The Dilemma of Western Philosophy

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How the West Was One: The Western as individualist, the African as communitarian

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Abstract

There is a kernel of truth in the claim that Western philosophy and practice of education is individualistic; theory in Euro-America tends to prize properties that are internal to a human being, such as her autonomy, rationality, knowledge, pleasure, desires, self-esteem and self-realisation, and education there tends to adopt techniques focused on the individual placed at some distance from others. What is striking about other philosophical–educational traditions in the East and the South is that they are typically much more communitarian. I argue that since geographical terms such as 'Western', 'African' and the like are best construed as picking out properties that are salient in a region, it is fair to conclude that the Western is individualist and that the African is communitarian. What this means is that if I am correct about a noticeable contrast between philosophies of education typical in the West and in sub-Saharan Africa, and if there are, upon reflection, attractive facets of communitarianism, then those in the West and in societies influenced by it should in some real sense become less Western, in order to take them on.

> It is impossible to make a general statement that covers every exception, and yet conversation so often consists of each person pointing out the obvious exceptions to the other person's statements. Hugh Prather (*Notes to Myself*)

Introduction: Approaching 'the West'

Western philosophies of education are individualist, whereas sub-Saharan African ones are communitarian.

I believe that this statement is true and that it can be sensibly asserted without committing any of the sins routinely lumped under the heading of 'essentializing', that is without indicating that all and only theories of education from Euro-America are individualist and that all and only those from below the Sahara are communitarian, and without implying that views from these locales necessarily have these respective characteristics.[1] In this article, I aim to provide a general account of how to plausibly construe geographical labels such as 'Western' and 'African', and to bring out what it entails for the way to understand different philosophies of education.

Although I reject an essentialist use of geographical labels, that does not mean that I advance a constructivist one according to which their meaning is determined merely by the properties that those in a group mentally associate with them. *Contra* the constructivist, I believe that a geographical label such as 'Western' has an objective content about which people can be mistaken, while *contra* the essentialist, I maintain that this content is not exclusive to, exhaustive of or fixed in the relevant locale. In terms familiar to those with expertise in the philosophy of language, I maintain that the referent of geographical labels is determined neither by a mere cluster of descriptions nor by rigid designation.

Appealing to my account of what terms such as 'Western' plausibly mean, I ultimately suggest that because of what I see as individualist blind spots in the Western tradition, those who adhere to Western views probably have some good reason to hold ones that are more communitarian. Although the words 'Western' and the like can be used without essentializing, it is likely the case that what is picked out by that term is too narrow for developing an attractive philosophy of education. If so, and the Western tradition has something to learn from African or more broadly communitarian perspectives, then, as I explain, the West should become less Western and should over time change what 'Western' means.

How to Construe Geographical Labels

My view about what geographical labels mean is this: they refer to features that are *salient* in a locale, at least over a substantial amount of time. They pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. They denote fairly long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions.

Such a view is not constructivist, for it implies that there is a mind-independent fact of the matter about the frequency with which certain properties are present in places, about which one or one's group could be mistaken. Such a view is also not essentialist, for it does not imply that the relevant properties are to be found only in a certain location, throughout that location or invariably in it.

Consider some examples. Marsupials are Australian. That is true, I submit, even though one will find a number of marsupials in South and Central America, one will not find marsupials in downtown Sydney, and the day could come when there are no marsupials in Australia. Hence, a natural reading of the statement is not essentialist. In addition, it is not constructivist, for what makes it the case that marsupials are Australian is not merely that people believe it to be; if a group asserted that

marsupials were not Australian but rather African, it would be incorrect. Instead, the claim that marsupials are Australian appears true in virtue of the objective fact that marsupials have for a long while been frequent in Australia in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. Basically, they stand out there.

Here is another one: baseball is American. Again, I submit this claim is true, but not true 'essentially'. After all, the Cubans and Japanese are well known for playing baseball; it is course true that not all Americans play it or even appreciate it; and there is nothing preventing Americans from giving up this sport entirely. And again, the fact that baseball is American is not 'constructed', for if a sociologist of sport failed to mention baseball when aiming to provide a general account of sport in the States, she would be epistemically guilty of having made a glaring omission. Baseball is American insofar as it is salient there.

Now, let me turn to terms that are central to the topic of this article. Consider the fact that the combination of markets, science and constitutionalism is Western. That is true even though one will find it in places beyond Europe and America, such as South Africa and Australia, and even though one will not find it deep in the Amazon jungle among, say, the Yanomamo people.

Similarly, it is African to hold a belief in the need to respect ancestors, wise progenitors of a clan who have survived the death of their bodies and now live in an invisible form on earth. That is true despite the facts that far from all sub-Saharans hold this belief and that other traditions, particularly in the East, also include reverence for ancestors. What makes the label 'African' or 'sub-Saharan' apt is that a belief in ancestors is at the core of the moral and cosmological world views of a great many indigenous peoples below the Sahara.

In short, talk of things 'Western' and 'African' picks out features that are salient in these respective parts of the world,[2] which, *contra* some philosophers of education, does not mean that calling something 'African' implies that it is utterly unique to that part of the world (e.g. Horsthemke & Enslin, 2005; Parker, 2003). I believe that this what most people mean when they use such terms, in the light of the several examples above. However, if I am incorrect about that, then note that it would be quite useful if people were to use them this way. I agree that the sins of essentialism are sins, even if those who point them out tend to be too quick to cast stones. And if one were to be constructivist about these terms, then people would routinely speak past one another when they associate different properties with the same term (a familiar problem with the descriptivist or cluster theory of reference). In sum, I submit that my account of geographical labels accurately describes the way people use them or at least the way they should in order to facilitate comparison and debate.

Western and African Philosophy of Education Compared

If I am correct about how to use geographical labels, then, in order to characterise Western philosophy of education in comparison with African, I need to recount properties that are salient in these two traditions. Upon doing so, I conclude in this section that it is fair to deem the former individualist and the latter communitarian.

For a long while in the Western part of the world, that is in Europe, the UK and North America, the practices and philosophies of education have been recurrently focused on individual persons. Consider this first when it comes to the final ends sought out or prescribed. Practitioners and theorists have tended to prize properties that are internal to a human being, making no essential reference to anyone but her. I have in mind properties such as her autonomy, rationality, intellectual virtues, self-development, self-esteem, pleasure, desires and work-related abilities. It is extraordinarily common to find Western normative theorists maintaining that the ultimate aim of education should be to enable the young to judge their traditions, to think critically, to freely pursue a conception of the good, to realise themselves and so on. Individual agency has been the name of the game.

In addition, with respect to higher education, a notable element of Western approaches has been to seek out knowledge for its own sake. For instance, Aristotle (350 B.C.E.) famously rates knowledge of the cosmos as the highest to be obtained despite being 'useless' and not among 'human goods', and Edmund Husserl (1935) characterises the entire European intellectual tradition in terms of a propensity to adopt what he calls 'a purely "theoretical" attitude' that is 'thoroughly unpractical'.[3]

There have been exceptions, of course. To name just two, one will find some American theorists arguing that public education ought to instil the virtues essential for a democracy to flourish (Macedo, 1990) or those needed for cosmopolitan citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010).[4] Here, there is an essential reference to others besides the individual student; she is supposed to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote and participate in just power relations.

However, for one, it is implausible to think that these should be the sole or even primary final ends of education; they are best construed as supplementing other final ends. For another, as should become clear below, these relational elements are thin compared to other, non-Western traditions such as the African, where values of sociality are much richer and deemed essential to exhibit in many spheres of one's life, not just the political. For a third, these relational positions are rare in comparison with the intrinsic ones, which point also applies to the care-oriented thought about education of Nel Noddings (1984, 1992).

Turning now to the characteristic means by which final ends have been pursued in the West, consider that a large majority of it has (a) taken place in a dedicated school building and (b) been run by professional instructors in the light of (c) a preset, vetted curriculum that (d) has focused on written texts. In addition, the instruction (e) has sought to impart mainly propositional knowledge that categorises things and happenings and seeks underlying principles by which to account for them (f) established through argumentation, with students (g) oriented towards obtaining a degree or certificate so as to compete on a labour market and (h) being assessed on how well they each do on tests.[5]

Most of these elements are plausibly characterised as 'individualist' in some way, at least in comparison with education models salient in other parts of the world or in different eras. The (a) condition, about where the education takes place, is itself noteworthy for being separated from the broader community and the worlds of work, home and civil society. In addition, consider how the (b) and (c) elements keep

students apart from each other and from the instructor; teachers are typically in control of a classroom such that most of the communication is unidirectional, coming 'downward' from a single source, and what they convey is unchanging in response to student particularity. As for (d), recall Marshall McLuhan's insightful reflections on the written word, and what new, isolating behaviours and interiorized mindsets came in the wake of reading books. The content of the books and other instruction (e) is typically focused not on developing interpersonal skills or understanding facets of the world in relational or holistic terms; it instead concentrates on classifying objects and events held to be able to known in isolation from other conditions (for which, see Nisbett, 2003). The technique by which such information is conveyed or supported is often a matter of argumentation (f), that is competition between competing hypotheses in which one seeks to win by virtue of marshalling the strongest evidence. Students are typically motivated by self-regarding considerations such as doing well on a competitive labour market, viz. obtaining a job and earning money (g). Finally, assessment is normally done so that each student is evaluated on her own (h).

Of course, there are exceptions to the above. However, I submit that it is the dominant approach to pedagogy in high schools and universities in Western countries and other societies heavily influenced by them. Since the above ends and means are salient in the West, that is have been recurrent there for a long while in a way they have not been elsewhere, at least not to the same degree, I dub them 'Western', in accordance with the previous account of how to use geographical labels.

I now consider which educational ends and means may be plausibly labelled 'African' or, more specifically, 'sub-Saharan', by virtue of being salient below the Sahara desert. With respect to final ends, it is well known that pre-colonial, and more generally indigenous, African education has mainly sought to enable students to undertake labour of a sort that would support their society, to impart the customs of the community to students, and to develop their moral excellence, understood as centred on a disposition to relate communally with others (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003; Adeyinka & Ndwapi, 2002). Even contemporary discussions among sub-Saharan philosophers and thinkers about higher education have similarly focused substantially on the final ends of promoting development for the society as a whole, supporting local culture, and promoting moral personhood, or so I have discovered upon making a critical survey of more than 65 post-war texts in African higher education theory (Metz, 2009a).[6]

The relational or social dimensions of these goals are palpable, in comparison with those of the Western tradition. The interests or capacities of a given individual student considered in herself count for relatively little in the frameworks typical of sub-Saharan Africa; she is instead in the first instance directed outward, towards the interests of others or the flourishing of the group. The point of education is to enable her to take up work that would be of use to her society, to learn and adapt to its folkways, and to become the sort of person who treats others in a morally sound manner.

Note that I have been unable to find a single African thinker who extols the desirability of knowledge for its own sake. When this approach to intellectual engagement is discussed by sub-Saharans, they are invariably dismissive of it as inappropriate for an African context (for citations and discussion, see Metz, 2009b). In addition, whereas

debate rages among Western theorists about whether moral education is permissible as a final end of at least higher education (see, for example, the contributions to Kiss & Euben, 2010), African ones by and large take it for granted as an appropriate goal.

With respect to means, sub-Saharans have also been less individualistic, and one might say extremely so when it comes to traditional practices among rural, small-scale societies. Returning to the schema that I used above, education (a★) was often undertaken in the community and 'on the job' and (b★) imparted by those with a particular 'know-how' or 'knowledge that' but no special training in pedagogical techniques in the light of (c★) a given student's gender and talents without review by some group of parents or officials and (d★) transmitted orally. In addition, the instruction (e★) sought to impart practical skills and parochial world views (f★) through rote memorization, imitation and group discussion, with students (g★) aiming to contribute to the well-being of their extended families and society more generally and (h★) not being formally assessed as individuals through tests scheduled at particular times, but rather by demonstrating an eventual acquisition of the skill or exhibiting an understanding in the course of collective dialogue.

Of course, contemporary education in urban environments below the Sahara hardly conforms to this 'ideal-type' (in the words of Weber) that was common before the influence of European settlers. However, one continues to find African education theorists advocating the adoption of means reminiscent of elements of this traditional orientation. For instance, one education theorist from South Africa contends that mathematics and science should include the learner's context and be 'embedded in the cultural practices of the African majority', for example by reflecting systematically on the fractal patterns of African traditional settlements (Seepe, 2000, pp. 131–133), while another similarly advocates local and participatory, or 'community-based', research (Nkomo, 2000, p. 53). For another example, a philosopher from Nigeria has argued in a systematic way for the view that certain types of 'indoctrination', and other forms of teaching that do not necessarily encourage student questioning, are appropriate as ways to impart virtue (Ikuenobe, 2006). Finally, Kwasi Wiredu, probably the most influential African philosopher alive, has contended that 'if education is an apprenticeship in the living of life in the community, then dialogue would naturally be one of its watchwords' (2004, p. 21), and I have similarly argued that an interest in realising communal relationships, central to characteristic African understandings of virtue and justice, recommends the creation of dialogical 'communities of educational practice' and the adoption of work-based learning (Metz, 2012).

My own view is that because of the salience of individualist ends and means in educational thought and practice in the West over many lifetimes, it is fair to think of 'Western' education as individualist, with similar remarks entailing that 'African' education counts as communitarian. To some readers, these labels will still seem overly restrictive and too exhaustive, objectionably implying that, for example, all and only educational elements in the West are individualist, which is of course not the case. Although the previous section makes clear, I believe, why it would be uncharitable to read the geographical labels in that way, perhaps such readers will at least accept that the Western is *more* individualist than the African, and, conversely, that the latter is *more* communitarian than the former. That will be enough to make my concluding

point in the final section, that those in the West might have good reason to become less Western.

How to Question Individualism

I lack the space here to give adherents to characteristically Western positions about education a compelling rationale to change their mind. Instead, my aim is to indicate some prima facie reasons to doubt the attractiveness of the extent of individualism to be found in Euro-American thought and practice with respect to education, and to point out what it would mean for Westerners to change in a more communitarian direction.

Unfortunately, much of the so-called 'communitarian' criticism of liberalism and relatedly individualist trends in English-speaking philosophy of education and related theorization has not cut deeply. Too often, critics point out things to the effect that individuals cannot flourish on their own or that various institutions require certain kinds of social interaction in order to sustain themselves. However, these are sociological banalities, points that no one could reasonably question and that do not tell against individualism, construed in the first instance as an account of what to value as a final end. I am simply not aware of any influential Western thinker who has claimed that it is possible for, say, a child to grow up into a normal adult without socialisation or an adult to make substantial achievements as a Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island. Rebutting such empirical claims is, I submit, a waste of time that fails to move the debate forward; for even the most rabid egoist, individualist *par excellence*, will readily admit that in order for his self-interest to be maximised, he needs to rely on various kinds of positive sociality from family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Hobbes hardly argued that one should live alone.

Where communitarian criticism has some bite is when it poses normative questions, about what makes a life worth living, how to treat others morally, or what public institutions ought to be striving to achieve, and when it posits essentially relational answers to them. Consider, for example, the idea that sometimes it is appropriate for people to make choices because 'this is who we are'. Note that one probably thinks at some level that loving and friendly relationships are to be valued for their own sake. Ponder the suggestion that a genuine psychopath, one utterly unable to empathise, to sympathise and to act for the sake of others, has a lower moral status than someone with these capacities. Think about the view that, when it comes to distributing goods in one's private capacity, one has basic moral reason to favour those for whom one cares and with whom one identifies. Reflect on the suggestion that one can have a duty to aid those related to one, but not because one has voluntarily assumed an obligation to do so by having promised. Notice the prima facie attractiveness of the idea that one function of a public school should be to overcome divisions of race, class and the like and to foster a sense of togetherness and that a government more generally ought to promote national cohesion in certain ways. Contemplate the notion that a public hospital should fund cosmetic surgery as necessary to facilitate romantic and other desirable social interaction. Pause over the perspective that one proper function of a criminal justice system should be to repair broken relationships between the

offender and his direct and indirect victims. Finally, see that not to be dismissed is the idea that the state ought to support the institution of marriage (even if it should broaden its application in many jurisdictions) as well as to help fund counselling for couples and classes for parents.[7]

If one is sympathetic towards these kinds of approaches, then one will likely think that they should inform education and that the Western tradition needs correction to some degree. If one were to construct a philosophy of education that posited relational final ends, as well as means that gave independent weight to relational considerations, then one would in effect be developing a non-Western, or at least less Western, viewpoint. Given the current meaning of the word 'Western' and cognate terms, as referring to long-standing individualist thought and practice in Euro-America, a more communitarian approach on the part of those living there would *mean becoming not so Western*.

However, recall my point that what counts as 'Western', or what more generally falls under the heading of geographical labels, is not fixed. If there occurred a systematic shift among those living in the West towards communitarian world views and ways of life, then what the term 'Western' refers to would change. Over time, given enough movement away from individualism in Euro-American contexts, the Western would become communitarian. To return to the philosophy of language, although I do not believe that geographical labels are identical in function to indexicals such as 'you' and 'this',[8] they are similar in that their linguistic content varies, depending on the context in which they are used.

As someone who is sympathetic towards the communitarian normative perspectives adumbrated above, I conclude that the West should become less Western, or, in other words, that it ought to change what the meaning of 'Western' is. However, as someone who also believes that those in the African tradition often miss out on some kernels of truth in Euro-American viewpoints, particularly with regard to the value of knowledge for its own sake (Metz, 2009b, 2013), I am also partial to the idea that those in Africa should become less African. My hope is that this article has made the coherence, if not attractiveness, of such claims apparent to the reader.

Notes

1. And, furthermore, without suggesting that people in these locations are morally obligated to hold views with such features.
2. I here acknowledge the political sensitivities about the use of the term 'African' and cognate words. Some have argued that it is immoral or otherwise inappropriate to use such terms, given that they are apparently colonial conceptual impositions and not the way indigenous black peoples initially referred to themselves (e.g. Ramose, 2004, pp. 145–146).
3. Discussed by Nisbett (2003) in contrast to characteristically East Asian approaches to knowledge.
4. And for a recent collection of work that forms an alternative to analytic liberal approaches to the philosophy of education, see Carr (2005).
5. I borrow some of this schema from Metz (2012), but have enriched it here.
6. I note that a concern to rectify injustice has also figured prominently (e.g. Nkomo, 2000; Ramose, 2004), but I set it aside as a contingent and 'non-ideal' end, that is one that arises only in the context of serious wrongdoing at the societal level.

7. For discussion and defence of a number of these ideas, see Metz (2010) and Metz and Gaie (2010).
8. Whereas indexicals plausibly rigidly designate, referring to the essence of a being in all possible worlds (as per Kaplan, 1989), I doubt that geographical labels do and believe they instead pick out a collection of properties or, perhaps, a subject of such a collection.

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