practices of Chinese, and are generally held to be of more importance than the values of individual rights. In Taiwan, for example, elderly person is symbol of reverence (both in care and respect), and the family is perceived as a source of strength, unity and security. It is a moral rule or norm among Chinese that a "child" MUST care and cater for his or her parent, particularly at old age. In almost all public places in Taiwan, including MRT buses and trains, inscriptions are publicly display on the need to respect the elderly and assist those in need by yielding seat to them.

This means that it is wrong on one's part to sit where elder is standing. Some sceptics may conclude that it only exist as ethical prescription but lacking in practice. However, the fact remains that it is a constant reminder of the values and norms of the Chinese people, and that person or individual is not on his or her own in Chinese world.

More so, family-life practice is notoriously pervasive in the daily life and existence of Chinese people till date. For instance, what has come to be called 'family dinner' among Chinese is still part of daily life in Taiwan. It is a way of strengthening their sense of community or communal existence.

On the whole, the Chinese's willingness to assist in times of need is certainly derived from a thought system that not only emphasizes humaneness but propagates the belief that individual fulfils his or herself when he or she assists others in their self-fulfillment, in the realization of their respective potentials.

Little wonder that the concept of person in Confucianism is hinged on the concept of *jen,* perceived as the central idea of Confucian ethics. The term *jen* connotes 'humanity,' 'human heartedness.' In fact, all positive human values and virtues are amplified in *jen.* Ts'ai Yuan-pei (1967) summarizes the concept of *jen* this way:

> *Jen* (humanheartedness) consist of a perfect personality embracing all virtues. It referred to a life manifesting the particular virtues of filial piety, wisdom, propriety, courage, and so forth. *Jen* could belong to all men, but actually it was anideal indicating the perfection of man.

Mencius sees it this way:

> …if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favor of the child's parents, nor as a groundon which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike of hearing such a noise.   From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration (etc.)is essential to man… The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of *jen* (Quoted in Yu-Wei, 1967:309).

This means that to be called person among the Chinese one must necessarily strive to live as a *jen*, meaning to live a life of respect, compassion, wisdom, courage, propriety and other related positive human virtues, failing which one may be regarded as not better than a beast. Confucian thinkers argue that persons or individuals who lack virtues included in *jen* are not persons but beasts.

In fact, Confucius argues that there are five categories of person or "five types of men in a rational linkage of development" (Fang, 1967:243). In the first category are the common men or persons but who with the help of proper education can become learned and enlightened persons. In the second class are those who are educated.

The educated persons could improve on their virtues (by an insight of knowledge and with sagacity in action, issuing in the noble art of life) and become superior persons. The super person is one who is adorned with beauty of character and balance of mind. Thirdly, with further edification, the person with ethical status of superman could rise to attain the status of person of excellence. The person of excellence occupies the fourth stage in the ranking of who an ideal person is in Confucianism. A person of excellence is one who is imbued with outstanding, defining good character and action. Another defining quality of person of excellence is the act of making his or her choices and forsakings to be in accord with the high standard of values acceptable to mankind as a whole. The person of excellence is one who always striven to act in the right without sacrificing the least part of the fundamental principles. His or her utterance of truth sets a good standard to the world without the loss of his or her own integrity. With all these qualities, the person of excellence could become a sage, or holy person.

The status or stage of a sage represents the peak in the rational linkage of development of the individual. The individual at the level of sage is full of wisdom. This is when the individual person has transcended all limitations and weakness by reason of his exalted spirit and by virtue of his assessment of every higher worth. The sage knows how to gain a world of love and reverence by employing himself generously for the world. He or she lives for the benefit of other men. The sage is always skillful and whole-hearted in the salvation of other person to ensure that there is no deserted person. Lao Tzu provides more insight to the idea of a sage when he argues:

> we have come to the consciousness that the essence of each individual man, when realized in full consists in an endeavour to attain to the ideal of the sage. Man's mission is constantly to make a campaign for the realization of this ideal. Thus the 'wages' of winning a sure status in the world is his own inward sageliness (Quoted in Fang, 1967:483).

Karl-Heinz Pohl argues that in Confucian tradition, the concept of maturing to a 'great self' or 'authentic' (Cheng) person has metaphysical connotations in that it is precisely the "Way of Heaven" to be authentic, that is, great, all inclusive, and true to itself.

The consequence of this is that the Confucian authenticity puts man or person into a sequence of responsibilities which lets him or her partake in the process of self-fulfillment of the entire universe. It is implicitly and explicitly clear, therefore, that to attain the status of an ideal person i.e. Jen or sage, in Confucian thought is a herculean task. It is like a project for which a person could fail in that to be so regarded as a person requires one to live up to certain virtues. Thus a person is person in the strict sense of the word if and only if one's conduct is guided by values or virtues of humanity, humanheatedness and respectfulness. In this sense, the Confucian concept of person raises the pendulum of argument in support of normative content as most crucial defining element of person. In other words, the person, lacking in honour, dignity, good moral conduct, compassion and respect is not a person in the Chinese world as is the case in Africa.

Ontologically speaking, a person among the Chinese is a constituent of mental organ (*hsin chih kuan*) and sense organs (*erh-mu-chih kuan*), both of which are said to be equal gifts of Heaven (Munro, 1969:50). It is important to stress that in early Chinese thought no serious attempt is noticed in terms of division of person in dualist or tripartite ontological constituent fashion. More importantly, the term "soul' or 'mind' *(hsin)* in early Chinese thought is not perceived as a separate entity distinct from the body and as having special metaphysical status. Rather the term "soul" is conceived in functional sense, which connotes several different meanings. Such meanings, ideas or concepts associated with the term "soul" include "intentions", "feelings", "the location of the desires", "cognitive activity", and "evaluative activity," "supposedly controlled by the heart, which although different from the other active organs (mouth, eyes etc.), did not have any special metaphysical status" (Ibid).

Donald J Munro (1969) argues that the term "mind" or *hsin* in the early Chinese works was never associated with an eternal, immaterial soul existing within the body. He says:

> In early Chinese works, too, there are terms that were associated with mental activity and are translated today as "soul":*p'o*, "sentient soul"; *hun*, "spiritual soul"; and *shen*, "soul". However, they also did not refer to any eternal entity having special metaphysical status, as did the Greek term *psyche* in works reflecting Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonic doctrines. As far as living man was concerned, the Chinese terms were related to such terms as *hsing* (bodily form) and *chi* (ether, matter), which were commonly applied to man's physical consti- tion. The other uses of these terms concerned the nature of the deceased; after death, the *hun* and *ch'i* return to heaven, whereas the body and *p'o* return to earth .

This encapsulates the ancient Chinese metaphysical account of person in which the term "soul" is essentially understood as a vital breath in gaseous material form. Munro likens the Chinese idea of soul to that held by the Atomists of Epicurean School in Greek thought. The Epicurus school holds that the souls of men are composed of atoms and it dissolves with the body at death. Death is the dissolution of both soul and body and the end of consciousness. In their (atomists) rendering, there is no life after death, nor is there any possibility of encountering the gods or another world after death (Omoregbe, 2004: 28).

Wing-Tsit Chan's argument tends to support this point of view. He argues that among the ancient Chinese, *hun* is the soul of man's vital force, "which is expressed in man's intelligence and his power of breathing, whereas *p'o* is the spirit of man's physical nature expressed in his body and his physical movements". "At death", he argues, "*hun-p'o* survives" (Chan, 1967:288).

Explicit in Munro's analysis is that while it can be argued that the Chinese believe there is soul of a kind in person which survives death, they would not think of it as a separate entity that has course for further journey after death or one that is providing "a ghost in the machine" for the body" (Munro, 1969: 50). In other words, the Chinese share a sense of soul but would not perceive soul as a crucial aspect of person to warrant crude division of person into 'soul' and 'body', 'spiritual' and 'material' or 'mind' and 'matter.'

This means that Chinese's ontological account of person not only consist obvious denial of the soul as a separate spiritual entity, it contains outright rejection of the possibility of life after death. Elvin's and Wang Ch' ung's (27-100?) arguments seem to confirm the indifference of the Chinese to the questions about soul as a distinct ontological entity and lifeafter. Elvin says that in spite of the purgatories and paradises of popular Buddhism, the Chinese were not on the whole obsessed with the personal fate of the soul and in afterlife to anything like the same degrees as the Europeans (1985:186), and by extension, Africans. Wang Ch'ung (27-100?), on his part, argues that there are no spiritual beings.

He says: "when a person dies his blood becomes exhausted". "With this, vital forces are extinct, and his body decays and becomes ashes and dust" (Munro, 1969:50).

The convincing summary that can be derived from the foregoing analysis is that person in Chinese world is more of a moral, worldly phenomenon than a metaphysical entity. The human person is so called a person not because of his biological components but for his or her sense of virtues, relation with others and the community. Pohl (1999:263) rightly underscores this when he argues that it was and largely still being assumed that a Confucian mentality- an orientation in life which grants priority not to the individual but to the community- was/is at the root of the East-Asia economical miracle, now regarded as the major challenge to the so far unquestioned universal validity of the western model. Hence, in traditional Chinese tradition, person is created for purpose of fellowship, mutual help, service to community and to extend humanheartedness to all men and women.

4. African and Chinese Perspectives on Person Compared

To start with it is important to note that traditional African societies are founded on, and sustained by, the idea of communally shared beliefs, practices, and values. Whereas the ancient China has its common beliefs or ideas, it is possible to ascribe a particular strand of thought to known individual thinker(s). For example, Confucianism started with Confucius; Mohism with Mozi; Legalism is ascribed to Shang Yang; Taoism to Lao Zi and Neo-Confucianism to Zhu Xi. On the contrary, this is not true of the traditional African of thought, which is totally communal in origin.

However, a glaring common line of thought in African and Chinese philosophies is one that perceives person as the centre of the universe, and all that the universe contains. In other words, the Chinese, like the Africans, have an ontology which is fundamentally anthropocentric. Similarly, they share a common belief that being a person or to be called "person" is beyond the simple reference to biological existents. Chinese and Africans believe that the value and essence of person is not in his material body, but exclusively in his or her moral worth and dignity. In other words, both philosophies indicate that a person who is lacking in good behaviour is not better than a beast. In this sense, the normative element is the most important defining element of person in Africa and China.

They (Chinese and Africans) also seem to share a common view on the relationship between the individual and society or community. In the Western tradition, the relationship between community and the individual has been extensively and sufficiently discussed from two main perspectives, namely the liberal or libertarian and the communitarian. From our analysis it is not difficult to see that the idea of person in traditional Africa and ancient China is related and in tandem with the communitarian theory as considered in contemporary social political philosophy. To be sure, the liberal western perspective is a celebration of individualism, autonomy, and self-determination, while the basic thrust of communitarianism is succinctly put by M. Daly in the following words:

> Instead of such values as individual interests, autonomy, universality, natural rights, and neutrality, communitarian philosophy is framed in terms of the common good, social practices and traditions, character, solidarity and social responsibility (Quoted in Oyeshile, 2006:106-7).

From our analysis, it can be inferred that in traditional Chinese society, person is created for purpose of fellowship, mutual help, service to community and to extend humanheartedness to all men and women. This can also be said about ancient African society.

However, there are some significant differences in the thought system of Chinese and that of Africa's, particularly as they relate to ontological or metaphysical account of person.   First, whereas the Africans believe in the existence of spirit or soul as a distinct entity capable of another life after death, the Chinese seem to be far from such belief.

Secondly, whereas Africans often view person in dual or tripartite sense that mainly emphasizes the existence of 'soul' and 'body', 'spiritual' and 'material' or 'mind' and 'matter' as separate different entities, the Chinese seem to view man as an entity, a whole irrespective of their belief in some sort of spiritual element that leaves the human body at death. This, however, raises serious scepticism in Chinese thought system about the fate of person after death, at least, metaphysically.

5. Conclusion

We have in this paper examined the concept of person in traditional African thought system and that of ancient Chinese's. As the paper has shown there is a sense in which it could be argued that, in traditional Africa and ancient china, a person is most appropriately conceived as a moral person whose life and existence is substantially dependent on others. The varied variations and scepticism which mainly characterize the ontological account of person in both traditions show that the question about the ontological nature of person is a perennial one, and a person, being a complex psycho-physical phenomenon will continue to be source of metaphysical and normative speculations.

Notes

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2. These works or writings, among others, include: W.E Abraham, *The Mind of Africa,* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962); A. K Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," in Daryll Forde (ed) *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and the Social Values of African Peoples*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954); John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969); Idowu, E.B, *Oludumare: God in Yoruba Belief,* (London: William Clowes & Sons Ltd, 1962); A. Kagame, "The Problem of 'Man' in Bantu Philosophy" *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy* Vol. 1, 1989; Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Kwasi Wiredu, "The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans" in G. Floistad (ed) *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey* Vol. 5: African Philosophy, (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987); Segun Gbadegesin, "Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person" in P.H Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds), *The African Philosophy Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998); Kwame Gyekye, "Akan Concept of a Person", in Richard A. Wright (ed), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, (New York: University Press of America, 1984); Gail M. Presbey, "Massai Concepts of Personhood: The Roles of Recognition, Community, and Individuality" in *International Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 34, no 2. 2002; Ifeanyi A Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Tradition Thought" in Richard Wright (ed), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, (New York: University Press of America, 1984); Kwasi Wiredu, "Death and the Afterlife in African Culture" in Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (eds),

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3. The Owan are a sub-group of the Edo-Speaking peoples of South Western Nigeria. Occupying two Local Government Areas (Owan West and East) of Edo State, Nigeria, the Owan people inhabit eleven major communities namely, Emai, Evbo-mion, Igue, Ihievbe, Ikao, Iuleha, Ivbi-Ada-Obi, Ora, Otuo, Ozalla and Uokpa.
For more information about the Owan see Ogbomo, O.W, "The Evolution of An Ethnic Identity: The Owan of Mid-Western Nigeria" in Adebayo Oyabade (ed) *The Transformation of Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Toyin Falola*, (New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc., 2002) 462-480. See also Ogbomo, O .W, *When Men and Women Matter: A History of Gender-Relations Among the Owan of Nigeria*, (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1997).

4. The Yoruba referred to occupy the savannah and tropical rain forest of the Western part of Nigeria. The people speak numerous dialects of the same generic language called Yoruba; and practices similar cultures and subscribes to similar systems of thought. This description is adapted from Babasehinde Ademjuleya's essay entitled "The Concept of Ori in the Traditional Yoruba Visual Representation of Human Figures" in *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(2): (212-220), 213

5. Etsako is an ethnic group of people which occupy some parts of the northern part of Edo State of Nigeria.

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