

An African Reading of Community and Self Autonomy in Michael Sandel

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Abstract

This paper attempts an African reading of Michael Sandel by focusing on the concepts of community and self-autonomy in his thought. Thus, it seeks to evaluate the idea of community and self-autonomy in Sandel in the light of an African imaginary by deploying the hermeneutical method to provide an African reading of Sandel's thought, thereby offering insightful critiques and analyses of these fundamental ideas, challenging traditional notions and prompting profound reflections on balancing the tension between individual agency and communal obligations/entanglements. The paper concludes that the challenges of contemporary society require persistent reworking of frameworks that underlie the various segments of human civilization in ways that pay attention to changing times and evolving problems in society.

Introduction

Michael Sandel's scholarship in philosophy touches on the questions of justice, ethics, and the role of community in shaping individual identities and actions. Central to his reflections is his critique of liberal individualism and advocacy for a more communitarian approach which have generated intense scholarly interests. It is argued that there is an ongoing tension between the pull of individualism or personal autonomy and obligations of individuals to communal responsibilities. Sandel's emphasis on community and self-autonomy with precision provides a peculiar relevance and nuance that redressing same with African texture and touch make them more interesting than previously imagined. Such is the immediate task of this paper and so, it interprets Sandel's ideas, examines the philosophical underpinnings, practical consequences and demonstrates their relevance for the pressing issues of the time.

Definition of Terms

Two important terms; that is, community and self-autonomy will be clarified briefly given that these two terms remain operational concepts in the entire work.

On Community: in Aristotle's *Politics*, community or *polis* in Greek is considered as a natural association that arises from human need for social interaction and cooperation. Accordingly, the community remains crucial for the attainment of the potentialities of the individuals within the Aristotelian context. Quite interestingly, the community is made up of individuals; thus, a collection of individuals makes up a community. The interconnectedness of the community and the individuals who make the community cannot be separated. For as it is often said and held in common parlance in the African setting that it the community that trains a child. This brings to the fore the importance of the community. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the idea of community is "Being - with" (Heidegger 149). Thus, community is considered as a mode of existence where individuals engage in mutual care and understanding. For Levinas, there is an ethical dimension that connects individuals that make up the community. Accordingly, Levinas echoes the ethical dimension by highlighting the responsibility that individuals have towards others. Thus, a genuine community is one wherein individuals ought to respond to the needs and vulnerabilities of others. From the foregoing characterization of the idea of community, a sense of loyalty and obligation seems to be portrayed to the extent that social bonds and relationships that individuals form with one another within particular context involves a high level of conscious interconnectedness that one feels or have for certain people that live in that context. It therefore, encompasses shared values, norms, and traditions that provide a sense of belonging and solidarity – essential for the flourishing of human life and its sustenance.

On Self Autonomy

Sometimes, the term self-autonomy is used interchangeably with the notion of individualism. It should however be noted that such usage has to be used with caution because when one conflates both terms without any attempt for clarity, it can lead one astray, suffice it to note that in the context of this paper, both terms are not used interchangeably. Thus, the paper will outline how some philosophers define self- autonomy and adopt their usage for the purpose of this paper. According to Kant, the notion of autonomy reflects "the capacity for self-governance and the ability to act according to principles that one gives to oneself" (55). This idea of autonomy is the basis of moral worthiness of an individual. For Mill, autonomy is "the freedom for individuals to pursue their own interests and make choices without interference from others or from societal norms, as long as these choices do not harm others" (Mill 14). In Taylor's work, "Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity and the Ethics of Authenticity", autonomy involves the ability of individuals to critically reflect on their desires and beliefs, to choose freely among various options and to construct their own narratives of identity and meaning. Taylor's approaches autonomy within the context of modern identity and self-understanding. It is typical among liberals to defend the concept of self-autonomy or that of individualism in the attempt to pursue free choices, freedom and personal rights away from the demands of committing to communal or communitarian values.

Community and Self-Autonomy in Michael Sandel

With the clarification provided thus far especially in the previous section of this paper, community simply refers to the social bonds and relationships that individuals form with one another within a particular context, whether it be a local neighborhood, a cultural or religious group, or a nation-state. It encompasses shared values, norms, and traditions that provide a sense of belonging and solidarity.

In recent Western philosophical history, Sandel seems to be the first to introduce his unique concept of community. On such foundational idea developed by him, he attempted to build a theory about political community. For example, in his work “Democracy’s Discontent”, Sandel argues that the discontents of contemporary American people are expressed in two ways either individually or collectively. Again, in his other work, *What Money Can’t Buy*, he argues that; “the idea that the community can be understood as a state, a nation, it also can be understood as small social groups, specific social organizations or villages, towns, associations, school union, and so on “(153). He emphasizes the importance of community in understanding political communities and the relationships between individuals and society. Sandel's view on community evolves and may be interpreted differently, ranging from the state or nation to smaller social groups, specific organizations, or local communities.

Sandel underscores the significance of community in fostering human flourishing, asserting that it offers us a profound sense of belonging and meaning. In his book, “The Trouble with Liberalism”, he contends that community is essential to human flourishing. It provides us with a sense of belonging and a context within which we can cultivate relationships and pursue common goods. Without community, our lives lack depth and purpose. It is through our connections with others that we find meaning and fulfillment (5).

He emphasizes the role of community in shaping our moral and social identities, highlighting how our interactions within these communal settings contribute to our personal development and well-being. By stressing the importance of community, Sandel encourages us to reevaluate the value of collective bonds and social cohesion in promoting human flourishing. His insights remind us of the intrinsic link between our well-being and the communities to which we belong, underscoring the vital role that community plays in enriching our lives.

In another of his work, “Public Philosophy”, “in community, we find support, accountability, and shared values that guide our actions and shape our character” (3). Furthermore, he suggests that our pursuit of individual fulfillment is inherently tied to our participation in communal life. This suggestion can be likened to Aristotle’s concept of the community, which, places emphasis on the human person achieving his/her full potential and value in a community or state. Aristotle encourages individuals to uphold communal ties and that the community remains essential for individuals to achieve full potential and live virtuous life.

At this juncture, it is important to ask the question as regards the fate of self-autonomy and/or individualism when considered in the light of the emphasis on the communitarianism. Or to put it clearer; does the idea of community render the self to be lost? How can we have self-autonomy in its fullest and complete sense in relation to the idea of the community. To what extent then are Libertarians correct to insist that the self ought to be free to make important decision away from the shadow or influence of the community?

For Sandel, self-autonomy involves more than just the ability to make choices or pursue one's desires. It encompasses the idea that individuals should have the freedom to shape their own lives according to their own principles and values, free from undue influence or coercion from external forces. The notion of self-autonomy is closely tied to the broader concept of individual freedom and self-determination.

Thus, self-autonomy pertains to the capacity of individuals to make rational choices and pursue their interests free from external coercion or undue influence. It is often associated with the principles of individualism and personal freedom, emphasizing the rights and responsibilities of autonomous agents in shaping their own lives.

In spite of the foregoing, Sandel provides a nuanced understanding that makes his libertarian conceptualization worth nothing and particularly significant for the immediate focus of the present reflection in this paper where the attempt is to provide an African touch to this nuanced thought of Sandel to make it more robust. For example, when Sandel suggests that self-autonomy is not an entirely individualistic. He goes ahead to opine that; self-autonomy is intertwined with the social and cultural context in which the individuals exist. Society plays a crucial role in shaping the options and opportunities available to individuals, and therefore, true self-autonomy requires not only personal freedom but also a just and equitable social structure that enables individuals to exercise their autonomy effectively. More importantly, Sandel's discussions on self-autonomy often intersect with debates about distributive justice, the role of government in regulating citizens' activities and the ethical considerations surrounding various social practices and institutions. He challenges simplistic notions of autonomy that overlook the social and economic factors that can limit individuals' choices and agency.

Sandel's Critique of Liberal Individualism

Sandel's critique of liberal individualism serves as a cornerstone of his philosophy, challenging the primacy of self-autonomy in contemporary political thought. He argues that the emphasis on individual rights and preferences has led to the erosion of communal ties and the fragmentation of social bonds. In his seminal work "Liberalism and the Limits of Justice," Sandel contends that a purely procedural conception of justice, which prioritizes individual choice and autonomy, fails to address the deeper moral questions that arise within communities.

According to Sandel, communities play a crucial role in shaping individuals' values and identities, and they provide a necessary context for moral deliberation and ethical decision-making. By reducing everything to matters of individual choice, liberal individualism neglects the significance of communal goods and the common good, thereby undermining the foundations of a just and cohesive society.

At this point, it is important to examine how the perspectives of other philosophers contrast with those of Michael Sandel, and how Sandel might respond to these challenges.

J. S. Mill's advocacy for individual autonomy stands in contrast to Sandel's emphasis on community values. Mill in his book, "On Liberty", "the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it." (63). Mill maintained that individual freedoms should not be subordinated to the collective will, as Sandel suggests. He contends that excessive

deference to communal norms can stifle individual creativity and diversity of thought. In response, Sandel acknowledges the importance of individual liberties but argues that they must be balanced with the broader interests of society. He might emphasize the role of communal deliberation in shaping moral choices and fostering a sense of solidarity among citizens.

On Rousseau's part, the idea of the general will and the importance of collective decision-making diverge from Sandel's focus on individual moral agency within communities. In outlining his version of the Social Contract theory, Rousseau was of the notion that; "each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." (47). He held further that true autonomy arises from participating in the democratic processes of the community, rather than asserting individual preferences. Sandel, in response, acknowledges the value of collective decision-making but cautions against the potential for the tyranny of the majority. He might emphasize the need to protect minority rights and ensure that communal values are not imposed coercively on dissenting individuals.

Charles Taylor's emphasis on the role of culture and community in shaping personal identity challenges Sandel's conception of autonomous moral reasoning. Taylor argues in his book, "The Ethics of Authenticity", that individuals are deeply embedded within social networks and cannot fully extricate themselves from the influence of community norms. While in the other work earlier referred to; that is, "The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity", Taylor reiterates that, "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves." (32) Sandel responds by highlighting the capacity for individuals to critically reflect on and challenge the values of their communities. He might argue that while communities provide a framework for moral deliberation, individuals still retain agency in shaping their ethical commitments.

Furthermore, when we examine Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which seeks to balance individual autonomy with communal well-being, there seems to arise a perspective that contrasts with Sandel's focus on communal values. In the work, "Frontiers of Justice: The Intelligence of Emotions", Nussbaum held that a just society should prioritize enabling individuals to pursue their own conception of the good life while also fostering a sense of empathy and solidarity.

The central human capabilities that an adequate theory of justice should affirm are, first, life; second, bodily health; third, bodily integrity; fourth, the senses, imagination, and thought; fifth, emotions; sixth, practical reason; seventh, affiliation; eighth, other species; ninth, play; and tenth, control over one's environment. (24)

Sandel responds by emphasizing the importance of moral dialogue and deliberation within communities. According to Charles Taylor, in the book, "Modern Social Imaginaries",

Communities shape the identity of their members and furnish the moral languages in terms of which they articulate their aspirations and make sense of their lives. That the identities of persons should be so deeply influenced by their communities, that they should derive their

conceptions of the good in large part from the moral traditions of those communities, seems a fact of human experience that any plausible theory of justice must accommodate. (36)

Despite the buildup of tension between liberal proponents, Sandel still maintains firmly that while individuals should have the freedom to pursue their own interests, they also have a responsibility to contribute to the common good and respect the rights of others in the community.

Again, Sandel offers a critique of John Rawls' theory of justice in his work "Liberalism and the Limits of Justice." Sandel argues that Rawls' theory of justice emphasizes the abstract individual as a moral subject separate from their ends, personal attributes, community, or history. Sandel criticizes this extreme individualism and argues that it disregards the role of community in shaping individuals and the importance of a person's meaningful identity beyond mere choice.

Moreover, Sandel highlights the inadequacy of Rawls' theory to account for the impact of community on individuals, as well as the erosion of community values in contemporary society. He discusses the loss of self-government and the diminishing sense of community in people's lives as significant concerns of our time.

In all, Sandel reaffirms his belief in the importance of communal values in shaping moral choices. He held firmly that while individual autonomy is valuable, it must be understood within the context of social relationships and collective identities. Sandel also acknowledges the insights of other philosophers but maintain that his focus on the moral significance of community provides a necessary corrective to overly individualistic conceptions of morality. He also emphasizes on the role of democratic deliberation and ethical engagement within communities as essential for fostering a sense of shared purpose and moral responsibility.

Community and Self-Autonomy in a Handshake in Michael Sandel

While critiquing liberal individualism, Sandel does not dismiss the importance of self-autonomy altogether. Instead, he advocates for a more balanced approach that integrates individual freedom with communal values and commitments. In his book "Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?" Sandel explores various ethical dilemmas and moral conundrums, illustrating the complexities of reconciling competing interests and principles within diverse communities.

Sandel's communitarian perspective emphasizes the importance of civic engagement, public deliberation, and the cultivation of shared virtues in fostering a more robust and inclusive form of democracy. He contends that genuine self-autonomy can only flourish within the context of a supportive and participatory community that recognizes the inherent dignity and worth of each member.

Dressing Sandel's Thought in the Garb of African Communalism

Communalism as discussed by Sandel, emphasizes the importance of community values and the common good over individual autonomy. It stresses that individuals are interconnected and have a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the community.

Various versions of African communalism place strong emphasis on community values and interconnectedness. In African societies, individuals are seen as part of a larger community and are expected to prioritize the needs of the community over their own individual desires. For

example, Kwame Gyekye's reflection on communalism contained in his book, "An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme", explores the communal values inherent in Akan philosophical thought, highlighting the importance of consensus and cooperation. Gyekye writes, "the Akan emphasize the interdependence and mutual supportiveness of members of a community. Every person is expected to contribute to the collective welfare and to rely on the community for support in times of need". (18)

This is the reflection on the communal ethic deeply ingrained in African communalism. Both communitarianism and African communalism share the belief that individuals are not isolated entities but are part of a larger social fabric. According to A.C. Obi, in his book, "Being as Duality and African Hermeneutics of Foundation", "Duality informs the nature of things in African ontology. The ontological implication of duality is that no entity is one thing by itself. Every entity manifests one aspect at a time and another aspect at another time yet fundamentally remains itself..." (64-65).

These two African philosophers who serve as exemplars both emphasize the importance of relationships, solidarity, and cooperation within the community. However, it is important to note that the impression created in the foregoing discussion is that both communalism and communitarianism do mean the same thing. There are also differences between the two perspectives. For example, while communitarianism is a philosophical theory developed in Western philosophical thought, communalism is a cultural and social practice that has deep roots in African traditions and beliefs. African communalism may have different principles and values than those emphasized in communitarianism.

Overall however without engaging in unnecessary polemics, both perspectives highlight the significance of community and interconnectedness in ethical decision-making, but they may do so in slightly different ways based on their cultural and philosophical backgrounds. Both African communalism and Western communitarianism emphasize importance of community and interconnectedness in ethical-making. They both highlight the idea that individuals are inherently connected to others and have a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the community. Additionally, they both recognize the value of collective decision-making and the importance considering the needs and perspectives of others when making ethical choices. While they may have different cultural and philosophical backgrounds, both perspectives ultimately share a common emphasis on the significance of community and interconnectedness. In African societies, traditional values and communal living often play a significant role in shaping ethical decision-making, while in Western societies; concepts such as individualism and personal autonomy have had an impact on ethical frameworks.

In Western societies, concepts like individualism and personal autonomy prioritize the rights and freedoms of the individual, leading to ethical frameworks that focus on individual rights, responsibilities, and choices. In African societies, there is often a greater emphasis on communal values, interdependence, and collective well-being, which can shape ethical frameworks that prioritize the needs of the community over individual rights. This difference in emphasis can lead to different approaches to ethical decision-making and conflict resolution in each society.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The ideas put forth by Sandel hold significant relevance in contemporary society, where debates over individual rights versus communal values continue to shape public discourse. In an era marked by increasing globalization and cultural pluralism, the challenge lies in reconciling diverse perspectives while upholding core principles of justice and equality. Sandel argues that the pursuit of self-autonomy often comes into conflict with the communal values and moral framework of society. He contends that certain decisions, particularly those with significant moral implications, cannot be divorced from the communal context in which they occur. For example, issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and genetic engineering raise fundamental questions about the boundaries of individual autonomy within the context of community values.

While Sandel's emphasis on the importance of community values is commendable, his stance has been subject to criticism. Critics argue that his approach risks subsuming individual rights to the collective will, potentially stifling personal freedom and diversity of thought. Furthermore, Sandel's framework may neglect the voices of marginalized groups whose interests may diverge from those of the majority within the community. In the face of this debate, how do we navigate the tension between community and self-autonomy? One approach is to foster inclusive dialogue that acknowledges the complexity of moral dilemmas and respects diverse viewpoints. Additionally, policymakers must strike a balance between protecting individual liberties and promoting the common good, recognizing that both are essential for a flourishing society.

Conclusively, Michael Sandel's reflections on community and self-autonomy offer a compelling framework for reimagining the relationship between individuals and society. His critique of liberal individualism challenges us to reconsider the prevailing assumptions underlying contemporary political discourse and to strive for a more inclusive and participatory social sphere. By recognizing the intrinsic value of communal bonds and the importance of moral deliberation within diverse communities especially as emphasized in African communalism which we think can indeed enrich Sandel's thought, we can cultivate a more just and flourishing society for all. As we continue to grapple with pressing social, economic, and environmental issues, Sandel's insights serve as a guiding light, illuminating the path toward a more equitable and humane future.

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