

THE HUMAN PERSON IN THE WESTERN AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Pantaleon Iroegbu

INTRODUCTION

As a people is, so are its ideas. Similarly, the ideas of a people and even of individuals make them what they are, both in their behaviour and their relationships. What exactly constitutes the human person is therefore a question that can be answered by referring to the experiences and thought patterns of the people under discussion. In this essay, we want to examine comparatively the understanding of what the human person is according to two broad cultures: the Western and the African.

For reasons of precision, we shall take the understanding of the human person as expressed by Boethius and Aquinas as representative of the Western viewpoint. This will be contrasted with the African conception as seen in traditional African culture, which is still evident in many parts of the continent. In the process, we will be able to reveal not only contrasts, but also areas of mutuality in the common project of understanding ourselves as human persons.

THE PERSON IN WESTERN THOUGHT

Metaphysical knowledge of the person: Boethius

The classical definition of the (human) person from the metaphysical point of view – the one most often referred to in the discussion on the subject – is the one given by Boethius. For Boethius,

Personae est rationalis naturae individuae substantiae. [Person is an individual substance of a rational nature.]¹

Western philosophy adopted this rational-individualistic definition

either as it is or with minor amendments (as in those of Thomas Aquinas). On critical review, this definition is heavily one-sided and therefore misleading or false. In its very definition, it cuts the human person completely out of the community from which both the experiential and even the rational individuality of the person are derived. To see this, let us explain Boethius' definition.

Three key concepts underlie the definition given by Boethius. These are substance, rational and individual.

In scholastic metaphysics, *substance* is that which exists in itself and not inhering in another. Substance is contrasted to accident, which is a reality that exists not independently, but rather depends on another reality. An example of accident is colour, which depends (for example) on paper, or height, which depends on (for example) an object like a tree. Substance on the contrary, is independent existence, and is either first or second substance.

First substance is an independent concrete reality that exists on its own, e.g. paper or tree. The realities we touch are first substances. Second substance, on the other hand, is a mental abstraction from first substance, like paperness, or treeness. Paperness does not concretely exist. Yet it is an existing reality, one existing in the human mind as abstracted from real and concrete existing paper. We apply this clarification of what substance is to Boethius' definition of person.

For Boethius, a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Now, take the expression *individual substance*. When applied to a person, 'individual substance' seems problematic. Against Boethius, Aquinas would argue that if Boethius meant 'first substance,' his addition of 'individual' is superfluous because a first substance is always an individual, i.e. a particular substance. If Boethius on the other hand meant 'second substance,' it would be a contradiction, because second substance is never individual but abstract and general.²

Paperness does not refer to any particular or individual paper, but to the abstract quality of being paper at all. All papers share in it, as it is common to them all. It is just like saying 'humanity.' Nobody is humanity as such. And nobody is known as or called humanity. But everybody shares in humanity as far as each is a human being, sharing in the characteristic of being human. Boethius likely meant an individual of a rational nature.

This brings us to the next term in his definition, *rationality*. Rationality is the power to think, to reason, to reflect, to cogitate. It is to weigh ideas or issues in the mind, intellectually. An individual

of a rational nature would then mean a being that is in itself rational. It is singular being with genus and specific difference. With other singular beings, e.g. tree, he shares singularity and is thereby distinguished from other realities that are not singular e.g. *treeness*.

Then comes the specific difference which makes clear what the human being has that is not possessed by other beings that are equally singular. This is rationality. For Boethius, the person is an individual singular being, one that can think or reason things out for himself, or with others, or both. Briefly put, the person is a type of existing separate being that can think.

A concrete example would be the human being, Ononiwu. Like ‘house’ and ‘book,’ he is singular, i.e. individual. But unlike them, he is an individual who thinks. He is therefore different from house or book, which cannot think. At a more particular (i.e. human person) level, Ononiwu is one who thinks in an Ononiwu manner. He has the experience of *Ononiwuness* in his biography. The totality of his experiences and his other life characteristics distinguish him from other thinkers like Will Smith and Van Parijs. He shares the genus of human with other humans. Yet he is characteristically different in his *Ononiwuness*. Therein lies his specificity as Ononiwu.

Boethius’ definition of person as an individual substance that can reason clearly excludes non-rational beings like animals and plants. But he does not put any limit when it comes to higher beings. Thus, a person may therefore include higher beings that can reason, e.g. God. But the definition does not tell us the category of reasoning that is required for personality to exist. For divine reason is certainly not human reason.

Lastly in the definition we find the element of *individuality*. A person must be an *individual* substance, writes Boethius. This can also be problematic because we know today that legal persons do exist who are not individuals in the sense of being singular persons. These are groups and associations and they have a legal entity, recognised as persons with rights and responsibilities, exactly like individual persons. Later in history, Hegel would give a legal definition of the human person as the most abstract and external expression of morality. The person is the subject of rights.³

Geddes and Wallace would conclude with a favourable re-interpretation of Boethius. An inclusive term for individual substance is *supposit*. Therefore for Boethius, the person is a particular type of *supposit*, one that has a rational nature.⁴

But one would wonder whether this dry solitary definition –

which is totally oblivious of the origins, parental and environmental background of the person – is adequate. Worse of all is the forgetfulness of the community or society from which and in which, and back to which the person lives and exists. Personality from nowhere! A person with no links is not a person.

We think that Boethius' definition fails to define a person appropriately. To be a person demands more than individuality and rationality. Boethius here can be described as one of the philosophical fathers of Western rationalism and individualism both in life and in the explanation of the life and values of his society. However contemporary Western psychology and anthropology is now shifting the emphasis from rational individuality to relationality in the delineation of what makes a person, a person.

Aquinas (1224-1274) on the Human Person

The Absolute Constitution of the Person

Two broad considerations of the constitution of the human person are the *absolute* and the *relational*. Aquinas, in the tradition of Boethius, underlines the absolute. That means the separate, autonomous aspect of the human person that makes him an agent, entirely distinct from all others – in a word, an absolute. The logic is that because the person is separate, differently existing and rational, he is absolutely constituted.

Aquinas, however, more than Boethius, would include the relational as part of the person's constitution. The relational is the person's necessary connection and interaction with other persons in friendship and in community in view of the assurance of the common good. Aquinas defines the person as follows:

Personae est subsistens distinctum in natura rationali [Person is a distinct subsistent in a rational nature]⁵

This can be seen at once to be a corrective of Boethius. And it was meant to be so. Boethius talked of an *individual substance*; Aquinas here says *distinct subsistent*. What is the difference?

We have seen that Boethius' *individual substance* is either a tautology (in the case of first substance), or it is a meaningless abstract expression (in the case of second substance). Aquinas' corrective tries to solve this vagueness by replacing *individual* with *distinct*, and *substance* with *subsistent*. 'Subsistent' in Aquinas is an actual existing being in itself (in the mode of substance), a separate being with its own act of existence.⁶ But that is also the mean

ing of substance in Boethius. Similarly, individual in Boethius is equivalent with Aquinas' distinct(ness).

Critique of Aquinas

If Aquinas set out to correct Boethius, his change in vocabulary does not seem to have achieved the betterment he had hoped for. Briefly put, *individual* in Boethius is exactly the same as *distinct* in Aquinas. For an individual is always a distinct being and a distinct being is equally an individual. Furthermore, *substance* and *subsistent* are *grosso modo* synonyms. The substance of a being is that which subsists when accidents are taken away. Subsistent is therefore substance. It is what is substantial – in other words, the core of a given reality.

Despite his change of terms, Aquinas commits the same mistake of which he accused Boethius. *Distinct subsistent* in Aquinas is, when defined, the same as *individual substance* in Boethius. Both terms in each author are repetitive. Both are guilty of a tautological fallacy.

Specifically understood, *subsistent* is that which is most underlying in a being. It is what the being is in itself considered separately from all other beings no matter how closely related. It is the essence or substance of a being, its *whatness*.

In defining 'person' as a distinct subsistent, Aquinas underlines the absolute constitution of the being of the person as an other, a being different from other beings. He goes so far as to write that because of its separateness, "person is that which is most perfect in all of nature."⁷ This means that to be a person means to be fully oneself with no restriction, without any hindrance whatsoever.

We note however that the emphasis on separateness, as in Boethius, is problematic. As noted above, our standpoint in this essay is that it is impossible to exist totally separately from others, worse still when one makes a sharp and distinct separation from community. From where after all does one derive one's being and how does one keep that being in continued existence and functioning if not from the community in which one lives? It is from the community that each person lives and moves and has his or her being. Cut off from community, the person disintegrates both definitionally and existentially.

We have, however, another definition of 'person' in Aquinas:

Person is an actual existent (i.e. with its own act of existence) distinct from others, possessing an intellectual nature, so that it can be the self-conscious, responsible source of its own actions.⁸

Umberto dgl ‘Innocenti reformulates this definition thus:

Person is an *autonomous* existent of an intellectual nature (*ens autonomum intellectuae*).⁹

Two basic elements stand out in this reformulation: autonomy and rationality. While rationality is the power of thinking and understanding, autonomy entails individuality and distinctness.

What could we, following Aquinas, consider to be the metaphysical basis of personality? It is the special mode of subsistence that is rooted in the spirituality of the form or substantial act of the intellectual substance.¹⁰

Thomistic thought regards the human soul, which is the spiritual substantial form of the human being, as the permanent structure that remains even when the body has died. This ever-enduring part of the human being defines his personality. Therein is rooted his absolute constitution. Here the human being receives a more perfect character than other corporeal beings and is therefore defined higher than these. This spiritual part of the human being allows him to possess abstract knowledge that is universal. In that universality is also embedded a relationality to other beings, including God, the world and other created beings.¹¹

In this Thomistic line of thought, Clarke notes that man becomes more of an embodied spirit than a rational animal. While he sinks deep down (into nature), he rises high up into the spiritual. There is a combination of both aspects in the being and realisation of his full being as person. This process is also a social one. Human beings are bound to socialise, i.e. to be in constant interaction with other human persons. Without socialisation, there is no individualisation that partly makes the person a person. This journey is also a historical one. This means that the human being lives and acts totally and only in space and time with both the constraints and the forwardness that these entail. He creates history by creating events. For history is itself made up of events and the relationship between various events.

Aquinas and Boethius agree that the person is realisable only in rational beings. This means that the human person possesses abstract and universal knowledge that separates him from the brute materiality of other creatures. The person knows not only things outside himself (consciousness), but himself (self-consciousness).

Above all, he has the capacity to reflect on his activities as well as on himself. In that process, he knows that he knows.

Geddes and Wallace have summarised the outcome of the combination of the views of Boethius and Aquinas. What makes up a person are five items:

- (i) Substance (as distinct from accidents).
- (ii) Completeness of nature.
- (iii) Self-subsistence (i.e., exists in-itself and for-itself).
- (iv) Separateness from others, therefore only first substance.
- (v) Rational nature.¹²

Relational Constitution

The human person as person has not only self-substantiality or autonomy, he also has a network of relationships that involve an openness to other beings. Man's personal characteristic constitution is the basis of his relationship to other beings, both socially and naturally. He is *animal socialis*. He is socially involved by nature and culture. Alone he is not. With others he is. Even the consciousness of himself as a being different from others comes through his relating to these others. Thus, socialisation is a natural necessity in view of being human at all.

By his intellect and will, he is consciously made aware of the need to deal with nature respectfully and to relate to other persons in a humanly reciprocal manner. Reality is one big entity of which he is part. The universe he occupies is part of that reality and thrives only insofar as the human being does not devastate it – for the devastation of one aspect leads to the devastation of other aspects. The endangered condition of the ozone layer today is a bold testimony to the mutuality of balanced co-existence.

Further, man's spiritual consciousness relates him to the absolute Being. Even his nature has a toward-absolute-tendency. And man can communicate with the absolute through the part of him that resembles the absolute. This is his immateriality, otherwise called the soul. There is an eternal longing of the human soul for eternal fulfilment, and this fulfilment is the ultimate destiny of the human person – though, as we saw above, the soul alone is not the person. It is a person in union with the body. Both constitute the complete being of the person that has the variety of relationships with other beings.

Aquinas brings out the aspect of the relational constitution

of the human person more clearly in his discussions on friendship and the political community. Here he is very Aristotelian. That man is a social animal is a dictum inherited from the Stagirite, Aristotle. Aristotle also taught that friendship is an indispensable necessity of the human being. He who thinks he can live without friends is either an angel or a beast. But even beasts have friends and companions with whom they live and interact.

For Aquinas, man is a social animal that must form relationships and bonds to promote not only his life and activities, but his very existence. Bonds, groups and associations are inevitable factors of human life and functioning. These start already with the family, through the village or neighbourhood, up to regional and inter-regional associations. Each of these social coming-togethers has its necessary role to perform in the sustenance and promotion of the human person.

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, the highest of the human bonds necessitated by man's social nature is the political community (*polis*). The aim of the *polis* is to provide for the larger needs that the smaller associations cannot – like general security of life and property, the sharing of rights and duties, offices and jobs, as well as other tasks and privileges that people have in common. Through the assurance of the tasks of the *polis*, the human being is able to perform in such a way as to be able to fulfil his nature as being made for community with other beings.

By nature, human beings find themselves to be beings with a self-communicating characteristic. In relating to others, a human being has presence to other human beings and through them the person achieves more presence to himself. In Clarke's words, the human being is *substance-in-relation*. By this he means – in the line of Aquinas and Boethius – the human person is fundamentally an independent, separate and self-existing being, but one that has necessary relationships with other beings. Clarke's summary is as follows: "The outgoing, self-expressive, self-communicating, relational aspect must be an equally intrinsic and primordial aspect of every person as its interiority and self-possession."¹³ If W. Norris Clarke did not over-interpret Aquinas – as it seems to us he did – then the two aspects of the constitution of the human person (i.e., as absolute and as relationally constituted) are represented in Thomistic thought as analysed above. However a very great lacuna still exists. The community aspect of the constitution of the person is virtually forgotten by our two pioneer thinkers.

Transcendental Constitution of the Person

Louis Dupré writes, “It is the nature of the self to be always more than itself ... to be a human person fully means to self-transcend toward the Infinite.”¹⁴

To transcend means to go beyond, to surpass. Self-transcendence means therefore to go beyond oneself, one’s person. At first sight, this may look paradoxical – especially if one takes the scholastic view of incommunicability as definitional of the person. If a person is incommunicable, to transcend itself would mean going beyond itself, therefore somehow communicating itself. It would no longer be itself as person.

Critical Remarks on the Western View

We observe quickly that the overemphasis on autonomy and self-possession makes the person an atom, alone in his self-world. It renders difficult any real communication and relatedness of the person to other beings. The fundamental distinctness claimed as a criterion for personality is rather exaggerated. One may be separate but not specially distinct, as one has a lot in common with other persons.

Even when we consider self-transcendence as a prolonged aspect of the relational, the thick wall separating the substantiality of the person from the other aspects makes this self-transcendence precarious if not totally impossible. The interrelationships between the three aspects of the person demand a more fluid and a less thick wall separation. Only then can different persons really communicate.

Above all, the forgetfulness of the communal basis of the very existence of the person is a serious lacuna. We shall call this *Kommunitätsvergessenheit* (forgetfulness of community). It may look like the idea and existence of real community is totally in the past of Western understanding and praxis. When mentioned at all in the West, community seems to be either an empty word, or only seen as a means to the individual. For example in Aquinas, the discussion of the political community or of friendship is only in reference to the achievement of individual goals. For generally in Western culture, only the individual is there. Only the individual counts.

Lastly we notice no existential or practical reference of the analysant (human person) to his origins. Heidegger tried to confront some of the existential problems of man today. But the origins

of this human person are not found worthy of serious discussion. Why?

The dry, abstract analysis of substance, nature, hypostasis and ultimate transcendence, and so on, totally remove the person from the real world where his roots and development are found. Any authentic analysis of the person must take into account the real world in which that person lives and moves and enjoys existence. Even metaphysics, the study of being in general, must be metaphysics for real people, i.e. people living in a world of space and time and history. Thus the culture, language, experience, and concrete background of such people should be brought into the explanation of the identity of the person for relevance and real explanation to be achieved. The second part of this essay tries to make good this yawning lacuna in the Western thought tradition.

HUMAN PERSON AS COMMUNAL: AN AFRICAN STANDPOINT

*The dignity of a person in truth lies in solidarity
of shared full life that lasts for ever
(Ugwu madu onye bi n'eziokwu:
isi ya bu igwe madu so ya nweta ndu di n'uju dikwa okpu)*

Dynamics: Community-Individuality-Community

Here we shall undertake a conceptual analysis of the two basic terms, community and individuality, in view of relating these definitionally to our African understanding of personality.

Community

Conceptually understood, community is the characteristic of communing, i.e., of sharing. It entails relating to one another at the human-social level. Community undergirds the spirit and practice of giving what we have, and of receiving what others give in co-operation and mutuality. In the sharing process, each person receives what he needs and gives to others what these others need to live. In a wholesome community, the members make the lives and activities of one another possible and able to flourish.

As a conceptual model, community is the origin of the life of each of its members. All are products of the community. This is both at the micro-level of the parents who give birth to each, and at

the macro-level where the community is the cradle that welcomes and creates the existential space for the new-born to be, grow, and flourish. Further, the individual springs from the socio-cultural matrix of the community. The language, culture, tradition, religion, habits, and even thinking attitudes and other traits that he possesses are those of his community. None of these is his by individual ingenuity or by his personal hard work. Whatever he judges as his values are those received from his community. Equally, the ideological constituents – or what B. Dudley calls the “mental furniture” – which constitute his person are those taken from his community.

Conceptually, community is the members themselves taken together and seen in interaction. Thus we cannot with our naked eyes see community. We may see a group of people together. But their assembling together does not make them community.

Community becomes community when the people assembled together come into co-ordinated interaction and dialogue, and when they live and act together, *in solidum*. This is when they become one. This is what we shall call the community-individual existential circle. But what is the individual?

Individuality

Some people think that since we don't see community, it doesn't exist. This is because the only reality we see even in community gatherings is a group of individuals. Others hold the contrary view. We do not actually see individuals as such, people who are totally individual. What we observe is commonness everywhere. There is no individuality understood as uniqueness, i.e., what is here that is nowhere else.

What one individual, Gab has, others, Louis and Clem, have as well. What characteristics are found in the Ihuezela community can also be found in the Umueke and Umunwoke communities. Each time we look at Gab, we see several other Gabriels, Louises and Clements that resemble him or more, that make him up. These include parents, family background, communal and cultural characteristics and a host of links that make Gab what he is. Alone Gab is not, never. This viewpoint concludes: Strict individuality is a mirage!

Between these two extreme viewpoints, we can identify true reality of individuality. It is one that is neither atomistic nor an undifferentiated mass. Let me explain.

Individuality, conceptually defined, is the self-determination

that is part of each member of the community. By self-determination, we understand the rational cum reasonable decision of each member, on the form that his contribution and distribution in the community would take. What can I do? What can I contribute?

The answer to this question is partly dependent on what I have received from nature, from the community, and from other sources that make and influence my life. What I can do is relative because I am sure that I can't do everything, even the things I would have loved to realise. I am limited. Yet I can do certain things. I am able, capable. Though influenced, my answer is nevertheless mine. I stand in front of my decision, not as a helpless slave or as a mechanistic robot manipulated from afar. I stand as a being with sense, thought, freedom and responsibility.

My being part of my community is guided by my qualities of reasonable willingness and responsible contribution. I freely choose to help. My being part of my community is equally guided by my rational ability to put to question things, values or systems that are not clear to me. Critique, especially constructive critique that tears down in view of rebuilding, accompanies the individual as member of community. This must be an internal critique, not one done totally from outside the community, but from within. Only internal critique humanly constructs and develops integrally.

Based on the arguments presented above, we can define individuality as *participability*. To be an individual is to be able to take part, i.e., to be capable of participation in life and its demands. The community has several heads or members. These different members have different talents and abilities (natural, acquired and developed) to contribute to the community. The full individual is one who is able to use his capacities and training to move the community forward. The act of community development is the same act of self-development.

This understanding of individuality is in contrast to the Western view that sees individuality as separability, distinctness, or rational substantiality with no reference whatever to his community. To be able to participate and contribute implies that one has something of his to bring in, something to say, something to offer. It is only in community that the effectuation of that capacity is possible. Participability is also at various levels: social and ontological, natural and supernatural. Thus openness to being including to transcendent Being, forms part of the identity that the human person is capable of. All this is only possible in community.

Thus the individual, far from being an enemy of community,

is a friend. He has positive critical freedom to build community. This ability to renew the life and values of the community means that the individual does not become a mass that has no face or identity. Equally, the ability to undertake a deconstructive critique makes one an individual different from another. This answers the objection that whatever is found in one is equally found in others. All are therefore not one, undifferentiated. As the individual Anyanwu, the life, customs and traditions of my community, Umueze, are also mine. But Anyanwu accepts these with a critical, though positive, mind towards Umueze.

Dynamics

In a summary form, our analysis above brings out this clear fact – we cannot discuss community without individuality, and we cannot define individuality without community. There is a co-existential dynamic between these two aspects of the human reality. Let us call this communal dialectics.

Communal dialectics means that the individual is in the community and the community is in the individual. While there is no community without individuals, there is also no individual without community. Each is inextricably involved in the other.

With this as background, our inquiry can now proceed to develop a new definition of the human person. In what lies the core or quintessence (*kpim*) of personality? Is it the community or the individual? Perhaps both. We are looking for a definition of the human person that is focused on both the community and the individual – a communal definition.

HUMAN PERSONALITY: ITS CORE

Definition and Elements

Like all realities outside the Supreme Being that is totally simple in its Being, human personality is a complex reality. It is thus not easily definable. We can however try to clarify it essentially by describing its foundational elements. What, from the African point of view, makes a person, a person? What makes personality? The diagram below will help us, but first a general definition.

The human person is the communally and self-embodied being that is in search of full transcendence.

This means that the human being's personality lies in his

being a community-structured self. He is a self that is with his community. Far from being a self that is independent of community, he is a self-with, in other words, he is a being-with not a being-apart-from other members of his community. He is one involved with and participating in his community. But at the same time he is on a journey for fullness in transcendence. Thus, there are three constitutive elements of the human person.

1. Community
2. Self
3. Transcendence.

Person as community-structured

Each human person as a person is a being that is deeply structured by the communities from which he comes. The first of these communities is the birth community constituted by his parents. Each person is a product of parental communal love and life. Problems may come later, but there was a love-union that was the origin of each person. People whose origin is through artificial or *in vitro* fertilisation can be said to be products of manufactured or *in vitro* love. Such cases are still a union of reproductive parts of two persons. In all cases there is union that is a communing. No union, no person.

Then come family relations, the immediate environment, and lastly the larger society. Progressively, the new human person picks up the language, mentality, attitudes, *worldview*, and numerous cultural values of these communities. These are mostly what will make him what he will be fully later in life. To escape from these is impossible. Were he to change environments, these characteristics would still follow him, everywhere, if not fully, at any rate partly.

This is what we mean by the definition that the human person is communally-embodied. The communal is the relational. This relational element comes first in his constitution. A person is a person primarily because he shares, because he communes with others. He can communicate and therefore receive the tools for life and growth from others. He has reason.

Having reason or being reasonable is higher than and englobes being rational. The ordinary understanding of ‘being reasonable’ has the same meaning as we give ‘reasonable’ here. One hears for instance, the caution: Iwunze, be reasonable! That does not mean that Iwunze should be rational or intelligent. It means that Iwunze should open up in dialogue, compromise, and common sense.

He should be considerate. Reasonableness is the quality of entering into dialogical communication openly and mutually with others. Of course, it presupposes being rational and being intelligent, abilities to think and to understand respectively. But the rational and intelligent can still be very unreasonable, i.e. unyielding and uncompromising, fanatical!

Communion with others, thanks (among other things) to reasonableness, makes one a person who is, due to his rationality and intelligence, able to review issues with others and thereby make progress in both self-realisation and community-realisation. The reasonable is *in se* other-tending. It is openness to a common vision that brings common objectives to fruitful functioning.

Furthermore, the communal quality of the person makes him able to accept a better argument while in dialogue with other persons. It shifts the human being from egoism to communalism. Communalism is not necessarily altruism (i.e., sacrifice for others). It is basically engagement on what will benefit all the members in the given community, including oneself, in the long run. The person is thus definitionally communal, i.e., relational. On this important African vision, H. Maurier writes that, on the African conception of the human person, “Relation is the constituent of the human person: Without it, the human person is isolated, and falls into nothingness.”¹⁵ After detailed analysis of this evident fact in African thought and practice, Maurier concludes, the human person is essentially relational. Either he as a person relates and lives, or he cuts off relations and dissolves into nihilism. We do not think that this truth is true only in and for Africans. It is a universal truth. For all persons, not relating leads to not-being, to non-being.

A further point is that the human person in community has the same vision of the world (*Weltanschauung*) with others. On this vision, his other ideas are founded. He lives on what he has received. This reception is as we saw above what W. Norris Clarke calls receptivity. He lives like one of them, and not higher or lower in being as person. Concretely speaking, he is not fed on grass and bone as animals are fed because these are not considered to be persons. He is in all respects – physically, emotionally and communicationally – treated as one with, and like, other human beings. Anything lower than this communal-belonging aspect of his being would reduce him to a non-person. The essence or *kpim* of the person is his communal oneness, i.e., his belonging participation with his community members at equal rank as human persons. Then comes the second, equally fundamental constituent of personness.

Person as possessing self-hood

Originating from and deeply steeped in community in being constituted as a person, the human being is nevertheless a separate being in contrast to both other human beings and to that community from which he comes. This second basic element of the person, his self-hood or individuality, is no less fundamental than the first.

The Igbo of Nigeria sees himself as an individual with freedom and separateness, yet deeply committed to his *Umunna* community. The drum sounds early in the morning (4 a.m.) for a gathering of the entire village community. It is to deliberate over a newly arisen situation. The entire people gathers. But each person comes out from his hamlet or hut as an individual. There is no community formed until the individuals come together.

And when all have gathered, it is individuals also who speak, argue, deliberate. The community as community, as a mass, does not speak. Individuals do. Thus the aspect of the community that is at stake here is the individuals, the selves, units and singulairs. This is proved by the fact that opposing opinions are expressed, conflicts arise and a variety of viewpoints manifest themselves. There is thus a self, an Ejinlh that is different from an Odocha, though all share the same community of Aba-Ngwa. Whence this difference?

The source of the variety of selves is the various qualities of thought, will, knowledge and interests that vary from one human being to another. Though all are humanly constituted, yet each has his specifics. This specific is *self-hood*. Self-hood is what Ejinlh has that makes him different from Odocha. The thought and manner of life of each, taken together, is his self-ness. Put in abstract definition form, it is *Ejinlhness* that is not *Odochanness*.

This does not mean that no one else has these particular qualities except Ejinlh. For different individuals can have similar qualities, vision, or interests. But it does mean that, on the whole, when we bring together all that Ejinlh has, this will be different from what Odocha has. The sum can never be exactly the same. Both individuals share certain things in common. That is the communal aspect. Yet they will differ in some others. The name for the proportional difference between them is the *self-hood* of each person, their individuality. Put in another brief way, my *self-hood* is what I have that you do not have. It is *me*, while your *self-hood* is *you*.

Person as self-transcendent

Transcendence is the surpassing of the being in question. Self-transcendence is the reality in that person which tries to surpass itself. The necessitating ground of self-transcendence is incompleteness. No created being, including persons is complete, i.e., perfect. Each is open ended. Each is in need of completeness. Hence the internal effort of the human being to complete its being is the drive for transcendence. This is through self-transcendence.

In his communal and selfhood elements, the person combines all his energies toward perfection. When this combination of communal and self-energy is appropriately articulated and put into practice, the self-transcendent process takes off. Though an element of the person's being, self-transcendence is not automatic. It must be a conscious act of the spirit of man – the soul, mind, and will. It entails commitment and patience to become more, to belong deeper, and to realise the higher self. Paradoxically, it is through the self-forgetful giving of one's entire being that one enters the process of self-transcendence.

The community must, however, create the positive environment for this self-giving to others, including giving to the most Transcendent Himself. At the end, however, the being is in his spirit drawn out of itself by a higher Being who is also Spirit and its ultimate source. The Spirit draws the spirit to itself. With and through the community, the self is transformed into the highest excellence of being where the absolute Being plays the greatest role. There he, the human person, in his body, soul and spirit, is completed. He blossoms out to be the fullest human person in communion with others. In the person of God, he becomes fully a human person.

Network of relationships

We can now bring together the three constitutive elements of personality. The communal element is the origin of the being of the person. Immediately, its other side is the self-hood that, in combination with other selves, make up the community. In the communal and self-hood, there is what we can describe as a *being-with* and a *being-apart*. At times they come into tension with each other. This must be resolved in a dialogical process.

But the communal and the self-hood aspects are incomplete without the third element: the transcendental. The striving for

full completion is immediately brought to work. There follows what we can describe as a historical-constitutional journey of the person. He is a *being-towards*. This person-journey is a progression upward in a triangular-concave-convex shape. Personhood is achieved in this relating-with-others.

Thus the person is the self-transcending communal self in mutual relationship with other selves, and in union with the divine who is his ultimate source. In a word, the person is self-with-others (community and God). He is not mere individual substance that is rational. He is communal, therefore related to other beings (relationality). He is self-hood, thereby free and critical. He is also reasonable and, consequently, communicational. To crown it all, he is other-worldly, spiritual and, therefore, self-transcendent.

Objection & Response

One may retort that the various elements that constitute the person, instead of simplifying, complicate our understanding of what a person is. The question could arise: In what one element resides the definition of the person? Scholastic philosophy gave the answer as the immaterial soul that is the metaphysical basis of personality. What does the African tradition say?

Our response is that it is not only impossible, but it is entirely wrong to define a complex being like the human person with a simple term. Any simple or one-word definition would be delimiting and minimalising. Therefore, instead of defining, such a single element disfigures the reality. The Thomistic doctrine that the immaterial soul is the basic element in personality is no definition of personality. As a typical, rational – at times rationalistic – thinker, Aquinas wanted to find one basic element. We may not always have only one. Moreover, in his formal definition of personality, not one but several elements were introduced. Person, he wrote, is a distinct substance of a rational nature. There are at least three different aspects of person in this definition: distinctness, substance, and rationality.

Our argument in this section, and extensively in the entire essay, is that person as complex reality is defined by three basic elements: communal (belongingness), self-hood (responsible-freedom) and transcendence (fulfilment). Each of these is indispensable in defining person fully. We shall now conclude our reflection by bringing out the major areas of resemblance and contrast be-

tween the Western and the African perspectives on the human person as analysed above.

CONCLUSION

In traditional western thought, the definitions given by Boethius and Aquinas emphasise reparability, rationality and individuality. Because he is distinct, thereby incommunicable, and further because he is rational, the human being is a person. These qualities make him absolute. The person is person because he is primarily separate and autonomous from others.

Yet he is also related to other beings. This is because he is part of the total human reality that by nature seeks communication with other beings in order to realise his fullest being. The person is thus a substance that relates to other substances: a relational being. A third constituent characteristic is the transcendental. Emphasised by official Church teaching, the person by nature tends toward the totally other to fully realise himself.

In our comparative study of the African concept of the human person, we noticed a yawning lacuna in the western viewpoint. The community in which the person is born, grows up, and matures is seen to be part and parcel of the definition of his person. As person, he is thus communal. Without the community, he is not a person. Nor can he be identified as this or that particular person. Nneoma Eileen is a person thanks to the community that made her Nneoma Eileen – what she is now. There is, we saw, a dynamics of relationships between community-individuality-community.

These major differences notwithstanding, the Western and the African traditions present some common characteristics in their understanding of the person. The person as person is not fully so, except in the search for transcendence. The person is essentially social (*animal socialis*), and there must be an uncompromisingly individual element of the human person.

One would then conclude that, though departing from different *locus standi*, and thereby emphasising different perspectives, the Western (emphasizing the individual) and the African (emphasizing the communal) can come to a common synthesis. The human person is a person, originating, though not crippled by, community. He is one that is in existential dynamic and conscious dialogue with other beings of the same universe.

NOTES

¹Ancius Boethius, ‘De Persona et duabus naturis,’ 3, See *Patrologia Latina* (PL), 64, 1345.

²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981) 1, q. 29, a. 1.

³ “G.W.F. Hegel,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-) Vol. XI, p. 166.

⁴L. W. Geddes and William Wallace, “Person,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-) Vol. XI, p. 170.

⁵Thoams Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 29, a. 3. See W. Norris Clarke, *Person & Being, The Aquinas Lecture 1993* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993) 29.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.* See W. Norris Clarke, *Person & Being*, pp. 27-30.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas; see Geddes and Wallace in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. XI, p. 167.

¹¹*Ibid.* 168.

¹²*Ibid.* p. 167.

¹³W. Norris Clarke, *Person & Being*, p. 71.

¹⁴*Ibid.* 107.

¹⁵H. Maurier, *Philosophie de l’Afrique Noire* (St Augustin: Anthropos Institut, 1985)p. 65n.

