



A CRITIQUE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SUBJECT: TOWARDS RELATIONAL INDIVIDUALISM

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ABSTRACT

The bifurcation between holism and individualism is essential to understand the contemporary debate in political theory. In this article I argued that both traditional and modern societies have elements of holism and individualism. I also argued that individualism is not radically opposed to holism because it is impossible to imagine a human society without authority, tradition, and taboos. Moreover, the pre-theoretical norms and values of holist societies have rational foundation within a certain context. Thus, it is possible to imagine an individualist society which is grounded in a holist social ontology. I argued that collectivist and tribal societies are not totally opposed to individual liberty since one of the morally relevant advantages of rationality is to foster cordial relations with others. I argued that Habermas's intersubjective communicative scheme is appropriate to account for the pre-theoretical norms and values of holist societies.

Keywords: *individualism; communicative action; rationality; pre-theoretical norms;*

INTRODUCTION

Most Western philosophers did not say much about non-Western cultures and traditions in their writings. Thus, Western philosophers draw on their own philosophical tradition and culture. One of the works that I deal with in this article is Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*. In this work Popper addresses the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Karl Marks with a deep sense of skepticism and distrust. Popper claims that these thinkers are antithetical to the values of the open society such as freedom, equality, and democracy. He argues that Western societies are the best approximations of an open society although they have a long way to go in terms of fully realizing these values (Popper, 2002, p. xxxv). From this assessment it seems that non-Western societies are closed societies. Popper traces the origins of the open society back to ancient Greek (Popper, 2002, p.167). Metz laments that Popper attributes the values of open society solely to the Western world without any comparative assessment of non-Western cultures (Metz, 2021, p.9). The idea being that traditional societies are heavily dependent on collectivist and communal organizations giving moral priority to the tribe or clan than the individual human being. Indigenous African societies are characterized as communal or collectivist (Ake 1987; Sogolo 1993; Adeyinka and Ndwapi 2002, cited in Metz, 2021, p.10; Gyekye 1997, p.36). My purpose in this paper is to argue that collectivist and communal societies are not totally opposed to individual freedom and liberty using Habermas's communicative model of rationality.



1. POPPER'S IDEA OF AN OPEN SOCIETY

Popper argues that Western civilization is characterized by the transition from collectivist social organization to individualist social organization which is based on critical individual thought (Popper, 2002, p. xxxv). He claims that the future depends on the decisions and will of individuals as opposed to any historical necessity (Popper, 2002, p. xxxv). He is against all those traditions of thought which seek to prophetically determine the course of history by way of “long term historical prophesies” (Popper, 2002, p. xxxv). Popper argues that the dissolution of collectivist or tribalist societies begins with the recognition that the truth of taboos is contingent on the tribes that uphold them implying that they are the artifacts of the human mind (Popper, 2002, p. 58). He calls this position critical conventionalism (Popper, 2002, p. 58).

Popper argues that critical conventionalism is not the affirmation of moral arbitrariness rather it is a call for individual moral responsibility because, he argues that norms and moral decisions are distinctively human without any natural causation (Popper, 2002, p. 59). Popper criticizes the Platonist plea for permanence epitomized by the Theory of Forms as a reactionary tendency that calls upon collectivist or holist justifications for a social and political order (Popper, 2002, p. 83). Popper argues that Plato's question as to who should rule is a misleading question in the history of political philosophy because it leads to holist and authoritarian solutions. That is, it lays a fertile ground for elitist social and political organizations which undermine democratic institutions in which even incompetent rulers would cause less damage (Popper, 2002, pp.114-115).

Popper also recommends piecemeal social engineering as opposed to a utopian and authoritarian approach to social engineering because no statesman can claim to have the blueprint for social transformation aside from addressing the most urgent and expedient problems of society (Popper, 2002, p.148). Popper argues that a closed society is analogous to an organic understanding of society in which priority is given to “semi-biological ties—kinship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distress.” (Popper, 2002, p.165). Thus, abstract social relationships such as division of labour and commerce are more important in open societies (Popper, 2002, p.165). It seems that an open society is based on abstract or spiritual bond as opposed to concrete biological and semi-biological bond (Popper, 2002, p.167). These abstract forms of social relationships were enhanced by the development of science and technology which facilitated sea communication and commerce (Popper, 2002, p.168).

Popper explains that collectivism emphasizes the priority of some whole or group such as the state, nation, or class as opposed to the individual. Thus, collectivist or holist societies magnify the normative importance of a group, tribe, or clan above and beyond an individual. In contrast, an open society emphasizes the priority of an individual over a group, tribe, or clan. He says that individualism is not synonymous with egoism rather it is the belief that the moral worth of an individual is intrinsic to him/herself instead of being contingent on group membership. Thus, individualism is based on the Kantian imperative to treat individuals as ends in themselves, and not only as a means. This belief leads to assuming individual responsibility for one's decisions and actions. Thus, the capacity for rational and free choice of an individual is the normative ground of an open society.

The idea of an open society is based on not only tolerating an individual for what s/he thinks and believes but also respecting an individual's thought and freedom. In contrast, if the rules of social cooperation or simply social rules are imposed from above by a state, nation, or group proclaiming them as culture, tradition, or taboo of society then individual



freedom of choice is violated. Thus, according to Popper, this kind of society is characteristically a closed society. However, it should be noted that all societies have some elements of holism. So, the Popperian distinction between open and closed societies as two different social systems is highly problematic. Because open and closed norms exist side by side in all societies.

2. METZ'S AFRO-COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS

Metz says that he agrees with Popper that individuals are morally important than groups. However, Metz contends that his version of the Afro-communitarian ethics is a viable alternative to Popper's Kantian moral individualism (Metz, 2021, p.16). According to Metz, Popper attributes individual dignity to the intrinsic qualities of an individual such as her/his capacity for rationality. Metz states that although it is true that Popper's ideal of the individual engenders a certain social manner or character, it lacks relational premises (Metz, 2021, p.16). That is, Metz is against the attempt to justify the moral worth of an action in terms of qualities intrinsic to a person rather he prefers to ground morality on relational qualities. He says, "the claim is not that relationships matter, and individuals do not, but instead that individuals matter because they are capable of certain relationships" (Metz, 2021, p.17). Metz points out that the word Ubuntu implies humanness in some indigenous languages of southern Africa. According to Metz, Ubuntu is distinctive to the moral thought of sub-Saharan Africans. The idea of humanness by way of being in communion or relationship with our fellow human beings is the core of Ubuntu. Metz points out that this ethic excludes those who are unable to exhibit relationship or fellowship with others from the human category (Metz, 2021, p.17). He points out that the difference between Popper and indigenous African morality is that Popper's moral theory is based on an individual's capacity for rationality whereas indigenous African moral thought is based on an individual's capacity for relationality. Metz points out that the idea of relationality or forming communion with others has counterintuitive implications for human rights in the sense that a stranger or a foreigner who is not part a certain existing relationship is excluded from moral consideration. To avoid this implication Metz introduces the idea that individuals have dignity by virtue of their capacity for communion or social harmony. I would like to call this position relational individualism. The idea of relational individualism is based on the belief that communion or relationality is not a fundamental value but rather our capacity for it as individuals (Metz, 2021, p.18). So, the dignity of an individual is contingent on the ability to relate or commune with others. I contend that the capacity to relate or commune with others is one of the virtues entailed by individual rationality. But the contention that individual dignity is based on the mere ability to relate or commune with others is unacceptable. Metz argues that the Popperian account of individual dignity condones psychopathic behaviour which means a person who is hardly capable of other regard is equally worthy of moral dignity (Metz, 2021, p.19). I argue that this is the reason why Popperian moral individualism needs to be complemented by the African relational ethic of Ubuntu. Metz points out that for Popper it is strictly an individual's capacity for agency that matters morally whereas for the African relational ethics it is an individual's capacity to relate with others cordially which makes him/her worthy of moral dignity (Metz, 2021, p.19). So, the normative implication of African relational moral theory is that an act is right so long as it produces communal solidarity or harmony; otherwise, an act is morally unacceptable. I propose that individualism can be justified by relational norms and values. Metz's relational moral theory can be an alternative



justification for individualism. Thus, I contend that individual agency and rationality is not opposed to the capacity to commune or relate with others.

Metz argues that from African relational perspective moral behaviours such as truth telling, promise keeping and respect for humanity are justified on grounds of social harmony and solidarity as opposed to individual rationality and free choice. He says, "... wrong acts by the present ethic are those failing to treat people as special in virtue of their capacity for harmonious relationships" (Metz, 2021, p.20: Metz, 2022, p.108). Thus, African relational ethics requires avoiding discordant behaviour for treating an individual with respect and dignity. This implies that indifference and isolation are morally reprehensible since they lead to "discordant actions involving subordination consistent with an 'us versus them' attitude as well as harm consistent with a selfish motivation" (Metz, 2021, p.20). Next, I will try to develop the compatibility of individual agency and rationality with relational values using Habermas's theory of intersubjectivity and communicative rationality.

3. RELATIONAL MORALITY AND COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

In this part, I will introduce Habermas's notion of communicative rationality to complement Popper's formal understanding of rationality in the process of moral cognition and deliberation to argue that morality is the outcome of intersubjective deliberation and communicative action. I contend Habermas's account of intersubjectivity, and communicative rationality provides a solid foundation for a relational understanding of morality. That is, Popper's idea of individual rationality and agency presupposes purposive rational action which does not "take into account all forms of symbolic interaction" (Habermas,1981, p.5). So, Popper's moral individualism is indifferent to "structures of a lifeworld that underlie the other subsystems" (Habermas,1981,p.5). Habermas says that the concept of communicative rationality implies "the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus bringing force of argumentative speech," in which subjective views are rationally integrated with the objective world and the intersubjective lifeworld (Habermas,1981, p.10). Thus, Popper's idea of individual rationality and freedom can be complemented by a relational morality in the intersubjective lifeworld through communicative rationality. Habermas points out that anthropologists and sociologists cannot succumb to the rationalization of moral life because of their increasing awareness of other cultures and ways of life which do not fit into the Western model of individual rationality. So, according to Habermas, this makes the instrumental reason of modernity limited and relative to the Western world. Instead, he introduces a phenomenological approach to a lifeworld which enables us to understand the communicative conditions of its possibility. That is, a certain lifeworld is possible because of intersubjectively shared linguistic devices which differentiate true propositions from false ones. The significance of this approach to ethics is that it enables us to understand the rational basis of a form of life from its own vantage point of view. This method helps us to discover the fundamental sociological and anthropological reasons for behaving and acting one way rather than another in a non-Western lifeworld or social system. Thus, I aspire to demonstrate that a relational moral individualism is possible through the critique of Kantian moral individualism. In other words, there are fundamental anthropological reasons for creating both self-regarding and other-regarding intersubjective lifeworld. I accept Popper's Kantianism in that an act is morally right if and only if it treats the individual not only as a means but also always as an end. However, Metz's relational approach to moral individualism is appealing as an alternative to Kantian individualism to account for the relational element of morality. Thus, I contend that



Habermas's communicative model of rationality accommodates other social systems through intersubjective argumentation in which the validity of moral propositions is determined by an intersubjective linguistic procedure called communicative action.

I contend that Habermas's communicative ethics seeks to redeem the Kantian deontological ethics through a discursive ethical procedure (Habermas, 1990, p. 14). Habermas introduces a moral procedure that is deeply rooted in Kantian principle of universalizability with an intersubjective discursive procedure to validate shared norms (Habermas, 1996, p. 107). He intends to transcend a particular cultural perspective to formulate an intercultural foundation for the Kantian principle of universalizability or moral impartiality (Habermas, 1990, pp. 195–203). So, Habermas wants to replace the monological aspect of Kantian ethical theory with a pluralist discursive moral theory without undermining the Kantian principle of universalizability. That is, Habermas seeks to transcend the monological aspect of Kantian ideal of universalizability in search of a pluralist universal discursive principle. Thus, the contention that Popper's Kantian moral individualism can be complemented with the relational imperatives of African ethics can be understood within this framework. My critique of Popper's moral individualism is based on the monological foundations of his moral and political theory by relegating other lifeworld to the category of closed systems. I contend that Habermas's project of redeeming modernity through the critique of modern reason is a viable solution to the problem of the monological aspect the Eurocentric model of rationality.

I contend that the idea of individual autonomy is worth entertaining, but it shouldn't be the sole ground of moral reasoning and argumentation. So, in line with Habermas, I argue that the intersubjective aspect of morality should be considered to recognize the relational aspect of public practice (Habermas, 1990, pp. 109–10). I think, Habermas is trying to strike a balance between the Kantian imperative for transcendental moral reasoning and the Hegelian quest for the concrete duties of the transcendental moral agent (Hegel, 1975, p.76). Hegel argues that Kantian transcendentalism and formalism results in meaningless tautological maxims without a concrete content. In other words, the Kantian moral agent is devoid of concrete qualities except for analytic and procedural ones (Hegel, 1975, p.76). He goes on to inquire that how can an individual who is endowed with her/his own contingent features elevate her/himself into a universal and absolute law giver (Hegel, 1975, pp.77-78). However, Habermas maintains that the formalistic and deontological rules of Kantian moral theory in his theory of communicative rationality by giving priority to the right over the good (Habermas, 1993, p. 2). He maintains that deontological rules are concerned with the procedural questions of justice as opposed to substantive rules of moral action (Habermas, 1990, p. 207). Thus, Habermas criticises the Hegelian notion that procedural claims are just semantic and logical propositions without any substantive content because every procedural moral claim implies a certain substantive moral norm required by real life (Habermas, 1990, p. 204). Consequently, Habermas endorses the Hegelian insight that the enunciation of a universal moral statement implies a particular conception of the good life (Habermas, 1990, p.205). In other words, Habermas's ideal of communicative rationality is the synthesis of Kantian formalism in terms of a deontological theory of justice and Hegelian notion of concrete moral norms in terms of a conception of the good life. However, Habermas draws distinction between Hegel's specific forms of the good life and Kant's abstract forms the good life. That is, he draws distinction between Hegelian specific forms of the good life and the Kantian deontological norms of the good life to introduce the notion of "structural aspects of the common good life" (Habermas, 1990, p. 203). Habermas's notion of "the common



good life” is neither Kantian nor Hegelian rather it stands for the pre-theoretical norms of social life and cooperation in their day to today lifeworld. I argue that this notion applies to indigenous moral values as in Africa which are the pre-theoretical norms of social harmony and solidarity like Ubuntu. I think, Habermas’s communicative rationality emphasizes on the validation of these pre-theoretical structures of social harmony and solidarity. Habermas recognizes the existence of different conceptions of the good life in modern industrial societies. He contends that citizens of a democratic society can come to a common standpoint on contested norms through the practice of moral deliberation with a view to formulate the principles of their common conception of the good (Habermas, 1998, p.41). Habermas endorses the Hegelian claim that Kantian moral proceduralism draws a sharp boundary between facts and norms or the “is” and “ought” in the sense that he does not properly address how moral norms can be put into practice (Habermas, 1990, p.196). Unlike Kant, Habermas justifies the universality of moral norms on a discursive as opposed to transcendental grounds (Habermas, 1990, p.207). He also recognizes the context, and the target population determines the validity and universality of a norm. Habermas also highlights the idea that norms are challenged and revised through day-to-day social practice and their validity is contingent on human relationships (Habermas, 1990, p. 61). In other words, if individuals or citizens of a democratic society are willing to conduct their affairs using certain norms then those norms are legitimate or else, they are illegitimate. This point leads the idea that norms need to be expressed in terms of concrete duties of social and political life in the form institutionalization (Habermas, 1990, p. 207). The underlying procedure for the institutionalization of norms is communicative action through collective social and political efforts (Habermas, 1990, p. 208). The novelty of Habermas’s moral theory is that he introduces the relational idea of “common good life” as a common background knowledge of society in contrast to the Kantian individualist notion of “good will” (Habermas, 1996, pp.106–7).

4. A CRITIQUE OF MONOLOGICAL RATIONALITY

Habermas’s communicative ethics is indebted to the Enlightenment project of liberating human beings from the deceptions of reified dogmatic power (Habermas 1988 [1971], p.15). The Enlightenment ideal of emancipation and freedom is based on the deconstruction of implicitly accepted belief systems by exposing their dogmatic and erroneous claims to knowledge whose continued existence undermines human emancipation and freedom. For this to happen, critical theorists like Habermas emphasize the need to wage the struggle for human emancipation on two fronts to wit: theoretical and practical. So, Habermas’s communicative ethics recognizes the Enlightenment trust in reason in the sense of recognizing the imperative to intersubjectively validate claims to knowledge (Habermas 1988 [1971], p. 15). The essence of communicative rationality is the intersubjective or I would argue relational scheme of moral problematization. It thereby helps us to dissolve the monologic and solipsistic subject of modernity through intersubjective dialogical quest for valid claims to knowledge (Habermas 1988 [1971], p.15). Therefore, Habermas is indebted to the Enlightenment’s theoretical quest for justified valid claims to knowledge that serve as pillars of social agreement. This theoretical pursuit lays the ground for practical action in the form of changing established social conditions (Habermas 1988 [1971], p.15).

The Cartesian subject of monological reason is no longer acceptable given the imperatives of Habermas’s dialogical communicative ethics (Habermas 2001 [1984], p.118). The monological subject of modernity has no independent sources of speech and action. In



other words, although formal ability for speech and action is inborn the content of speech and action is provided by the cultural resources of a society into which the individual is born. Thus, despite its monological pretensions the Cartesian subject is the product of a dialogical intersubjective lifeworld. That is, linguistic cognition is possible through a communicative engagement with society. Thereby I contend that society is not the product of the monological Cartesian modern subject rather the Cartesian subject is the product of a maturing society in which mature human beings come to self-conscious communication (Habermas 1988 [1963], p. 281). I claim dialogue is essential for a relational understanding of morality because it recognizes the social character of communicative rationality. This implies that social norms and conventions are valid if and only if they are rationally defensible. Thus, monological claims to knowledge are hardly defensible from a relational dialogical perspective. In other words, the modern monological subject is inadequate unless its claim to knowledge is subjected to the dialogical rationality of social normativity. I agree with Habermas's communicative rationality because he situates the hermeneutic universe of discursive rationality in a lifeworld inhabited by ordinary people (Habermas 1987 [1981a], p. 134). So, it can be argued that communicative ethics is not an abstract linguistic exercise in philosophical imagination, but a philosophical enterprise concerned with the everyday intersubjective lived experiences of ordinary people. The practical quest for social transformation cannot be divorced from the social nature of communicative rationality. The idea of communicative rationality is inconceivable without mutual understanding through communicative action. Therefore, communicative rationality as a philosophical approach is inconsistent with the idea of withdrawing into solitary subject of modernity rather it seeks to recover the primordial relational subject (Habermas 1988 [1971], p. 28). This commitment of communicative ethics is confirmed by the enlightening of power of discursive encounters. That is why I contend that the monological subject of modernity is withdrawn from all forms of relational ethical discursive encounters to ensure the purity of monological rationality. Thus, an authentic ethical discourse is dialogically constructed out of relational discursive encounters. In other words, the normative force of a moral principle comes from dialogical discursive encounters in the relational lifeworld. Moreover, one of the major advantages of dialogical rationality in a communicative moral paradigm is to engender a sense of mutual responsibility in the form of reciprocity. In communicative ethics our goal-oriented action is mediated by our intersubjective communicative rationality. Finally, it is interesting to note that Habermas recognizes the relational imperative inherent in a dialogical relationship as a recognition of oneself in the other human beings (Habermas 1988 [1968], p.148).

Habermas states that human speech and action draw on intuition and reflection. Thus, discourse ethics identifies with both world intuitive and world-reflective subjects of communicative rationality. It is important to note that communicative ethics recognizes the overlaps between intuitive and pre-theoretical claims to knowledge and discursive and reflective claims to knowledge. The latter is theoretical and discursive knowledge while the former is communicative and pre-theoretical knowledge of ordinary people which enables us to interact on pretheoretically endorsed non-problematised folk beliefs and values (Habermas 1987 [1981b], p. 286). Habermas's communicative ethics recognizes the communicative competence embedded in pre-theoretical folk beliefs and values aside from the reflective competence of the monological subject of modernity. Although I used the phrases communicative ethics and discourse ethics interchangeably, there is a slight difference between the two. That is, communicative ethics suggests competence of ordinary people for communication whereas discourse ethics seeks to emphasize the reflective competence of the



modern subject. In the former case, the accent is on the pragmatic significance of communication for mutual understanding while in the latter, the accent is put on our capacity for a reflective engagement in the rational defence of a discursive action. Thus, from this analysis we can say that communicative ethics is cognizant of the rational defensibility of pre-theoretical folk values and beliefs on grounds of their potential for mutual comprehension. On the other hand, discursive ethics is the outgrowth of the maturity of Western civilization which mistakenly identifies rationality solely with the contemplative powers of the monological subject of modernity. Since Habermas's communicative rationality recognizes the communicative and discursive foundations of normative propositions, communicative rationality is the most appealing epistemological justification of the African relational ethics of Ubuntu. However, I contend that the recognition of background rationality does not imply uncritically endorsing it rather the background lifeworld has to be a live option for responsible and free individual philosophical reflection. In this regard, African philosophy is a two-pronged intellectual exercise in the sense that it draws on the background lifeworld of indigenous African communities and the foreground thought of a critical and independent philosopher. I claim it is the unilateral endorsement one of these two positions that leads to a monological discourse and stereotypes. Thus, the pre-theoretical and hidden premises of the background wisdom of society are exposed to the demands of open, independent, and critical scrutiny of the modern subject. The crux of the matter for Habermas is the fusion of the communicative and discursive horizon with a view to forge a mature and coherent understanding of modernity. Hence, the proper understanding of modernity entails the recognition of both forms of discourse as the building blocks our life world. As the habitual activities of an individual need to be disturbed to bring about self-consciousness in the same way the habitual patterns of social life need to be disturbed by critical reflection and inquiry (Habermas 1992 [1988], pp.173-174). Thus, communicative rationality seeks to strike a balance between the pragmatic significance of the background lifeworld and the critical role of an independent and responsible thought in the form discursive argumentation.

I think, Habermas's communicative model of rationality is very useful for framing the debate between ethnophilosophers and professional philosophers in African philosophy as it clearly outlines the fault lines of the African philosophical debate on tradition and modernity. I claim tradition stands for the background communicative significance of folk values and beliefs for mutual understanding whereas the quest for modernity stands for the need to discursively engage the background knowledge of society to come up with a rationally defensible claims to knowledge. I contend that taking sides is not the way forward rather it is appropriate to understand the mutual reinforcing nature of both background and foreground knowledge. Thus, I contend that the African relational ethics of Ubuntu is a live option for a discursive engagement in African cultures, traditions, and languages.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis has demonstrated that communicative ethics seeks to transform society through intersubjective validations of claims to knowledge as opposed to a commitment to the monological reason of the modern Cartesian subject. The aversion to risks of partiality is no longer valid in the intersubjective paradigm of communicative rationality rather it is the recognition of partiality that justifies the need for communicative rationality. I would argue that communicative rationality justifies a global intercultural dialogical communicative ethics in which partial claims to knowledge are wedded to create a global



intercultural communicative rationality. In this regard, African relational pre-theoretical folk values such as Ubuntu can facilitate the intersubjective quest for a global communicative rationality. Basically, the idea is that intersubjective communication is useful for legitimizing social and political systems through opening the discursive forum for indigenous, subaltern, and pre-theoretical lived experiences of traditional societies. Thus, the Popperian distinction between open and closed societies implicitly shuns other social systems by stereotypical labels such as closed versus open societies.

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