

Although the moral component of what is called the self might be the closest to an analysis of identity and to discuss personhood, such as Charles Taylor has worked out in his monumental writing *Sources of the Self*, (Taylor 1989), I discuss the self from an ontological point of view. As mentioned, I regard the self as consisting in the relations which constitute identity. Depending on which relation is prevalent, personhood is understood in different ways. Such, the question I will raise to various attempts to define personhood is, from which perspective does the self show itself, makes itself seen? Which of the above mentioned relations is prevalent for understanding a person?

According to Arendt, for example, 'who' one is, i.e. the person can only be determined by the others, through the stories and narratives they relate about this person. (Arendt 1958) With Bernard Williams, this could be formulated as the problem of the witness, or the problem of how the other relates me. (Williams 1973) In other terms, the relational character of the self has been pointed out in various ways. Bernhard Waldenfels named this relatedness of the self to others "responsiveness": being responsible by answering, responding to other individuals through acting and becoming one-self. But which is the novelty of a "communal self" in African thought? This question has often been raised, such in the Philosophy of Placide Tempels (1906-1977), who pointed out that the Baluba think so much differently that it could not even be compared to Western thought. (Tempels 1945) In his sharp analysis Bernard

Matolino indicates in how far such a position is prone to be subsumed to racial thought: assuming incomparable authenticity is unfruitful, and, to a large extent misleading, the much more so as a superstitious, mythical, illogic way of thought is suspected rather than proved.(Matolino 2011) Pointing out a radical alterity resembles chasing the exotic and mostly leads to falsification. Much more seminal might be the attempt to understand how community is understood in African thought and how this concept is capable of bearing in contemporary practical life.

The question of the self and personhood is not merely a practical term, but is considered to be a metaphysical question. Beyond conceptual differences, personhood is understood as being communitarian or communal. Only to name a few African philosophers of this view: Odera Oruka (Kenya), John Mbiti (Kenya), Ifeanyi Menkiti (Nigeria), Kwasi Wiredu (Ghana), Godwin Sogolo (Nigeria), and Kwame Gyekye (Ghana). The debate of these philosophers can be outlined by having a closer look at the last one named here, namely Kwame Gyekye.(Gyekye 1997) Gyekye represents a moderate communitarianism which mainly relies on the responsibility of the individual. In the mean time Gyekye accuses Mbiti and Menkiti of advocating radical communitarianism.(Matolino 2011) I will outline the conceptual difficulties of the ‘communal self’ by following Gyekes argumentation, especially conceptual problems with regard to action and initiative or ethics, individual responsibility, but also with regard to individual rights.

For Mbiti in African perspective the identity of an individual and his existence is linked to the reality and existence of a community. (Mbiti 1970) Menkiti radicalizes this claim and regards community as being responsible for rendering an individual his identity. (Menkiti 1984) Okolo sees the self in African thought as being a “we-existence”determined by societal exchange. He holds to the saying: “I am because we are; therefore I am” and adds: “Such a philosophy of self is bound to generate all sorts of problems with regard to the status of self as an individual, as an independent subject.” (Okolo 2002)

Such a philosophy does indeed generate problems – especially for questions concerning individual freedom, responsibility, rights and duties. But the question is, whether this problem has to be posed in the first place: Gyekye’s argument is, that the radical concept of a communal or communitarian self or person in African thought is an exaggerated, extrapolated view and that there is sufficient argument to see, that there is a concept of individual self in African thought.