

**ETHICS AND THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF
COMMUNAL ETHICS IN THE MORAL PRACTICE AND THOUGHT
OF BASOTHO**

By Christopher Ntlatlapa Mokolatsie

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Unless otherwise indicated to the contrary in the text, the whole thesis is my original work.

C.N. Mokolatsie
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DEDICATION

*To my grandmother
who taught me who I am,
my mother and father,
for teaching me what I ought to be
and my brothers and sisters
for giving me community,
and to Mpho.*

ABSTRACT

Contemporary sentiments both African and Western indicate the inadequacy of modern approaches to ethics and the failure of an individualistic ethics as a basis for public and private morality. Modern ethics is inadequate as a moral framework within which communities live their lives. As a result there is a need for a paradigm shift from this mainly individualistic and universalistic modern ways of doing ethics to a more communally oriented and contextual approach reminiscent of traditional African ethics.

If we hope to have a more satisfactory moral framework than the current one we need to have a moral outlook that encompasses both the ethical code governing the individual i.e personal ethics and the ethical code governing social groups and their conduct. And that framework will be something similar to the communal model that we see in traditional African communities such as the Basotho's. Such a moral framework made it possible for communities not only to be contextual in the way they approached personal conduct, but also communal.

The current moral uncertainty accompanied by vicious moral individualism in places like Lesotho, seems to me to be the result of the introduction of an individualistic ethic to the Basotho way of life. Ethics as found among traditional Basotho communities was not just a matter of the individual alone, but also of the community within which the individual found his or her true identity. This co-responsibility and mutual inter-dependency for the moral life, something which modernism and the influence of liberal ideas is increasingly eroding from the contemporary life of Basotho, ensured that there was a moral centre through which people found their moral reference point.

It ensured there was a moral thought and practice that was coherent enough to give both the individual and the community a moral base, an approved way of conduct with an implicit, but nevertheless clearly understandable rationale and justification. Such a communal approach to ethics made it possible for communities to have a recognizable moral character and it is only when communities are themselves moral that we can hope to have a moral society.

So in order to help contemporary Basotho and indeed most Africans, from the pervasive self imposed moral bankruptcy and inconsistencies there is a need to revisit and rediscover that traditional ethos to see what lessons can be learned from it for the present. We need to look back

to where we come from as Africans and only then are we going to be able to navigate our future correctly and authentically, and see what lessons of life and proper ways of conduct can we learn from our past, lessons which will be more in line with who we are as Africans in the context of contemporary modern way of living.

PREFACE

"Anybody who stands for nothing will fall for anything and
when we as a people lack things to stand for
we become easy victims to any other culture of our times
which promises us something.
This is our problem as Africans today"

ABELUNGU BAMNYAMA

My nephew say she does not know how to speak Zulu
It only speaks English. Was she born by whites?
When I greet "sawubona", she asks "what are you talking about?"
When I greet "sawubona", she says "don't talk that silly language".

What are the elders doing, if not teaching kids their traditions?
Our ancestors are weeping, where they are resting.
The Western culture is prospering while ours is dying.

Words from the song *Abelungu bamnyama*, by SABELA
(translated by Bongani Dladla)

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Africa, which is increasingly becoming a meeting point of two different worldviews, namely the African worldview and contemporary Western culture, many Africans manifest a kind of moral ambivalence and inconsistency in their daily conduct. One senses a degree of uncertainty whereby people lack the moral confidence of their predecessors. Hannah Kinoti describing this situation says that

today Africa is at a cross roads and the path has forked. In terms of everyday conduct for individuals and communities there is uncertainty, disillusionment and even despair (1992: 73).

As a result of this modern people are not only reluctant to speak the language of morality in most cases they are not prepared to commit themselves in moral debates and discussions. This manifests itself in the common attitude one often hears in which the modern person, afraid of taking a moral stance, say that "it's up to the individual concerned". All this is indicative of the greater challenge, namely the moral dilemma and confusion facing individuals and communities. This is partly due to the conflicting value systems embedded in the Western and Traditional worldviews. The traditional worldview emphasises the communal approach to life. By contrast the Western worldview has as its main focus the welfare of the individual. According to the traditional African worldview ethics was communal by nature, and not individualistic. With the westernization of African societies, there has been a noticeable change from this communal orientation of thinking about ways of conduct.

One finds these days more and more people who think of ethics or morality primarily in individualistic terms. In Lesotho for instance, there is a growing tendency of saying what I do is my own business. According to this, ethics is primarily about how I choose to lead my life as an individual. The communal aspect of ethics is thus not only fading but also seems strange to the younger generation, something uncharacteristic of their predecessors.

However, since the traditional worldview and its ethos has not totally disappeared, it is still playing a significant role in many peoples lives. According to Mugambi and Nasimiyu-Wasike the societal moral issues we are experiencing today in Africa

are the same old issues, but they have taken on the new forms and amplitudes of our time. Moral issues have become very difficult and complex, particularly in the African

context where structures and forms are changing so fast that African society seems to be in a permanent transitional stage of history (1992: 1).

In other words the disruption of the African social life by modern political and economic systems, did not mean an end to the African culture. So what we have is unplanned co-existence of these two different ways of approaching life, functioning simultaneously within the same person. This naturally results in an inner tension, and moral incoherency which, as I will argue, is the experience of many Basotho and indeed many Africans.

The practical implications of this is that sometimes people approach their way of conduct from the perspective of traditional morality, and sometimes from the perspective of their newly found moral framework. It is this growing moral incoherency and the lack of a moral centre guiding individuals and communities, that has given rise to the general unhappiness with the contemporary state of ethics and morality.

Contemporary sentiments both African and Western indicate the inadequacy of modern approaches to ethics and the failure of an individualistic ethics as a basis for public and private morality. As such I will attempt to show that in order to have a moral society we need a communal approach to ethics. It is by having moral communities that we can be able to have a moral society. The current moral uncertainty accompanied by vicious moral individualism in Lesotho, seems to me to be the result of the introduction of an individualistic ethic to the Basotho way of life.

My hypothesis, therefore, is that ethics as found among traditional Basotho communities was not just a matter of the individual alone, but also of the community within which the individual found his or her true identity. This co-responsibility and mutual inter-dependency for the moral life, something which modernism and the influence of liberal ideas is increasingly eroding from the contemporary life of Basotho, ensured that there was a moral centre through which people found their moral reference point.

In other words there was moral thought and practice that was coherent enough to give both the individual and the community a moral base, an approved way of life with an implicit, but nevertheless clearly understandable rationale and justification. So in order to help contemporary Basotho and indeed most Africans, from the pervasive self imposed moral bankruptcy and inconsistencies there is a need to revisit and rediscover that traditional ethos to see what lessons

can be learned from it for the present. Before doing this there are some preliminary remarks I want to make regarding this enterprise.

0.1 The Diversity in the African Culture

One of the arguments against generalisations about some aspects of the African peoples is what is seen as the irreconcilable differences found within the African culture. While I will agree that there are some differences I do not agree that they are such that we cannot not speak about African culture in general as this argument often tends to suggest. These differences should therefore not be used to discourage us to speak for and about Africa and its values.

According to those who emphasise the diversity of African culture, Africa is inhabited by many different peoples with different perspectives on life¹. The continent is not a homogenous society, with common practices, ritual, customs and beliefs. It is argued that in some cases even within the same country, there will be found differences that do not concern merely trivial matters of life; but moral and religious values considered central in the cultural fabric of the people (cf. Waruta 1992: 122). As a result the feeling is that it is often not possible to speak about something as African without the immediate need to qualify it, as according to such and such a tradition. This is also said to be true when one tries to uncover ethical traditions and systems of Africa. It will suffice to point out that even if this is so, that which is being qualified is something African. Not European or Indian or Chinese. It is further argued that this problem is compounded by yet another factor and that is, within contemporary African culture, which is largely characterized by complacent adoption of western ways of living and doing things, there are significant differences between Africans living in urban areas and those living in rural areas.

All these are raised as a way of pointing to the difficulty of the enterprise of organizing society and the moral life around African values and standards. Faced with these obvious constraints, especially the pace in which African culture is developing and giving way to the dominant cultures of Europe and America, the temptation to abandon the project is a real one. For some

¹ For a more detailed account of the diversity and homogeneity of African experience and their implication to studies about Africa, see Chapter 1 of Mugambi, African Christian Theology 1989, Nairobi.

it would seem better for Africans to humbly acknowledge the obvious fact that one can no longer speak of African culture -it has long since ceased to exist for what we now have is a mixture of cultures, and what is often called the African worldview no longer exists.

And yet it is such an attitude that I question and argue that it must be challenged as an excuse for the kind of intellectual laziness we who are concerned about African traditions cannot afford. It is with the same concern that in agreement with Mugambi it needs to be emphasised that the recognition of diversity in Africa should not be used to overlook the reality of aspirations for a commonality and homogeneity in the African experience (1989: 5). The problems that are being raised, instead of discouraging us, should help us to be realistic about the kind of project we are undertaking. Such difficulties should not be the reasons for giving up on the project of self explanation and reflection on our ethical traditions. Rather they should help us to be critical of what we are trying to do, aware of the complexity and difficulty it involves. It means that such difficulties and problems should not be dismissed out of hand or taken lightly, but at the same time they should not be accepted too readily as valid reasons. My reflection and examination of the ethical traditions of the Basotho is an attempt to do this.

0.2 The Unity in African Culture

The question that the above argument has to answer, and hence the challenge to such concerns, is whether the culture of the people, their sense of who they are, in this case the African people, can simply be effaced by changing their political and economic structure. The answer is an obvious no. Rather what is clear about the African culture, and perhaps the point that the foregoing concerns is making is that the present situation in Africa makes it very difficult to practice and exercise traditional African values and virtues. As much as there are differences among Africans and change is continuously taking place, the African worldview, those basic assumptions of the African people have not changed. What has changed is what that worldview has to interpret, i.e. the life experiences of African peoples. The basic framework on the basis of which an African person approaches life, interprets facts of experience and conducts his life has not fundamentally changed. It is therefore not surprising to find that sometimes, for most Africans even at present, the way people conduct themselves, contains elements of the traditional

worldview. Most people today when they have achieved some success, like graduating from university still have *mokete oa balimo* -a feast in honour and thanks to the ancestors. What this shows is that the African worldview, the fundamentals of the African culture have not been totally abolished from the social conscience of the people, not even by modernity².

One will find, therefore, in some instances African people sharing many things in common, such as the belief in ancestors, living within a matrix of invisible loyalties, social roles and obligations and responsibility to one's family and community. These may not be that visible from their observable public life today, but they are there. So in spite of their cultural differences, I will argue that African peoples do not have fundamental differences in their worldview. Hence one does find common values and practices, and sometimes a noticeable uniformity (Kasenene 1994: 138).

Hannah Kinoti, writing about this, points out that:

although Africa is a vast continent and much fragmented in terms of languages, beliefs and customs, there is adequate evidence from various studies that where the basics of cultural and moral assumptions are concerned, the bottom line is fairly solid, and that it is therefore possible to generalize to a large extent (1992: 76).

In the moral sphere this implies that there are basic traits within African moral thought and practice which are uniquely African, and thus grounds for speaking about African ethics i.e. a reflection on the adequacy of their norms and values, a reflection which should let us know who we are and who we ought to be.

What I am intimating, therefore, is that in spite of our various cultures as Africans, there are basic characteristics of our moral traditions that we have in common, which distinguish them from ethical traditions and moral practices of other cultures to warrant them as African. Here I will agree with Kasenene that while it would be misleading to overlook cultural differences in Africa culture, since the continent has always been a home to a variety of people with different cultures

² By modernity here it is meant philosophical, social and political ideas of rationality, objectivity, truth, equality, freedom and the overcoming of the domination of tradition...ideas that came to birth in the philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment. These ideas found their political expression in democratic revolutions, their social expression in bureaucratic rationalism, their cultural expression in modern art, their religious expression in the tradition of liberal scholarship, and their moral expression in the ideal of human progress towards equality and tolerance under the guidance of reason (Pertersen 1994: 103). For a more readings on the subject see post-modern theorists like Jean-Francois Lyottard, Jacques Derrida, Giddens, Habermas and C. Jencks' book The Post-Modern Reader, 1992.

it would, however, be equally wrong not to recognize the common values and, at times, uniformity that exists within their diversity, south of the Sahara. There is a common Africanness, which must not be lost sight of (1994: 138).

It is from this conviction that in agreement with him it must be emphasised that in spite of the different contexts found in Africa there can still be found alive in Africa today sparks of traditional values, attitudes, ideas and norms, because the traditional ethos has survived (cf. Ibid 1994: 138). As I have suggested the modern way of life does make living these very difficult and this may be the reason why it appears as if they do not exist.

I am going to argue, therefore, that for Africans to make sense of their present moral condition they will need to do indeed as Kasenene suggests, rediscover their Africanness. This again I will argue they can not do as antecedently individuated individuals, but as connected, inter-dependent members of communities. To do this we need to look back at traditional culture and its morality from the perspective of the particular tradition from which we have come. It is only through this re-examination of the past, looking back to where we come from, that we will know not only what we ought to do in the present moral unhappiness, but even more important what we ought to be.

I propose to do this from my particular tradition as a Mosotho. Such a self-examination, or looking into our past should not be interpreted as nostalgia or a romantic call to return to pre-modern Africa. Its value is that since most African societies are increasingly becoming secularized and modernized it becomes necessary to re-examine traditional morality and its ethical traditions and values. The purpose of this is so that we can find out what lessons can be learned from it in view of building and sustaining moral communities (cf. Moyo 1992: 49) for our times. We also need to do this because we must recognize the fact that the traditional way of life and its ethic is still viable for many African people today, and any attempt to understand contemporary moral problems of Africans which does not take this into account will remain superficial and misleading. This is because the African that we see today is a product of lives lived before him, and is a part of the chain of cultural continuity which carries the past into the present (cf. Kasenene 1993: 6). In other words in dealing with the ethics of Africa we need to recognize the fact that by birth an African joins an already existing moral story and when he leaves the scene the unfolding moral drama being acted by the community continues.

It is the intention of this work to re-examine that traditional world view and ethos within the matrix of contemporary Basotho society, and identify its implications for a re-discovery of community based ethics for the complex types of contemporary interpersonal relations and the nourishment of both private and public morality. If we hope to have a moral society in Lesotho, a society that is characterised by kindness, feelings of mutual responsibility, solidarity and goodwill, perhaps we can learn a lot from traditional society and its morality.

0.3 My starting Point

Due to the obstacles I have pointed out and the fact that it is impossible to explore satisfactorily the various African ethical traditions, and thus give a complete understanding of their ways of conduct, the primary focus here will be on the traditional culture of the Basotho. This will provide me with a handy starting point, because being a Mosotho I am more familiar with their tradition and culture than with other African cultures and traditions. This will also provide a stepping stone or an entry point to exploring African moral traditions and thought and a basis upon which general statements about contemporary African ethics can be made.

So while the primary purpose is to look at ethics among Basotho, I will also be reflecting upon broader issues concerning African ethical traditions and practices and suggesting what the hallmarks of African ethics are. What I will then say about the Basotho, in most cases will not necessarily be unique to that culture and as such will in most cases be true for other places in Africa. In that sense I will often speak interchangeably of African ethics and Basotho ethics.

It will be important to bear in mind as we reflect on ethical traditions and practices of the Basotho some central questions which will guide our focus. It is therefore my intention to explore how ethics functions among the Basotho. What influence does their conception and experience of community have on personal conduct? How does the way the Basotho think and experience community shape their understanding and definition of what it means to be a person and in turn how does this influence ethics? In short how does community form the basis of morality and function as a basis for moral judgements? How does it provide a communal and personal moral identity? Such questions as how the Basotho arrive at making ethical or moral decisions and judgments, their moral point of reference, what is it that informs their moral thought and practice

thus will become important for our study.

In other words it will be in seeking answers to such questions that the central elements of their ethical traditions and practices will become apparent. It will be by articulating elements of traditional morality that a clearer picture of what I take to be Basotho ethics will emerge, along with its communal orientation.

Before identifying some salient aspects of ethical traditions and practices of Basotho, and beginning the discussion on community and its significance for their ethical conduct, I want to look at the contemporary state of morality and the situation in ethical debates and moral thought. This is necessary because not only is this the larger context within which the moral life of the Basotho is a part, but also because it will shape much of the discussion that follows and why I think that a communal approach to ethics or morality is a much better alternative.

1. CONTEMPORARY MORAL ENVIRONMENT

A cursory glance into the contemporary moral sphere reveals a general confusion and unhappiness about ethics and its function. Describing this Hannah Kinoti says that

There is much grumbling and lamentation... People lament and grumble because they possess some knowledge of traditional morality which ensured the well-being of communities and individuals alike. That morality has been superimposed, and in certain respects rudely crossed, by other influences of the day and age in which we find ourselves (1992: 73).

This unhappiness is both on the theoretical and practical level. On the theoretical level the dissatisfaction is partly due to abstract universalistic and objectivist tendencies towards ethical reflection. This has gradually undermined the moral significance of the context of the agent i.e. the local and particular. One's context, or moral particularity is not only important but imperative for any authentic ethical reflection. The reason for this is that all ethics is contextual, because it speaks to a specific context or community. On the practical level this unhappiness is with the lack of moral accountability together with the accompanying individualistic tendencies. It is partly due to this transformation of the status of ethics that not only do we have a general confusion but often opposing views and feelings about ethics in modern societies.

1.1 Concerns and Views About the State of Morality

For most people today ways of conduct are a personal matter. Personal conduct is understood primarily as a private and not as a public matter. This has resulted in a fundamental change to the traditional idea of ethics as a communal enterprise. In traditional societies, beliefs and morals were not private matters or aspects of life to be left entirely to individuals. As such the subsequent dichotomy between the private and public sphere that we now see developing in many contemporary African societies was non-existent. Commenting on this Mwikamba points out that

with the advent of Christianity and Western culture, life has been compartmentalized into public and private sectors. This explains the existing dichotomy between public and private, individual and collective, and above all lack of "accountability" in different spheres of life (1992:85).

Because of this attitude one finds in places like Lesotho today, a growing trend in which personal conduct is almost untouchable and often not open to be evaluated by others. It is something which other people have no business getting involved in it. According to this, the individual is morally accountable to no one except himself or herself. This has not only led to individualism and privatization of ways of conduct but also to a feeling of uneasiness and unhappiness about the state of contemporary African moral environment. There is unhappiness because the society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart and because as Kinoti points out

today African society may seem to be in a state of near chaos in the realm of morality. People are disillusioned after suffering major cultural upheavals... The emergent new African-Western educated, Christianized and clothed has been something of a caricature, least pleasing to himself (Kinoti 1992: 80).

This change, particularly its Euro-American spirit of individualism³ with its selfish tendency, has not only made it hard to practice traditional African values but has also given rise to unsatisfactory moral conditions and attitudes. Ethics as an expression of the particular community's ideals, values and purposes is essentially communal, and thus cannot be privatized in this way. In this sense morality i.e. as a codification of community's standards and values, likewise is essentially institutional. It is that which evolves within a particular social institution

³ . By individualism here it is meant an attitude and conception of the self whereby the individual is understood as autonomous, independent and as essentially distinct from society. An understanding that sees the individual as having a sphere of life that only affects him or her, and within which he or she is sovereign.

and it is therefore the thing of that particular institution or community (cf. Mackie 1977: 80). This provides the community with its own moral base. The purpose of ethics will, therefore, be to ensure that as individuals and communities we live our lives in line with this moral base. It becomes a recognized way of conduct providing people with guidelines that can serve as a basis for personal conduct.

When ethics is understood in this sense it will not make much sense outside the context of communal living. It is a kind of language that is spoken between people and not by oneself as liberal individualism tries to do. For this reason the community has a very important moral role to play, and that is to ensure that ethics is not left to the peril of individualism but rather that it remains open to the critical input of the members, or the prophetic voices within the community. In modern societies this communal responsibility towards ethics is increasingly declining and in some cases it is almost non-existent. All these things have given rise to the feeling that the state and status of morality in recent years is one which is terribly unsatisfactory. The general feeling is that moral standards have deteriorated and continue to do so. On the African scene people are unhappy because as Mwikamba points out

in the past Africans were much more community-centred, today Africans are becoming more and more ego-centred. Furthermore Africans are caught up in a moral contradiction. Should one be faithful and loyal to herself/himself, to the community, the religious group, nation,... or to their wealth? (1992: 86).

This situation plus increasing individualistic moral attitudes have thus left many people without a clear sense where and what is the moral reference point and in comparison to earlier generations, morality in our age is not what it used to be nor what it should be. The traditional values and virtues such as respect for elders, charity, honesty, hospitality and communal solidarity are not only fading (Ibid. 1992: 84) but a rare phenomenon. These values and virtues gave ethics a tangible social content.

At the observable level of actions and omissions Kinoti says, one finds increasing cases of

giving and receiving of bribes, parents neglecting their children, adult "children" abandoning their aging parents,... failure to show respect for one another,...(Kinoti. 1992: 76).

All these things according to African culture cast doubt on the moral integrity of a person. At the theoretical and conceptual level, we are a people that live in a state of moral uncertainty and

a generation lacking the conceptual moral framework within which we make moral utterances. We lack conceptual tools with which to think and reflect adequately about ethics. The present modern framework, particular its devotion to the individual is unsatisfactory because by posing individuals as independent and operating on the principle of choice, it makes our moral statements and judgments inconsistent. This in turn makes our moral identity inconsistent because it lacks the enduring qualities made possible by inhabiting roles and not by choice⁴. The reason is that an identity that is determined by choices has no enduring character, because choices change substantially from day to day. The need for freedom, and in turn freedom of choice that we now see in contemporary way of living is so strong and predominant that it has been a major factor separating the traditional way of life and the modern one. This has resulted in a shift from extended family to nuclear family and subsequently from communalism and community to individualism.

This shift is not only physical or sociological i.e. where a family is no longer understood in terms of at least three generations (children, parents and grand-parents). It is also psychological and intellectual whereby most people think of themselves in very individualistic terms. Many rarely think of themselves in terms of collective identity, which is linked with inter-generational ties, social responsibilities and duty. Contemporary people think of themselves in terms of the relationship with parents, brothers, sisters and friends, but even these are dependent on choice. As a result the communal bonds of friendship which used to characterise traditional communities are weaker today than in the past. The impact on morality⁵ of this shift together with the conception of the self that accompanied it has resulted in societies where life is lived with no recognizable shared values and moral standards. What worries many people is that with this decline in the value and sense of community on the one hand, and the rise of individualism on the other, a new social phenomenon has emerged and that is a society where there can be no judgment of the conduct of others because this would interfere with the greater freedom of the

⁴. The whole idea and concept of "choice" as a modern phenomenon typifying the liberation of the self needs to be put under serious scrutiny because modernity gives the impression that people are now freer to choose. But this is hard to comprehend when the majority of people today, e.g in third world countries, for various reasons are often forced to "choose", when in fact there is no choice to make. For these people they simply have to accept the dictates of global economies and programmes of the mighty rich nations of the West.

⁵. Morality here means a system or a code of conduct containing values and standards by which people in a given community live. Ethics is a reflection on or a study of such systems and has to do with evaluations of such systems through principles of right and wrong.

individual.

According to Melanie Phillips this is the case with modern Western society. She points out that according to Himmelfarb in comparison to traditional societies, modern Western societies are very reluctant to speak the language of morality and that

individuals can devise their own moral codes; any attempt to rank them is illiberal... No one can pass judgment on other's behaviour lest they give offence. Sensibility has replaced moral sense... "Values"...is itself a neutral word that denies the firm basis of those... principles which should be more properly described as virtues (1995: 832).

The modern Western society she says is one which has rejected such principles as family values, neighbourliness and self respect which contributed among other things to personal integrity, altruism and a sense of community. Modern societies she argues have "rejected the very idea that a set of firm principles should animate society" (Ibid.1995: 832). Perhaps it is not so much that people have rejected the idea that morality should animate society, but rather that morality is interpreted primarily in individualistic terms. In other words there are moral standards but these are self chosen and informed by an ethic of happiness which in turn is closely linked and in most cases driven by consumerism. So what is good and right is essentially what makes me happy as an individual.

This way of thinking about ethics and morality is fast becoming the dominant moral attitude wherever modernity has taken root and Africa is no exception. People are not only reluctant to speak the language of morality or prepared to be morally accountable to anyone, they are after the pursuit of happiness in the form of contemporary materialism. What is perhaps more worrying is that because personal conduct has been virtually removed from the public arena and exclusively confined to the private sphere, the effect of individualism on people means that as people we no longer have any moral obligations to one another.

1.1.1 Moral Confusion and Uncertainty

Charles Kammer likewise expresses unhappiness with contemporary Western moral environment. According to him modern society is marked by both moral confusion and intense moral concern in which there seems to be not only uncertainty about the shape of the moral life, but also about what to value and what rules to honour. The emergence of pluralism and its implications for the moral existence he says is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because with the

emergence of moral pluralism there is the knowledge of the varieties of moral life but while

such knowledge frees us,...it also leaves us feeling adrift. Is all morality relative? ...Is it possible that there is no right and wrong, that the moral life,...is simply a product of personal and social preferences. We feel as if our moral lives have no grounding (1988: 33).

Indeed this is the feeling that is becoming increasingly the experience of many people. The contemporary situation i.e. one of lives lived without a moral centre, gives rise to the experience of the world as being morally bankrupt and so chaotic that the only alternative is for each person to choose if not to create his/her own standards (cf. Hauerwas 1983: 2). As a result more and more people live profoundly confused lives in which they are uncertain about how to respond to fundamental moral questions of who they are and who they should be (cf. Kammer 1988: 34). Because we are uncertain about answers to these fundamental moral questions deciding what to do on a day to day basis and making moral judgements becomes more difficult and more arbitrary, and the more we are uncertain as people about how to respond to questions of who we are and who we should be, the more we become attracted and vulnerable to emotivist⁶ tendencies of modernity. We do not only find it easy but politically correct to believe that moral statements are nothing more than just expressions of attitudes and feelings which are not governed by any criterion, principle or value (MacIntyre 1981: 31). With this we do not have to be morally accountable and by implication agents that can be morally committed.

Our problems in Africa are largely due to the fact that, because we have lost common meanings and shared values, we have no clear stand on these issues and as such we stand for nothing, and anybody who stands for nothing will fall for anything. When we lack things to stand for we become easy victims to any other culture with its social and moral attitudes.

1.1.2. Moral Neutrality, Pluralism and Tolerance

Contemporary moral attitudes are not only worrying because of the increasing tendencies towards individualism, but also because they seem to lack the kind of moral seriousness required for a society with a recognizable moral system. This lack of moral seriousness is often justified by the

⁶ . MacIntyre describes emotivism is a doctrine which asserts that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude and feelings, in so far as they are moral or evaluative in character (1981: 11). For a more detailed account of emotivism see chapters 2 and 3 of MacIntyre's After Virtue.

modern person as appropriate because it promotes moral pluralism and tolerance. While I do not question the value of moral pluralism and tolerance, I question the underlying motives behind their use in the life of contemporary moral and ethical discussion. I think much of their use and application is suspect. It seems that much of this may be motivated more by concerns by people to avoid moral responsibility and in turn to cop out from moral accountability to the larger community, than by a genuine value for moral tolerance. Unwilling to be morally accountable to others and for others the modern person tells us that they do not want to impose their own moral viewpoint on others.

No one would disagree that it's a good thing not to impose one's moral standards on others, but this does not entail moral neutrality or that a person should make moral evaluation of another persons' conduct. The reason modern people are hostile to external dimension of moral evaluation is understandable if we look back at the situation in the past. The contemporary person unlike his counterpart in traditional society, is stripped of communal significance. It is a self with no social roles and any social status and as such lacks the confidence that goes along with this i.e. speaking for and on behalf of the group. The status that person enjoyed as a representative of the community in traditional societies gave the agent authority. So when he or she made moral statements they were expressions of something more than just the individual's own likes and dislikes, but when the agent speaks purely on his or her own behalf their views become just one among many and hence they are less authoritative. This is because, as MacIntyre points out,

the price paid for liberation from what appeared to be external authority of traditional morality was the loss of any authoritative content from the would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent (MacIntyre 1981: 65f).

MacIntyre poses a very challenging question and asks why anyone should listen to such an individual or pay any attention to his moral views, and indeed we should ask, why should they? Perhaps it is this more than the supposed high regard for moral pluralism that is the motive behind the lack of moral seriousness exhibited by the autonomous self of modernity.

While there is in general a great deal of unhappiness with the contemporary moral environment, there are those who do not agree with this view. Among liberals especially, there is a feeling that the situation does not call for any concern, at least not for the same reasons given by the view just presented. For these people it is not true that contemporary moral life is unsatisfactory. This

is because in their view we are now free to do as we like, with no one telling us what to do. Our age is the age of free choice and individual rights. According to this view the contemporary moral environment could not be any healthier. Through freedom of choice and the liberation of the self from social roles and social control, the individual can claim full responsibility for his or her conduct unlike in the past when you did what you were supposed to do, not what you wanted or chose to do. So what is lamented by some as lost value in community, is seen by others as liberation and freedom from social control. It is in view of the latter, that Singer says some people speaking of morality and ethics, have in mind a set of puritanical prohibitions mainly designed to stop people having fun (1979: 1ff), particularly in some form of unencumbered or indulgent behaviour. As I will argue, ethics is much more than this. It is about how we come to choose who we want to be and the people we ought to be.

1.2 Individualism and Liberal tendencies in Africa

In Africa the unhappiness with the contemporary moral environment can be described as a result of the introduction of the liberal's individualistic and universalistic ethics within a moral scheme that was essentially communitarian. In that sense what we are dealing with is in many ways similar to the debate in Europe and America between liberalism and communitarianism. In Africa however this has not evolved or come about for the same reasons. In other words individualism i.e. selfish concern with oneself, and its emergence among African communities both as a social and moral phenomenon has come as a result of social change, modernization and the exportation of Western ethics to Africa. Unlike the West, individualism in Africa has not come about as a corrective to what was perceived as the abuses of authority by communities or groups. It was not a social reaction to the inadequacies of community, although this may well be the reason why some people are drawn towards it today. However the current dualism among Africans indicates that individualism has not emerged as a corrective to community. One finds, therefore, that some people have adopted a pick and choose attitude and approach whereby they have opted for the best of the two. In the West the situation is different. In most cases people in the West have clear positions around the issue: you are either in the liberal camp or in the communitarian camp. In Africa these positions have not as yet crystallized to that level. There are still a lot of grey areas.

The majority of people in Africa are, therefore, in the middle and have one leg in each side of the debate at different times. As such the debate in Africa will have to be looking at the issues not as mutually exclusive. This means at the best the debate will have to be concerned with the mutual purification of the excess and shortcomings of both liberalism and communitarianism. For this reason my critique of liberalism and individualism must first be seen from this perspective and as aimed towards the nature of the problem as it has emerged in Africa. Secondly this critique is not of liberalism as such, but rather of individualistic ethics which has come as a result of individualistic liberal influences among Africans. This means that my interest in the debate is only in so far as it will help in understanding the implications of communal ethics on the one hand and individualistic ethics on the other. In other words I will follow it only as a way of making a critique of individualistic ethics in favour of communal ethics, which I believe is not only the traditional African approach to ethics, but with some minor improvements offers a much better moral framework for ethics today.

Since a lot of what underlies these problems even as they are found in Africa derives from similar concerns as those that were informing the debate in Europe and America, it will be necessary to briefly outline the nature of that debate as it has developed. The current debate between liberalism and communitarianism may be described as a second phase development in the chronology and history of the debate, which seems to have been characterised by a reaction-counter-reaction movement. First the debate was initiated by what later became liberal tradition, as a reaction to dissatisfactions with the limitations and weakness of European monarchies (Daly 1994: xix). In the current phase the roles have changed. Now it is liberalism that is being attacked by communitarianism. Markate Daly describing this points out that

communitarianism is a postliberal philosophy in the sense that it could only have developed within a liberal tradition of established democratic practices, and in a liberal culture that had allowed community values to decline to the extent that a corrective seemed necessary. Communitarianism was proposed as just such a corrective...(Ibid. 1994: xiii).

If Daly is correct this is a serious indictment to liberalism. An indictment to the effect that it has failed to be a workable framework on which people should base their lives, including their moral lives. It means there have been some inadequacies and shortcomings that were so serious that people felt there is a need for a paradigm shift. This has largely been pioneered by those people

who call for a return to community as just the shift that needs to be made, or communitarians as they are now commonly known. In order to appreciate the communitarian critique, we need to know what it is that they are attacking within liberalism. Before doing that there are some preliminary remarks that need to be made about liberalism.

Liberalism has evolved and branched into many directions because it has not remained static, but has adapted to changing social conditions. This means no single characterization of the phenomenon will be able to encompass all of its major adherents. However I will try to give a definition of liberalism that will provide not only the context for understanding the current debate, but also of understanding liberalism as the basis of an individualistic ethic now informing contemporary moral attitudes in Africa.

1.3 Liberalism and the Liberal Tradition

At the risk of sounding too simplistic, liberalism can be described as essentially a philosophy devoted to the welfare of the individual because as liberals would say "the bench mark of justice is the individual" (cf. Phillips 1994: 178). Its guiding principle is justice whose function is to protect the individual's rights. Central to this philosophy is freedom of choice, autonomy of the individual, neutrality of government towards conceptions of the good life and which way of life is morally preferable. Describing this Childress says the corner stone of liberalism is

the belief in the supreme value of the individual...a conviction that the only value of the state is to remove obstacles in the path of liberty and to create the positive conditions of freedom...(1986: 347).

In similar words Daly describes liberalism as starting from the basic premise that the right is prior to the good and says

this means that in constitutional democracy, the guarantees of individual political and civil liberties take priority over any good that could be accomplished by rescinding those rights (Daly 1994: xvi).

The common factor to all these elements from the moral point of view is that they presuppose a certain conception of the self i.e. the liberal conception of the self, a self that is understood as free, autonomous, independent, and has rights and is not defined by its social roles. This conception of the self I will argue is not only informed by the liberal social construction of

reality, which it also presupposes, but that in turn it informs and is presupposed by that social construction of reality. In other words it is in the mutual inter-dependency and influence of the two that the liberal philosophy originates.

1.3.1 The Liberal Conception of the Self

One of the key features of the liberal self is that it is an individual who is free to do as he or she chooses with his or her life. In other words an individual free who is free from the social control i.e. society or the community in which one belongs. Describing what this means Mill argued that

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 (1994: 17).

According to this freedom means the ability to pursue what each person considers good, in their own way as long as this does not affect other people's freedom negatively. This notion of freedom implies that as individuals we have two clearly distinct spheres in our life -one that we share with others and from which society can make legitimate claims, and one which has only to do with ourselves and no one else. In this sphere the individual is not only sovereign but their liberty may not be interfered with. Thus Mill argues that in that part of the individual's life

which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign (Ibid. 1994: 16).

According to this there is another aspect to the notion of liberty of the individual; sovereignty.

The individual being his or her own master. In this we have the foundation and the core of the liberal perspective regarding freedom. It is freedom from something and freedom to do something or what Isaiah Berlin describes as negative and positive concepts of liberty. The former he says stresses

that some portion of human existence must remain independent of the sphere of social control... liberty in this sense means liberty *from*; absence of interference beyond the shifting, but always recognisable frontier (1984: 19).

Concerning the latter i.e. the 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty', Berlin says it derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. He says its meaning

comes to light if we try to answer the question, not 'What am I free to do or be?', but 'By whom am I ruled' or 'Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?'...

(Ibid. 1984: 22).

Both of these conceptions have not only become the corner stone of liberalism, but are major influences informing contemporary moral attitudes in Africa.

Liberals have not only put forward a view of the self which is individualistic, independent and free as John Locke puts it (cf. Daly 1994: 4), they have also argued that as individuals we have rights i.e. an inviolability which even the welfare of every one else cannot override. According to the liberal perspective as John Rawls argues, these rights are best secured by a political framework founded on justice as fairness⁷, which denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others (1984: 39). According to this theory as Rawls says quoted by Sandel

one does not take men's propensities and inclinations as a given ...Rather, their desires and aspirations are restricted from the outset by principles of justice which specify the boundaries that men's systems of ends must respect (1984: 42).

Liberals argue, therefore, that on the basis of this all that is needed is a basic framework of rights which would be binding to all, but also within which the individual can pursue their own conception of the good life. Justice in this way would serve that purpose. In justice as fairness the priority of the right over the good, Rawls argues

imposes certain criteria on the design of the basic structure as a whole; these arrangements must not tend to generate propensities and attitudes contrary to the ...principles of justice (1984: 42).

So the liberal self is a self that has rights, and these rights must not only be protected but individuals must be able to enjoy them without impeding others from doing the same.

The third aspect of the liberal conception of the self, and which has been heavily criticized by communitarians, has to do with personal identity. Liberals postulate an image of the individual in which the self is prior to its aims and ends, and distinguishable from its values. What is important is that in line with the liberal concern with freedom, the self is also understood in terms of freedom of choice. In other words the liberal self is a self-choosing individual who is independent of the desires and ends they may have at any moment. According to Rawls, quoted by Sandel, to say that the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it means that

⁷ . For a more detailed account of this see John Rawls's book: A Theory of Justice, 1971.

even a dominant end must be chosen from among numerous possibilities...I am never defined by my aims and attachments, but always capable of standing back to survey and assess and possibly to revise them (1984: 5).

This means that the self has priority to choose what are its aims and ends and does not assume inherited ones as a given. David Gauthier in relation to this says of the process of socialization that there must be a non-neutral moment in it. That is to say a moment in the life of a person in which their preference and ways of conduct are not self chosen. However, because the key factor in liberalism is freedom of choice, even this must be seen as a very temporary state of being, because as he points out

this non-neutral moment, even if no threat to autonomy, seems an arbitrary factor that stands in need of justification to the rational autonomous individual (1992: 158).

The centrality of choice to the liberal self means the significance of inherited factors such as one's preferences, values and ends is not only very small, but these very factors need to be put through the purification process of choice. As such they do not contain any moral weight nor are they binding. Hence Gauthier points out that even if it can be assumed that an individual begins with preferences and capacities that are, at least in part, socially determined

what matters is that their preferences and, within limits, their capacities are not fixed by their socialization, which is not a process by which persons are hard-wired, but rather, at least in part, a process for the development of soft-wired beings, who have the capacity to change the manner in which they are constituted (Ibid.1992: 158).

This means that the idea that people are constituted by their inherited aims and ends will not only be unacceptable, but found to be incompatible with the liberal perspective. Our identity as individuals according to the liberal perspective is not defined by our social inheritances, but rather by what we choose to be.

1.3.2 The Liberal Social Construction of Reality

What we have presented was a broad picture of the principles and ideas that form the context of the liberal conception of the self and by implication the liberal view of society. This then forms that context within which liberalism must be understood. The principles and ideas we have touched have to do with claims to freedom and rights. From this basic premise a whole range of other liberal values follow such as freedom of choice, moral neutrality, autonomy and

independence of the individual.

While these go somewhat towards explaining liberalism, they do not nevertheless clearly explain its link with individualism. That link I will argue is in the fact that they all presuppose a particular type of social construction of reality⁸. One which I will describe as essentially individualistic and sees people as separate. These values all assume a social construction of reality which does not only treat people essentially as individuals but one which aims at just that: individuals, not their togetherness but their separateness. In other words liberal values make sense only from the perspective where social relations are fundamentally understood in individualistic terms i.e. a perspective that sees a clear distinction between the individual and society and one which aims at advancing the course of individualism.

As such liberalism must be understood as a theory of social construction of reality that is essentially individualistic and one that has lost faith in community or has no interest as such in community. It is in this sense that liberalism is individualistic or atomistic. The social and political agenda of liberalism bears testimony to this because it is only concerned with limiting the sphere of social control on the individual to as little as possible, and maximizing the scope of individual freedom as much as is realistically possible. Describing this Jacques Maritain says

in the bourgeois-individualist type of society there is no common work to do, nor is there any form of communion. Each one asks only that the state protect his individual freedom of profit against the possible encroachments of other men's freedoms...the function of the State is only to insure the material convenience of the scattered individuals, each absorbed in his own well-being and in enriching himself (Ibid 1986: 122, 124).

So even though liberalism may appear to be dealing with groups or collectives i.e. the relationship between the individual and society, this is coincidental. Its main concern is not this relationship as a valuable thing in its self, it only deals with it as something it had to do. This means that as such this relationship may not only be seen as unimportant, but it is not the interest of the liberal agenda. The thrust behind that agenda is fundamentally individualistic and its motivation derives from the concern with the interests of the individual.

2. Individualism as a Social Phenomenon

⁸. The phrase "social construction of reality" is borrowed from Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book The Social construction of Reality, 1966. As employed here it is a way of describing the overall liberal conception of how society is constructed.

Individualism as a social and economic phenomenon can be ascribed to the emergence of notions of freedom and rights in people's consciousness. It originates from a desire to choose one's way to be in charge of his or her life rather than being trapped in social norms and traditions. The flowering of liberal thought in the philosophy of thinkers such as Locke, Jefferson, Burke, Paine and Mill and others, played a central part in the social forces behind individualism. It is also important to realize that as we see it today individualism rests on two factors: economic and political. In the economic sphere liberal capitalism has a major impact on societies and hence one of the important factors behind individualism. On the socio-political sphere the enlightenment enterprise seems to have had a huge influence on societies and the way people understand themselves.

While I will not go into detail identifying the weaknesses of liberalism, it is nevertheless important to point out that in Africa in particular it has resulted in unsatisfactory social and moral condition. As William Makgoba points out there are a number of problems with classical Western liberal democracies namely their value systems and in general the whole Western liberal ethic.

According to Makgoba

the most threatening of these are ...a reduction of human values, materialism, an expansionist mentality, disdain for morality and spirituality, an over emphasis on the individual above the community and a profound crisis of authority (1996: 23)

Aspects of life such as morality and spirituality are to the African people very important and to dismiss or take them lightly as liberalism seems to do will create conflicts of all sorts. Liberalism, as a central feature of Western-style democracies, can be described in Makgoba's words as having attained liberty but having lost humanism. It is this perceived loss or lack of interest in humanism and the unqualified pursuit of freedom and happiness that is worrying with the liberal ideal. When the concerns of liberty are pursued with disregard for community, the end result is the sort of uncaring individualism we see developing today. Roger L Shinn describes this as the magnification "of the valid experiences of the self" in which its social formation and involvement are minimised. The starting premise here is individual persons and society becomes just an aggregate of individuals, whereby social institutions exist to serve individuals (1986: 295). This view of society together with contemporary market forces, in particular liberal capitalism, are key to understanding individualism as the social background informing

contemporary moral attitudes. For this reason it is important in looking at the historical development of individualism to pay attention also to liberalism which is where it is clearly articulated.

2.1 Liberal Capitalism and Individualism

The close affinity between Liberalism and individualism is not so much because of the liberal rejection of collectivism or excessive individualism of libertarians. Rather it is

its concentration on rights and for its failure to attend sufficiently to the common good as well as its inadequate appreciation of community...(Childress 1986: 349).

In other words it is by down-playing the significance of the collective and tradition arguing "that the individual has natural rights" and is therefore autonomous, that liberalism is a vehicle for individualism. The moment people start entertaining a position like this, it is an indication that they understand themselves primarily as separate independent individuals. We see then how the need for the individual to have maximum personal freedom goes hand in hand with the need to have as little external control as is possible. To this Isaiah Berlin makes an important observation. He says

if I wish to preserve my liberty, it is not enough to say that it (sic) must not be violated unless someone or other... authorizes its violation. I must *establish* a society in which there must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should be permitted to cross (1984: 27, my emphasis).

What Berlin is saying is of great significance because in it we can see how liberalism links up with capitalism. What is of prime importance to a liberal over and above securing of political rights is the establishment of a social order for the individual to thrive. In other words *conditions* must be made that will allow each individual to reach full liberty and happiness. It does not take much insight to see that one such condition would have to do with the economic sphere because it is the second most important sphere in the life of people besides politics. According to this, therefore it would be economic systems that are coherent with allowing individuals their freedom to do as they like. This means liberalize the economy, i.e. have as little external control as possible, along the same lines as the political rights in the political sphere.

So just as freedom formed an integral part of the liberal political agenda in the same way it formed a central part of their economic agenda. So we see in the economic sphere that free

economic enterprise is regarded as the best economic system even today. It is believed that it offers not only positive conditions for the liberty of all, but also equal opportunities. One has only to look at the majority of the so called third world countries in contrast to the first world to see the injustice and unfairness of liberal capitalism. Materialism, i.e. the chronic condition of acquiring more and more material things, is not only seen as a sign of freedom but of meeting the individual's desire for happiness and pleasure. As William Makgoba points out the "overemphasis on the economy as the standard of judging and evaluating recognition, respects, *acceptance and success*" has resulted in people losing their "dignity, status, and respect", and this in turn has lead to moral and ethical decay (1996: 23).

We can now see how the emergence of individualism is closely linked to the market forces and in particular liberal capitalism. The reason is that through its individualistic economic ethic, i.e. the pursuit of profit, liberal capitalism pulls people away from the more traditional selfless ethic centred around communal solidarity and concern. Contemporary life style makes it almost impossible for many people to see the value of community or to live it up even when they do see it, because it is seen as uneconomical.

2.2 The Enlightenment Project and Individualism

We have seen how a number of factors are the reasons behind individualism in the social-political sphere. While these have also had their impact in the moral sphere others factors seem to have been most prominent, and of these the enlightenment is a case in point. What can be said from the outset is that in this project alone we find all the central tenets of contemporary moral environment: objectivity and universality on the one hand and ethical relativism accompanied by emotivist tendencies on the other.

As a socio-cultural reaction to the culture of the time, the enlightenment set as its objective justification of morality and the emancipation of the individual from what was perceived as authoritarian and oppressive traditional moral values. This was to be achieved by giving an account of the self that was not depended on the social standing for its identity. So inherited factors of the situated self e.g. one's roles and obligations, loyalties and commitments were stripped and regarded as not morally befitting a rational moral agent.

By dismantling these central features of traditional society, features which formed part of the

personal and moral identity of people, but failing to find satisfactory replacement, the enlightenment left that which constituted the moral centre empty and without shape or form. This meant that the idea of a shared and common moral and value system which formed the foundation of both personal and communal moral life was effectively abolished. With this the individual was then made free to create and devise his or her own moral standards. So even if the individual was still contracted to others by means of social contract i.e. a loose voluntary association of individuals to common causes, this individual could still choose to follow their own standards different from those he is in contract with. Today this is often backed up by labelling as illiberal or conservative any attempt to judge any such standards. Because of this the influence of the project was a favourable factor to the liberal project and objectives.

Along with its social agenda the enlightenment enterprise had a cultural agenda, and here too the end results were as unsettling as they were to the conception of the self that it produced. The project having dismantled traditional social organization extended to traditional morality. It put aside its central elements of ultimate ends or *telos* and tried to find a rational justification for morality. The reason for this was seen as the need to avoid the arbitrariness of moral judgments. To do this it had to do away with the traditional context and old moral assumptions. That context had three basic elements:

untutored human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be, human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos* and the precepts of rational ethics as the means for the transition from one to the other (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 51).

What the project did was to do away with two of these elements and just concentrate on ethics. As MacIntyre points out each of these three elements requires reference to the other two if its status and function is to be intelligible (Ibid. 1981: 51) and it was because this was done away with that the project failed. This failure⁹ left ethics without any public significance and individuals and communities without a moral centre. This virtually opened a way whereby ethics and morality would be rejected as a communal practice under communal responsibility. It was then regarded as a private matter and an individual's responsibility, a responsibility which the society has not business getting involved in.

⁹ . For a more detailed analysis of this failure and why the project had to fail, see MacIntyre's After Virtue, chapter 5.

So we find in the post-Enlightenment period liberal philosophers speaking of what they considered the tyranny of public opinion and the need for people to be protected against society to impose its own ideas and practices as unwritten rules of conduct on people who dissented from them. Statements like this are indicative of the type of relationship that was to become more and more predominant between the individual and the community in the post-Enlightenment period in many Western societies. It is one that is understood essentially in terms of competing interests and choices and one in which the individual is no longer an ally of the community or the society. Such a relationship is described less in terms of unity of life in which the individual and community mutually grow from each other's respective strengths, and at the same time mutually cure their respective weaknesses. This kind of individualism which has become liberal orthodoxy, I believe is still the dominating characteristic of modernity.

The consequences of this has been a very individualistic view of human nature and in turn of ethics. This became possible because the enlightenment stripped morality of the notion of human purposes or ends. In traditional thought and practice the purpose of ethics was to allow human beings to realise their ultimate purposes and ends, and in their life time work towards the achievement of these. Ethics was that which would lead people from who they are to who they ought to be. By removing teleology and then failing to find an alternative context within which ethics functioned, the enlightenment left ethics as a matter to be decided here and now alone by the individual. This made ethics vulnerable to privatising individualistic tendencies which characterise contemporary moral attitudes. It is in this sense that contemporary moral culture can be described as a culture centred around the devotion of the individual. It is a culture that functions within the framework and worldview that celebrates individualism, free choice, self autonomy, and the demand for rights, usually understood in terms of individual liberties and interests, in the liberalist culture. It follows then that moral values and virtues like kindness, rightness, wrongness, duty, obligation, justice, and trust-worthiness or ways of conduct will all be interpreted through the principle of vicious individualism of the autonomous self.

MacIntyre describing this points out that the individual that was produced by the enlightenment project who is typical of modernity, is sovereign in his moral authority because he is now freed from hierarchy and teleology, the very substance of the moral terms and concepts he uses. It is the individual with no social roles, obligations, civic duty or social responsibility (Ibid.1981: 60,

65f). In traditional African societies it was these social roles that helped to curb extreme individualism. In modern societies the type of person we have is an individual whose relation to society is one of mutual convenience where people are only in communion with others purely for pragmatic purposes and personal benefit (cf. Taylor 1984: 191). In such a relationship society or life-together becomes morally irrelevant and does not stand in any substantive relationship to the moral life, moral identity and personal conduct of the agent.

This is the condition and the moral landscape of much of Western society, which unfortunately is finding its way into Africa in an alarming rate.

2.3 The Problem of Pursuing the Liberal Ideal

Now that I have sketched the liberal position, I can proceed with the identification of the weaknesses of liberalism or the dangers and problems of pursuing the liberal ideal. I want to emphasize again that as I have suggested this critique will be made primarily with an African situation in mind. As such it is informed by an African perspective. A perspective that is informed by a worldview that is fundamentally holistic and makes no division between the private and public, the individual and the community, the religious and the political, and the sacred and the mundane. I need to emphasise this because I believe this is an important difference to bear in mind and because as I said the implications of liberalism in Africa are not necessarily going to be the same as in Europe and America or other places. So it is important to keep that contextual perspective in focus. We must not, therefore, lose sight of the African nature of the problem by assuming a universal perspective, because as I will argue what we are dealing with here is an African problem.

2.3.1 *The Individual-Community Dichotomy* →

The first problem with the liberal ideal is its distinction of the individual from the community, a distinction which is almost separatist. The extent to which it dichotomizes the individual from the community I think is not only unhealthy but can lead to impersonal communities where people have very little feelings and concern for one another because they don't have too. According to Phillips, liberalism as a theory of justice, insists that the individual is the bench

mark of justice and therefore

all judgements concerning the justice or injustice of people's conduct or of various social arrangements pertain ultimately to individuals. Even when liberals say that blacks, women, or one or another group have been treated unjustly, they mean that the *individuals* comprising that group have been so treated (1994: 178, my emphasis).

This view of people and society as a whole does not bring much hope for fostering feelings of care and responsibility for others, nor is it good for inculcating the spirit of brotherhood, communal solidarity, and a sense of duty towards others because it encourages individualism. This leads to another difficulty with liberalism, and that has to do with agency and the role of choice. Besides the fact that this is too centred around the individual, it is also not clear "what exactly this choice consists in and *how* one comes to make it (cf. Sandel 1994: 80, my emphasis). The individualistic rationality that seems to be the process by which the individual comes to make his or her choices is not only impoverished in terms of our ability to feel for one another, it is also unable to address the question of duty and one's responsibility to others. Besides the fact that it is dangerous to leave important issues such as morality to choice, a society animated by a voluntaristic idea of doing good has no real prospect for achieving it, because of the selfish impulse in people which needs something other than individuals themselves to help them overcome it. In other words it needs to be checked by something over and above the individual's conscience.

To leave one's social participation purely to choice I think is not only undesirable but also threatens to hamper the cultivation of those virtues which I think are important if our societies are to remain human. As people we are not in this life just for ourselves we have a social responsibility towards our families, other people, our nation and indeed our planet.

Accepting a strong dichotomy, as opposed to a soft one between the individual and the community, therefore, runs the risk of belittling those things that we value and can only achieve in common. This is because such an individualistic view of society sends a wrong signal to people. Modern people, individualistic and selfish as they, are not going to be motivated to have goodwill as a main characteristic of their lives when as a rule society is preaching the opposite. The instinct to do good under that sort of social order is less likely to have greater influence over individuals than in a society where individualism is being discouraged.

Because such a rigid distinction between the individual and the community, as proposed by

liberalism did not exist in an African worldview, the process of evaluating conduct and interpretation of such concepts as justice and rights was approached from a very different angle. That approach valued above all else that the wellbeing of the community, or the common good takes priority. This is because from an African perspective to be is to belong or as we say in Sesotho motho ke motho ka batho -a person is a person through other persons.

According to this the individual is understood as existing only in relation to others, i.e. one's family, relatives and community. The implications of such an understanding of a person are that not only will people not maintain this dichotomy but also that most people do not approach their own life and identity and that of others from this understanding i.e. as separate from the community. To a large extent this is still the case in most people's lives today, even though the parameters or scope of this may have shrunk to just close family members and relatives.

2.3.2 *The Liberal Individual*

Closely related to the liberal social construction of reality which is essentially individualistic, is the liberalist conception of the self. And that conception is of a self that is an antecedently individuated subject always standing at a certain distance from society, a self who is not only distinct and free, but is independent, autonomous and can choose what way of life it will lead. This is because as Mill argued, the individual's liberty means

liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like,...without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong. (1994: 17).

As people we cannot think of ourselves in this way. We are always connected to others in more than just superficial ways. From an African perspective this image of the self that is being presented is simply not there, and not many people would identify themselves in that way.

While we have our own recognizable individuality and identity, we also think of ourselves in terms of our communities or some community with which our sense of identity cannot be fully known and achieved apart from it.

In other words while we are distinct from the community, we are at the same time not separate from it. So even though to question one's identity can be achieved individually, knowing one's identity is only achievable from knowing where one comes from and where one is going, and we

know these from our communities and by being part of their traditions.

2.3.3 Choice as a Moral Requirement

The destruction of shared meaning and values caused by individualism, marked the emergence of the culture of free choice, according to which as individuals we would now be free to choose how to conduct ourselves and what moral standards to keep. This is very different from the way things were with classical or traditional African morality.

According to traditional thought we do not choose who we want to be, nor what standards we are to follow. This is because we can not choose who we become. As people, part of who we are is already established for us by the givenness of our lives. As a person I am not born into a social and moral vacuum. My life, as an entry into an already existing story, is not something that must be given shape and meaning by a framework or values and standards that as an individual I still have to choose.

By birth one is born with a basic framework upon which one conducts one's life. This includes certain obligations and responsibilities, it involves goals, ends and loyalties, and adoption of certain values and rejection of others. It includes the fact that we do not choose the parents we are born to, the community we grow up in, and the history that we are a part of, and most important, the moral tradition that we inherit.

The story of our lives is always embedded in the story of the community. We are born with a past which becomes part of who we are, and to try to cut ourselves off from it through an individualistic account of our identity is to deform our present relationships (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 205). This cannot happen without a serious identity crisis and confusion taking place in our lives. This is true for most people today. We are a generation which suffers from profound identity crisis and confusion.

In other words we have no choice about many factors in our lives because they form part of who we are. I as a first born and the only one in my family to have reached this level of education, I have my life played out for me by these very things, among which taking care of my brothers and sisters would be part of that plan. I have no choice about this, or as my mother said when I complained about this "why did you become the eldest child?" Part of being the first born is to do just that. According to the liberal view I am not exactly free, because I have not chosen

these things, and yet this is the reality of many Africans. While it has been problematic to some, it has equally not been a problem to many.

A traditional African person confronted with this idea of choosing one's moral conduct would not only be confused, but would not understand what is being said. This is because the whole concept of choice, particularly as it relates to moral conduct and identity is not only strange to African moral practice but it has no place within traditional African thought.

That morality is part of the givenness of our lives and something we do not choose, can still be found today among most African communities, in the case of parents in relation to their children. To many parents for example in Lesotho the idea that their children can choose their moral conduct, even if these are men and women with their own families, is not only confusing and something they can't understand, it is simply unacceptable. For them as parents it is their responsibility to raise their children in good and proper ways of conduct.

Allowing children to choose their own moral standards would not only be incompatible with what the role of a parent is, it would be failing to function as a parent. As such matters of conduct are not something that they have to deliberate about. It is simply a given and a part of what it means to be a parent. This explains why many African parents do not understand the irrational phobia and hostility towards authority exhibited by youngsters today. The difference lies in the conception of the self that most of these young people have of themselves today. They primarily understand themselves as individuals who are autonomous and with the right to choose.

2.3.4 *The Unqualified Pursuit of Justice*

Another difficulty with the liberal ideal has to do with their idea of justice. While the liberal concern with justice as the highest moral ideal for society is a good thing, when it is geared primarily to serve individuals who are essentially individuated selves, and not communities it can lead to a society that has no compassion, love and kindness, because each person would only be interested in what they deserve. It would seem preferable, if we are to avoid a pursuit of justice that might result in great peril to society, that it must be brought under the control of goodwill.

This is because as Niebuhr points out

any justice which is *only* justice soon degenerates into something less than justice. It must be saved by something which is more than justice (1960: 258, my emphasis).

It is that which is "more than justice" that seems to be lacking within the liberal position, something which in traditional societies was a prominent part of life. That something was called community or *kutloano* in Sesotho (friendship in a communal relationship). Maritain makes a similar observation that

while the structure of society depends primarily on justice, the vital dynamism and the internal creative force of society depend on civic friendship (1986: 118).

Such a virtue is not developed by adherence to a strict minimalistic conduct of life, restricted only to doing no more and no less than what is expected. It is rather cultivated in taking initiatives, going beyond the call of duty. It is not only encouraged but is the ideal which becomes one's goal and purpose. For the Basotho and most Africans for that matter, this meant that concepts like justice were not interpreted in a minimalistic narrow way. Rather they were understood in their broadest terms than the impoverished and narrow modern understanding.

This leads me to another related problem and that has to do with the portrayal of rights in the liberal position. My unhappiness with the liberal position on rights is not only that it says nothing about people's obligations towards one another, but that it centres too much around the idea of a basic framework of rights. By this it is meant an establishment of a framework which would ensure that the rights of people are protected and at the same time the individual does what he or she likes within that framework. While this is good to ensure justice, my problem is that it can too easily and too often be interpreted so narrowly and legalistically that justice becomes an impersonal process that excludes other human values and virtues like goodwill, mercy, reconciliation or kindness, values which keep communities human. According to Rawls

the priority of justice is accounted for, in part, by holding that the *interests* requiring the violation of justice have no value (1984: 42, my emphasis).

This is a heavy indictment on processes like the current work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and in particular the granting of amnesty to people, especially in the wake of calls for prosecutions in the wake of the horrifying disclosures of the activities some of the people were involved in. By contrast to this and because as a national community we have other ideals and interests equally important as justice, we have put their priority first, in this case reconciliation. What this has done is not only to suspend justice, but even more miraculous through this process we began to see the emergence of repenting and forgiving community as

some of the TRC hearings have shown.

These are the things that make us community and human, which a naked pursuit of justice will not necessarily allow to come forth. A community that is based on observing the demands of pure justice and not informed by other human values very soon will degenerate into a cold and impersonal community.

Another problem here is with John Rawls' argument that the principle of justice as fairness. He says that as a guide for *how* basic structures of modern constitutional democracies are to realize the values of liberty and equality, justice as fairness means that

each person has an equal right to a fully adequate *scheme of equal basic rights* and liberties, which scheme is compatible with a similar scheme for all (1992: 191, my emphasis).

According to him this scheme can be achieved by what he calls the natural position, with the feature of veil of ignorance (Ibid. 1992: 200), in which those involved would have no prior knowledge of where they will be placed in the scheme once established (cf. Rawls 1994: 72f). Two important issues emerge here. The first is the idea of a scheme of basic rights and the second is the idea of original position and a veil of ignorance. Rawls goes to great lengths to explain that the latter has no metaphysical implications and that it can be adopted any time simply by reasoning for principles of justice in accordance with the enumerated restrictions (1992: 203). To both I find Niebuhr's observation relevant regarding the way to bring about justice. He says

where human relations are intimate..., the way of love may be the only way to justice. Where rights and interests are closely interwoven, it is impossible to engage in a shrewd and prudent calculation of comparative rights... Justice by assertion and counter-assertion therefore becomes impossible. Justice by a *careful calculation of competing rights* is equally difficult if not impossible (1960: 266, my emphasis).

And this is just the point. The liberal perspective assumes it is possible to separate a person from their interest, desires and goals, and in turn be able to carefully calculate the demands of justice, something which I will argue is close to an impossibility. The Basotho way of life in many ways fits this picture, because of the holistic nature of their worldview. The notion of justice in this sense would be difficult to establish because in such a worldview interests are too mutual to allow for their interpretation in individualistic terms. Not only does it go against the spirit of mutuality, it is lacking in important communal values such communal solidarity and care, aspects

which are important in people's lives.

We can sum up this by saying that the liberal idea of rights does not only fail to encourage people to care, but would not be able to help us to deal with the question "why should I care?" a question which is important in many people's lives and communities.

2.3.5 *The Liberal Conception of Freedom*

Another problem with liberalism has to do with its position on freedom. The problem is that it presupposes an individualistic social order. Freedom as an essential characteristic of human agency is something to be encouraged, but any pursuit of freedom like all other aspects of life that have to do with the individual, must not lose sight of that communal aspect. This means in the process of securing freedom for individuals, it must not be stripped of its social dimension. The best way of doing this is to adopt a communally oriented conception and pursuit of freedom. The reason is simply that we can never be totally free. We will always share this with other people. This is even more important from an African point of view because these two spheres of life i.e. the individual and communal are very closely intertwined. It implies that the pursuit of freedom for individuals will, therefore, need to take into account the context and culture of the African people.

Since freedom in the liberal perspective presupposes a social construction of reality in which the individual is distinct, almost separate from society, entrenching freedom within African culture and moral practice will need to be informed by communal concerns, over and above those of the individuals. This is because most people in Africa live their lives from a social construction of reality that is communal. A social construction that sees the individual as part of the community, and not separate from it. This explains why most people even today still have strong ties with their communities in spite of the claims to freedom. This can be seen in the way most African people still regard for instance their responsibility to their families as an integral part of their life.

On top of this there is still concern among people about how one is regarded in and by the community i.e. whether they are seen as good people or not, even if this is only a distant concern. One finds that on the one hand for these people the image that the community has of

them and in general how they are rated is of great concern, while on the other hand they will say they do not care what the same community has to say about them, its their life that they are leading. So in spite of people having adopted the idea of freedom, they have not done away with traditional ideas such as communal approval which still seems to play a major role in most people's lives. Freedom in an African context will have to seek to promote the wellbeing of the individual without belittling communal concerns and endangering the community's goals and ends.

In this context the conception of freedom put forward by liberalism, will need to be redeemed from its individualistic orientation towards a more communal understanding and conception of freedom. It will need to be informed and based on the idea of collective identity and be protected from artificial and arbitrary dichotomies between the individual and community, the public and private life. This is because as people we are always connected to others and what ever we do will always have an impact on others, either now or in the future. As such we can never strictly speaking have a sphere of life in which the interest is ours only. Not only is it simply not true that such a sphere does exist, but as people we are not always entirely at liberty to do as we like with our lives without affecting other people in some way.

As people our life is always having social implications and in that sense the society has an interest in it. The degree of this interest may vary, but it is always there. Because of this it would seem difficult to say without doubt that there is any significant area of our lives which has no interest other than our own.

3. THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN ETHICAL APPROACHES

What has become clear about contemporary ethics is that not only is it founded on the complacent acceptance of liberal individualism, hence its individualistic orientation, but it is also centred around actions and rules or moral quandaries. Hauerwas thus describing this says

it thus appears that "ethics" is primarily concerned with ambiguous situations and hard decisions. Such a concentration on "quandaries" obscures the fact that they make sense only in the light of convictions that tell us who we are (1983: 4).

This way of understanding ethics gives ethics a narrow scope and a meaning that is shallow.

Along with this understanding contemporary ethics is also too concerned with abstract, universal moral absolutes which are supposed to be free from historical relativity. From this perspective

it is often thought that one of the primary tasks of ethics is to show how morality is grounded in unchangeable principles and convictions (Ibid. 1983: 1).

Understanding the task of ethics in this way has resulted in a universal "ethics" which seeks a foundation of morality that will free moral judgements from their dependence on historical contingent communities (Ibid. 1983: 17). This view of ethics is unsatisfactory and inadequate for an understanding of ethics as a reflection of who we are. It is inadequate not so much because of the centrality of the individual in making moral decisions, or because of its need for objectivity and moral absolutes. It is rather that this view is only concerned with minor questions of "is abortion wrong?" or "should one always tell the truth?". It does not address the important question of "how or why a "situation" came to be described as a "moral" problem in the first place. In other words "no account is given for why and how certain set of circumstances have thus come to be describe e.g. abortion, or adultery, or murder, and so on (cf. Ibid. 1983: 21).

The reason why or how situation comes to be thus described is because of the persons we are. As such moral judgements are like action or conduct descriptions, and these gain their intelligibility from the role they play in the history of communities. In other words moral judgements are made from the stand point of the persons we are and our intentions. From an African perspective, "who we are" is fundamentally linked to being a community. As such our intentions are not only informed by the community but the community teaches us what are good intentions.

3.1 The Task of Ethics

Among the Basotho ethics is not primarily about rules and obligations, whose function is to give directives on what actions are right nor is it about what actions are good or bad. To be sure it is about these and more. It is about a particular way of life in which the main emphasis is not on "doings" but rather on "being", i.e. the character of people. In other words ethics is about the ways of conduct that people have. It is about personal conduct or "*boitsoaro*" in *Sesotho*. It has

to do with the nature and character of my conduct as a person, so formed by the community to which I belong. What is important in this is the person as a moral agent.

When ethics is understood this way, it becomes more concerned with the quality of conduct within the context of communal living. Its emphasis becomes the formation of good qualities of character. From this we can then describe ethics as essentially having to do with how we arrive at adopting certain ways of conduct rather than others. It is about *how* we arrive at making judgements of right and wrong. For we all know that everyone has their own idea of what is right or wrong, what is good or bad and will argue passionately and forcefully about them. What is often lacking is how people arrive at these judgments. Ethical reflection, therefore, should explain this.

As a reflection on our moral norms and values, ethics must indicate the criterion by which we evaluate conduct and judge actions and this is what Basotho ethics tries to do. It is an explanation of the criteria I use in making moral decisions and in leading life in a particular way. Because this is often lacking in modern ethics, it fails to make explicit what makes actions right or wrong. It is not always clear what is the moral point of reference.

In ethics it is important to be able to identify this so that it can be tested, in dialogue with other moral criteria. For this reason it is necessary to know, why and how, certain moral judgements are arrived at. Are moral judgements made on the basis of breaking some laws and or rules? Or are they made on the basis of the type of persons we are as a moral agents and as members of specific communities? In other words is the type of person I am inconsequential to the way I conduct myself and on what I may permit myself to do? I will argue that not only does this influence and shape personal conduct but that it should be the basis for the way we conduct ourselves. For the Basotho "who I am" or personal identity is closely linked to a sense of community and collective identity, because as we say in sesotho "*motho ke motho ka batho*" (a person is a person through others). According to this, personal identity is fundamentally linked with being in community, and this does not only inform, it also influences personal conduct.

3.2 Events Precede Ethical Reflection

Another problem with modern ethical reflection is the tendency to do ethics in abstraction and

fascination with rules and principles. This alters the function and purpose of ethics and encourages universalist ethics. It changes the contextual basis of ethical reflection because it separates it from the events and context that precedes and shapes it. Rules play an important part in this because they give an appearance of ensuring objectivity and rationality. However as Hauerwas points out

our relatively recent fascination with rules draws on the promise they seem to hold for the *impersonal* justification of our moral behaviour... Accordingly, moral reasoning attempts to justify any particular judgment by appeal to a more *universal* rule of principle to which any rational creature must adhere (1983: 19, my emphasis).

Such a picture of ethics fails to do justice to our historical contexts our identity and a sense of who we are because all these things are located and take their significance from local and particular. As such the adoption of a contextual perspective in ethical reflection is not only important but imperative. It is imperative because without it ethics becomes an abstract exercise without any context informing it. This points to a reinstatement of context at the centre of ethical reflection. By contextual perspective here I mean ethical reflection that recognises the uniqueness of the particular and local. I mean a reflection which is therefore not timeless but one that speaks for and to a particular community or period. One of the sad facts about modern ethics is that we have forgotten that ethics is essentially social and that morality evolves out of a larger reality than the individual (cf. Kammer 1988: 9). This is because ethics is a story of a particular people or community. As an attempt to explain the way a particular people live, ethics is essentially a second order activity. It is preceded by events and life experiences. For this reason it is misleading to think of ethics apart from these events and approach it in terms of universal and abstract principles. It is as a result of this being neglected in modern ethics that it is necessary to speak once more loud and clear for the reinstatement of a contextual perspective in ethical reflection and discussion.

3.3 Ethical Relativism or Universalism

In explaining some of the problems in modern ethical reflections I have suggest that authentic ethical reflection is one which acknowledges its particularity. I tried to show how ethics is first and foremost something belonging to and situated in a particular community or social group. This

acknowledgement of the significance of context for ethics is closely related to another ethical concern, namely the debate between ethical relativism and universalism. I will not go into the philosophical complexities around this debate, but only as they shed some light on the ethical importance of context. My interest will only be to show the necessity for the moral agent to acknowledge his or her moral particularity. It is also important to realise that objectivity in modern ethics has not only been the force behind the demand for moral absolutes, but also the catalyst for ethical universalism.

3.3.1 Relativism, Objectivity and Universalism

In doing ethics it is important to avoid two dangers: extreme ethical relativism on the one hand and extreme ethical universalism on the other. In regards to the latter ethics, as a reflection on the adequacy of our norms and values, must take on a universal point of view. This does not mean that ethical judgments must be universally applicable. Rather it means that in making ethical judgments, our actions and decisions must show concern beyond one's own immediate dislikes and likes and how we stand to benefit (cf. Singer 1979: 10f). It means that our ethical approach must not be so completely particular that one fails to recognize the universal aspects of ethics. At the same time it means not being so wholly universal in approach that we disregard the local and particular. In other words in making ethical judgments my actions or decisions must be found to be compatible with more broadly based ethical concerns (Ibid. 1979: 10f). This is not the same as asking for the modern ideas of universality and objectivity. According to Hauerwas what is often presented as "objectivity is actually the distorted image of subjectivism" which

schools us to assume we can, and perhaps always should, respond to any purported immoral action with "Who am I to say that is wrong" (1983: 17).

The result of this type of attitude has been vicious moral relativism and the continued requirement of universality as central to ethical reflection by contemporary moral thought and practice. Accordingly, the justification of moral statements must be such that it is not only seen as objective but is also universal or can be universal. It's not hard to see why this is so. The concern with universality is almost always accompanied by an implied concern with objectivity. As moral agents we are thus required and expected to regard our situations from the perspective

of disinterested observers.

Personally I do not think this kind of objectivity is ever possible, for the simple reason that as people we have desires, ideals, goals, aims and values that we aspire to. More often than not we can not separate our desires, aims and goals or ideals from who we are and hence become purely objective.

3.3.2 Contextual Ethical Perspective

Because of the problems we have just mentioned regarding too much concern with rules and objectivity, a contextual perspective becomes a necessary ethical stance to prevent ethics from even contemplating such a task. Ethics as a reflection of a particular peoples' history or story (cf. Ibid 1983: 1), while it will have a universal perspective, is anything but a universal campaign for objectivity and making moral principles universally applicable.

A universal perspective recognizes the broader implications to ethical reflection, but it does not attempt to be universal. An ethic that takes on a universal point of view, therefore, ensures that ethics is more than just what I as an individual think or want. It recognize that ethics implies something bigger than the interest and or concerns of the individual (Singer 1979: 10). This is because ethics implies interests, ideals, aims and goals of a people which have evolved over time and continue to evolve. Interests which one inherits and become binding and authoritative, and whose imperatives become that which we ought to obey and do.

The universalistic tendencies of modern ethics must be seen against the background of the need for moral absolutes, objectivity and an over emphasis on the universal aspect of ethics at the expense of attaching no significance to the local and the particular. Having discarded the significance of the local and particular Western ethics lacks a contextual perspective and rejects it as an important aspect of ethical reflection. Influenced and informed by the ideas of the enlightenment and expansionist-European mentality western ethics accepted without question the notion of universal moral principles. This in turn paved a way for an abstract way of thinking about ethics and proper ways of conduct, a phenomenon which is becoming the popular moral attitude of many people in Lesotho, and in deed many Africans. This is not only because many of them have been detached from traditional communities and way of life, but as in many cases relating to Euro-American culture when it meets Africa, there has been too quick an embrace of

this attitude. The result has been that in spite of it being intellectually and theoretically possible to think about ethics in abstract universal principles, complex problems arise as soon as these have to be applied practically to concrete cases and situations. A local application and interpretation becomes necessary. For this reason I agree with Kasenene who says that

whereas it is true that there are some universal ethical principles such as truthfulness, honesty and justice, these too, are influenced by context in their application and the moral system in which a person operates (1993: 4).

This means that while people might agree theoretically about these, they almost always differ and disagree on their meaning and interpretation, and like wise about the evaluation of action and conduct. This is because what constitutes the practical social content of principles will differ according to how these have been experienced and interpreted in different communities. The universality of moral principles must be understood, therefore, as existing only in so far as they are found in their particularity, and not as independent concepts as such.

3.3.3 Context as the Social Content of Ethics

What we have just pointed out shows how ethics is not only relevant but depends in a significant way on the context for its social content and application. Charles Taylor makes an important remark in this regard in his comparison of Kant's and Hegel's moral philosophies. He points out that

Kant's moral theory remained at the edges of politics,... setting limits which the state or individuals should not tread. For Hegel, in contrast, morality can only receive a concrete content in politics, in the design of the society we have to further and sustain" (1984: 177, my emphasis).

Taylor's remark is important in two ways. In the first place it helps in understanding origins of contemporary moral attitudes which are largely influenced by ideas of people like Kant. Secondly because it reiterates the significance of context as the content of ethics. It is from the context that ultimately moral principles and moral judgments derive their meaning and not from some theoretical deduction of an abstract universal principle. The community, therefore, as the context for ethical reflection is an important ethical entity. It provides the content of ethics by its identity, i.e. its tradition, norms and practices by which it determines what is good and bad.

As we said earlier if answers to questions of who we are resides in part in our communities and

if we arrive at making moral judgements by way of our identity, then our communities are an important component in the process of ethical reflection. They teach us what things to value and not to value. For this reason the community as the primary ethical context, where people learn what is justice, honesty, and other moral values and virtues; is very important as the proper context for ethics. As the first form of human interaction larger than the immediate family, the community is a school where we learn how ethical principles function. It is in community that people learn to be moral.

Since the community is not static, but is evolving, it is of its very essence to defy any tendencies towards moral conclusiveness or absolutism, elements which are always implicitly inherent in moral universalism. So as the context in which we come to terms with the complexity of moral principles and their application the community is also the appropriate moral starting point for ethical reflection. Only from here are we able to explore and dialogue with the broader moral context.

3.4 Reinstating Context in Ethical Reflection

The attempt in modern ethics to secure a moral framework which is "unfettered by the contingencies of our histories and communities" (cf. Hauerwas 1983: 7) has resulted in modern people finding themselves in an ethically difficult situation. This is because the more and more we try to be objective, the more we realize that to "disentangle" oneself from his or her our own engagements in that way is not only difficult, but impossible. As a result we feel it's better to be reluctant to make moral statements. The centrality of objectivity in ethics means that, in making moral statements the agent is supposed to put little significance, if any at all, to their context. This renunciation of context has a peculiar effect of disembedding us as agents, hence the feeling of being morally adrift. If anything is to be learned from the lack of agreement on application of the so called universal moral principles, it is that there is more going on between the context i.e. the culture, experiences and history of people, and how moral concepts are understood and interpreted than we want to admit. The lack of appreciation of the moral significance of the local and particular can thus be ascribed to an over emphasis on objectivity as the standard for evaluating and judging. However there are problems with an unqualified

pursuit of objectivity. There is no doubt that some of the concerns behind the need for objectivity are necessary. In other words not everything about modernity and its relation to ethics is bad. For instance it is important that ethics is not just an arbitrary imposition of constraints on others, that it is not be a disguised way of imposing purely subjective sentiments upon other people. So instead of attempting to be objective, it seems preferable that we should rather incorporate those concerns it was meant to address into a contextual approach to ethics.

3.4.1 *Disembedding of Ethics and People*

As moral agents we are always embedded subjects. We are members of communities with a particular moral identity, culture and environment and these constitute our context. We are always operating from these particularities as our specific moral starting points and the givenness of our moral life. It is here that we are embedded and so is ethics. For this reason ethical reflection that starts with the complacent acceptance of universality and objectivity and the relegation of the particular and historical to insignificance is an illusion. This is because as MacIntyre points out

particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belongs to man as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical moral philosophies, is an illusion, and an illusion with painful consequences (1981: 205).

According to modern ethics the moral agent is supposed to regard the ethical issues they are confronted with from anyone's point of view (cf. Hauerwas 1983: 17). This requires the moral agents to think of their context as immaterial to their ethical processes. This is not possible because as people we are essentially bearers of tradition ~~w~~ether we acknowledge it or not (MacIntyre 1981: 206). Modern ethical thought and practice, desperate to disassociate itself from the historically contingent, tried to develop universal maxims and reject the significance of the local and particular. Its reflection would be one that comes from "above" not from "below", and its content is abstract principles or propositions and not the events of peoples lives and experiences. Hauerwas thus states that motivated by the desire

to avoid any arbitrary normative recommendation, ethicists have sought to formulate "metaethics"-that is, a formal account of the nature and basis of moral principles-which in itself entails no single proscriptive alternative (1983: 17).

This fear among ethicists of being regarded as relativists pushed ethics further away from its

mutually exclusive is a misplaced debate. According to him the debate becomes over simplified because often it does not take into account other base points and the way they are related to the discussion of context and the use and authority of principles (1971: 101, 125). While his concern for an awareness of the interrelatedness of the sources of ethics is valid, it does however make a big difference to one's ethical reflection, which of these is chosen as the starting point. I agree with him that holding context and principles as mutually exclusive is not healthy for ethical reflection. However I shall insist that it is important to have a clear distinction between them when it comes to the starting point of ethical reflection, because there is big difference between them.

Context acknowledges that there is no neutral starting point from which reflection on the nature of the moral life can begin. The authority of principle by contrast runs the risk of ignoring this and often it treats principles as set of rules justifiable in themselves. The truth is they are not because when treated like this they become unintelligible. They will only make sense within the particularity of the context in which they function.

It is because of this that I believe that it makes more sense and hence preferable to choose context and not the use and authority of principles. We are what we are because of our contexts, both in terms of our past inheritance and the present communities we are members of. We cannot enter a reflection arena any other way other than as the persons we are. As such it is not only logical, but proper that our contexts be our moral starting point because as Macintyre says

it is not just that different individuals live in different social circumstance; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this and that city, ... I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. ...As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This gives my life its moral particularity (1981: 204f, my emphases).

In other words as a moral agent I am situated in a specific set of social circumstances which forms my immediate moral context. In it the meaning of so called "universal" moral principles will be understood differently from another context. One of the concerns that Gustafson sees as problematic with an exclusive choice between context and principles is that by not sufficiently moving to other levels, this debate has assumed that the matter of how moral decisions are made could be separated from other considerations, which are equally important as the basis upon

which moral decisions are made (1971: 125). To this it should be said that one can only move to other considerations, such as the situation or consequences, from one's given moral particularity. This does not mean an exclusive use of context for making moral decisions nor does it mean a rejection or devaluation of the moral significance of context and is not equal to the extreme relativism found in emotivism. It is only saying that it is important to acknowledge one's context as primary and that is important to adopt of what I called a contextual perspective. This we do by acknowledging our moral particularity. Without this to begin from there would not even be anywhere to begin. In other words I am only able to embrace other base points by moving forward from such particularity.

It is equally important to realize that, the fact that I have this moral particularity and that I find my moral identity in and through my membership to a particular community e.g. my family, or my village community, does not mean that I have to accept the moral limitations that may obtain there (cf. Macintyre 1981: 205). Rather that through my interaction and dialogue with other moral particularities and being challenged by them, I continue to reflect on the adequacy of the norms and values of my moral particularity and starting point.

According to this our historical circumstances and context are, therefore, not morally incidental but rather stand in a substantive relation to our moral thought and practice. All of which ensures that ethical reflection does not become a floating enterprise with no reference to its context. It is in this sense that I will argue that ethics as found among the Basotho was contextual, because their moral life was lived and organized around the community as their primary context.

4. THE BASOTHO CULTURE AND WAY OF LIFE.

Traditional life in Basotho culture was essentially organized around community in the form of numerous clusters of "*metse*", or villages. Some were small others were big, but what ever the size members of the village knew one another, even much better than people who live on the same street in urban areas. The community or "*motse*" (village) both as the basic social organization and social institution is, therefore an important background, as the place where the Basotho's concept and experience of community derived its meaning and character.

Today villages have not only become closer to one another but have become bigger (Lapointe

1986: 29). This means that the majority of Basotho still live their life primarily within the context of community as the basic form of social organization and institution. However the corresponding attitudes or rather the spirit that in the past characterised the community as found in the village is fading. The *tone* of inter-personal relationships, the bond of friendship that characterized earlier social relations in the community are increasingly becoming rare, noticeably in urban areas.

But in general life for the Basotho is lived in close social relationships or communion in which there is a face-to-face presence. Because of this it is not common to find single homesteads, hence the saying in *Sesotho* "*ha ho ntloana-'ngoe*"- there is no house by itself. Life lived within the framework of community means more than just being in the same locale. It means a face-to-face contact with neighbours, whereby they are known by name and as persons with social roles. Life lived in this manner meant that social relations were aimed at having a healthy bond of friendship among members of the community. Before looking at this in detail there are a few preliminary remarks I have to make concerning contemporary discussions around the subject of community.

Today the term community is surrounded by much ambiguity. The reason seems to be either that people speak of community primarily as a concept and then only afterwards do they look at the social realities to which the concept applies. This way of discussing the subject is bound to encounter problems, because in the first place the concept has come out of a specific social reality. Secondly in each of these social realities community takes on a local variance. As such trying to find a definition, which often can be universalized, through a deductive process is not going to offer workable alternative.

Community, as a concept describing a way of life, comes about as a result of observing, and trying to name a particular way in which people relate and live. In other words the concept is not prior to the life experiences out of which it has emerged. As such it cannot have an independent meaning, which can be accessed and then applied to various human groupings, and where it fits there is community, and where it does not there is no community. Such a mechanical view will not work because community refers primarily to a way of life and the corresponding tone of inter-personal relations.

By focusing on the concept or definition of the term, the events that preceded and from which the concept was found are pushed to the periphery. It is not surprising that in their absence the

concept is not only illusive, but seems to have no concrete meaning because it is these that give content to the meaning of the concept.

As I understand it community can not be reduced to this kind simple definition or explanation. As such even as I describe it, I will deliberately avoid giving a specific definition because I want to avoid the obsession with definitions, which to my mind is the quintessential feature of modernity in its campaign to master and have full control over everything. Community as found among the Basotho and indeed many African societies was something that could not be mastered in this sense. One grew into it theoretically and practically, and could only get better at it. This meant that at best it was understood by observing it in action. In other words I will argue that it is only after being exposed to the community in action that a correct description could be made. Even then such a description is not definitive, because community as a lived experience is a living reality that is always evolving. All that such a description will do, therefore is to highlight central aspects of community as a kind of commentary on the observation of the reality in real life situations.

4.1 The Basotho Understanding of Community

Community among the Basotho is primarily a statement about life, a life together in common. This understanding can be seen in some of the common proverbs and expression that the Basotho used in their daily life, proverbs such as "*hlaahlela le lla ka le leng*", "*matsoho mabeli a ea thusa*", "*ntja peli ha e hloloe ke sebata*", "*tsoho la monna ke mookolla*", "*re batho ka ba bang*" (Sekese 1994: 53). What these expressions have in common is the idea of solidarity, of co-dependency as the way to live. These expressions complement one another's meaning and thus give a much richer understanding and meaning to community.

The basic attitude or the virtue that is being articulated and one which underlies these proverbs is that of *kutloano* or friendship in which the emphasis is on the tone of interpersonal relations and the value of living in friendly relationships. The term *kutloano* comes from the word *utloana*, denoting the act of hearing each other which in turn comes from the verb *utloa*-to "hear" or "feel". But for the Basotho like most Africans the seat of all feeling, thought, will and all life is placed in the heart (cf. Casalis 1861: 243). Bujo describing this as the characteristic feature

of an African says

the ethical African does argue with his or her head, but attributes everything, including speculative arguments, to that organ which is central in the human, namely to the heart (1992: 100).

Accordingly, *kutloano* in this sense denotes a feeling where there is a bond of friendship in community characterised by agreement of wills. Something akin to the christian idea of being one in mind and heart. This is because as Maritain points out

friendship brings about agreements of wills, required by nature but freely undertaken, which lies at the origin of social community (1986: 119).

Where this spirit prevails the Basotho say of the situation "there is *kutloano*" and of the people involved "*ba ea utloana*". *Kutloano* is, therefore, a kind of social relationship plus the corresponding emotional feelings akin to what we know as friendship.

Friendship as a way to describe the idea of *kutloano* must not be confused with the modern conception and use of the concept, where affection is usually the central issue. Rather it must be understood as referring to a type of social and political relationship, rather than a type of emotional state (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 146). This does not mean that the affective dimension of the bond of friendship is unimportant in friendship as a social or political relationship. What it means is that this does not become the sole defining feature of the bond of friendship between community members.

Friendship as a paradigm for community will then mean that such a relationship can not be derived and be based upon utilitarian or pragmatic motives, nor can it be defined solely in terms of the mutual pleasure brought by being in that relationship. The bond of friendship between members of the community derives mainly from their shared concern with the community as the common good and their goal and purpose. *Kutloano* as a description of Basotho understanding of what community is in many ways closer in meaning to this view. This can be seen in the difference in the usage of the term to describe on the one hand the relationship between two close friends and on the other hand to describe the relationships obtaining in the community.

When used to describe the bond of friendship between two friends, *kutloano* has the same meaning and connotations as the modern conception of friendship where affection is often the central feature of the relationship. However even in this context the term still maintains that element of an agreement of wills. As a description of the bond between members of the

community we find that the centrality of affection decreases in prominence, not importance, and the communal understanding of *kutloano* increases as a social relationship in which the agreement of wills is that of the whole community.

As a description of a social relationship it, therefore, means living together with a high degree of mutual concern, feelings for one another, and a general agreement among members with a common will. As a main feature of community among the Basotho *kutloano* may be described as a genus, and its species being values like communal solidarity, harmonious relationships, and all other African values and virtues.

What is important to note here is the extent to which the sense of being community is an important aspect of the way of life of the Basotho. This is also the case with African culture in general south of the Sahara, where one finds that the most prominent feature of life is the sense of community and concern that people had for one another. This is so basic to the African way of life that it could be said to be the rationale behind much of the observable aspect of the African culture. Because of this in traditional societies every person was thus related to another, and there was no person who did not belong, not even strangers¹⁰ or unknown persons. These relationships which could either be by blood, by marriage, or friendship were emotionally seated and cherished dearly.

4.1.1 Community as Life-together

Kutloano as the basic feature of life in community presupposes a life in common. As a virtue it is, therefore, highly valued and necessary for the community to be community. As the main characteristic of the life of the African person this means that Africans by nature are community people. Somewhere in the nature of the African is this strong sense of community or belonging, and because of this there are still traces of this even in the lives of modern people.

Commenting on this Setiloane says that the most common complaint among many Africans who are studying in Europe or America is the lack of community they experience. The privacy of life and individualised form of social living which Western culture has come to almost make a

¹⁰ . In Sesotho there is no word for a stranger. A person who was unknown was simply called *motsamai*, the one who travels. And when "the traveller" arrives in a village he would be asked to recite his or her *seboko*, (totem) in order to establish who in the village are *me-hahabo*, his own people i.e those with same totem. After they have been identified they are charged with the care of this person until his stay is over. If there is none, such a person becomes the responsibility of the chief.

religion of, for these poor Africans he says becomes an unhealthy environment which results in loneliness and depression (1986: 9ff).

From this we can see that community even today, impoverished as it may be, is more than just a nostalgia for the past. It is a need that is real and deeply felt. This also shows that community is more than being in the company of other people, because these African students would most definitely be around other people. In an African understanding community was about the quality of relationships in a life lived in common (Ibid. 1986: 9f). This is perhaps what is found missing in the individualised, private social living of Western culture and indeed most of contemporary African culture. Life that is lived in common.

By saying that a life that is lived in common it must not be assumed that this means there are not differences. What it means is people valued living together as a community in spite of the differences and sometimes even conflicts. Because of this in Sesotho there is a saying that say "*ntoa ke ea ma lula 'moho*"- the fight is for those who live together. ↵

The idea behind this is that even people who live together they too do have differences and now and then will "fight" or have different points of view. The moral lesson here is two fold. First, the members of the community are told on the one hand that the fact that they are in communion with one another does mean that there will be no "fights", differences, and sometimes serious ones in their relationships.

On the other hand they are told that when they do have fights or differences, which may sometimes lead to mutual excommunication, they must remember that it is not unusual. They must know that this does not mean they cannot and indeed should not be in communion with each other or one another again. According to this we see how community was important. It was so important that even when personal differences made it difficult to be community people were discouraged not to let these be the sole determining factors of their communion with one another. Rather they were encouraged to transcend these and get back to living life in common.

4.1.2 Community as Knowing Face-to-Face

The African understanding of community as life together whereby *kutloano* prevails also means that there is a great emphasis and value put on a face-to-face presence of persons. This person-to-person relational presence formed an integral part of the African experience and conception of

community. People were expected to relate to one another just like that, face-to-face. This type of relationship, as the expression of relational proximity, is the practical and theoretical actualization of the presence and proximity of the other as a person.

One of the sad things about our inter-personal relations today is that even though we are highly inter-dependent on one another in so many ways, this inter-dependency is not only shallow but very abstract. In fact it is because of the abstract nature of modern social inter-actions that much injustices have been done to the majority of third world countries by modern economic systems. Our trust in one another is no longer in persons who are known, but rather in abstract social inter-actions. As such even our face-to-face relations in most cases they lack depth and have no real significance, and because of this not only have we failed to know people as people, we have also failed to recognize their presence. According to Dussel the experience of the nearness of persons in the face-to-face relationship makes the other one's neighbour, because it is by being face-to-face before another that one becomes someone (1986: 9f).

In other words in a face-to-face presence before another, a person-to-person relationship, it becomes important to know whose face am I face-to-face with. When that face begins to matter, the other is known and their presence felt, and not just seen.

It is this that was important for the African experience and understanding of community. Such a relationship enabled members of the community to know one another in a way that is not so common today, and by far superior to how we know one another these days. It was knowledge in a way that everybody knew everybody else's experiences. This meant knowing and sharing one's neighbour's difficulties, happiness, sorrows and many other aspects of life that today we would not necessarily know of our neighbours. Because people knew one another in this way it was easy for them to care and be concerned about one another. Even more important is that it became possible for people to have faith and trust in one another. In this way, faith in one another became the communities' hope in one another in their common purpose of being community, and all this was sustained by love as the bond of friendship or *kutloano* in the community.

These virtues were thus not only central but formed the foundation of community life. They were also a statement about life in common because of their emphasis on the importance of harmonious relations with one's neighbour as a special charge to individuals within the

community. Thus these virtues as a way of making concrete and giving shape to the practical living of the relational demands made and expected of communities, affirmed the communal nature of life as found among African communities.

4.2 The Basotho Worldview

Much of what I have been saying about the Basotho culture and way of life, is based on their understanding and ideas about reality. In other words on their basic assumptions or worldview. In this section I want to look at that African worldview. This will in many ways assume and be heavily dependent on the past. This is because it provides a relevant background for understanding the current situation. In other words even though my concern is with the present, without a good understanding of the past i.e. the traditional way of life it will be difficult to make sense and understand what is happening at present. In other words without a better understanding of traditional African ethical traditions i.e. where the contemporary African comes from, understanding his present situation will not be easy because the present is the result of the past, and the future is the result of whatever is being done today (cf. Mugambi 1992: 16). To understand who the present Africans are we must recognize that the history of their lives is part of the history of lives lived before. So to get a better understanding of what is happening in their moral lives and environment we will need to take into consideration their past. For this we must examine the African culture and in particular its worldview, because a worldview affects people's decision about what they should be and how they should act (cf. Kammer 1988:21). In other words the way they conduct themselves.

By worldview I mean people's basic assumptions about life and reality and that which informs all other aspects of their life. I mean those things that form part of what a particular people have taken as a given and which function as their basic framework. Because it functions in this way it is often so familiar that its interpretative processes are routine.

This means that often we are unaware of them and if we are they almost seem automatic (Ibid. 1988: 19). In the moral sphere this results in what we can call habits, and I will argue that habits have more to do with who we are i.e. our characters than with doing things out of custom. A worldview, therefore, as Kammer points out has to do with

general presumption about the final principles and powers that underlie existence of both natural and human history... presumptions about human nature, the nature of the world in which we live, and human society (1988: 20f).

The Basotho worldview is very much like this. It is a set of presumptions about life and what it means to be a person. These are found in one way or another in two inseparable and interdependent key elements, namely holism and religion. In this way we can speak of one of the legacies of even a contemporary Mosotho as being the sense of the religious. We can therefore expect to find this reflected in his or her life. Basotho, like most Africans, do not draw a sharp distinction between the social and the religious, religion and culture, or morality and religion. Life for them is a single reality understood as a unity with religious and moral obligations that are lived out in community. In other words in addition to being communal, ethics for Basotho is rooted in their religion, e.g. in the significance of ancestors to their life¹¹. Studies on the subject of ancestors have far too often been used to highlight only the religious sphere of the life of the African people. The very same studies have shown, even if in a limited, way that ancestors do affect people's decisions about what to be and how to conduct themselves. In this way the ancestors had an ethical role, because as religious figures they influenced the life of the living and the way they conduct themselves (cf. Pula 1988: 30, Manyeli 1992: 46).

In examining the African worldview I will argue that holism and religion have great mutual influence on each other. Some people add communalism as the third element. As I shall argue communalism or community is the corollary of the African belief in the unity of all things. As such in giving the description of the African worldview and how it impacts on life and ways of conduct, I will not treat these as separate elements.

4.2.1 Holism as the Basis for Community

According to the traditional African worldview all things belong together. In the eye of the African the world is made up of supernatural and invisible realities, human beings, plants, animals and all other created things all belong together. According to traditional belief this unity originates from the common origin in the Supreme being i.e. their creator (cf. Moyo 1992: 50).

¹¹. For more on the significance of ancestors to the African way of life see Bujo's African Christianity, chapter 3.

It is because of this belief that the African worldview is holistic in orientation. This implies that in examining some aspects of African culture one has to bear in mind the significance of these to the larger reality. It means that a fuller understanding and grasp of these needs an awareness of the place they have in the overall schema of the African worldview. As such this is an important reminder for us as we look into ethical traditions and practices of the Basotho.

It means we should not understand them fundamentally as self-contained and explanatory or treat them in isolation, but rather that they should be regarded as parts of a whole within which their full meaning and significance derive and take form. Kasenene, describing this, notes that the African worldview blends the sacred with the mundane and that the religious and the moral intermingle with the physical, material, political and social concerns of the people. This means it stressed the wholeness of life and not just that of humanity but of human beings and their environment. As such he argues that

in all they do, Africans strive to promote the well-being of the members of society, and this is attained where there is personal integration, environmental equilibrium, social harmony and harmony between the individual and both the environment and the community (1994: 142).

This belief had even greater obligations towards human beings themselves. It meant that this connectedness of all things and the idea of belonging together must be even more visible among human beings themselves (cf. Bujo 1992: 23).

In other words if people were expected to live in harmonious communion with the rest of creation, even greater was that expectation in relation to their fellow human beings. In other words this unity must be reflected in the way human beings live including the way they live their moral life.

According to traditional thought, therefore, people were not only expected to be in communion with the rest of reality, but they were also expected to live in unity and solidarity with one another. Human existence was thus primarily understood in terms of corporate existence through which life reaches its fullness and wholeness.

4.2.2 Holism and the Wholeness of Life

African worldview as we have just seen was essentially holistic, and as result its view of life was a holistic one whereby life was seen in its wholeness. This wholeness of life meant that there was

no separation of human life into the different compartments such as modernity requires. The personal and communal, private and public aspects of life all blended together.

However this did not mean that there was not distinction between them. In other words there may well have been a distinction, but it was one without separation. Besides the exact nature of this distinction according to traditional view would not be interesting nor would it be seen as important. What was important was that life be understood as a whole, whereby the present of one's life was lived and understood in view of their past and their future with no separation between the private and the communal.

Describing the post-enlightenment period regarding this says MacIntyre says that

any contemporary attempt to envisage each human life as a whole,... encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical. The social obstacles derive from the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour (1981: 190).

It is this understanding of human life that marks the difference with contemporary societies. According to traditional thought the fullness of a person's life and wholeness of life could not be achieved apart from living with others in community. A life that was lived alone was considered not whole and fulfilled.

Because of this conception one sees the enactment of this belief among most African peoples from the very beginning of the person's life, in the elaborate communal rituals celebrating life at birth. Among the Basotho for example when a child was born the understanding was that it was born to the whole community, whereby the new life (the baby) was regarded as a gift to the family and the community. As such they celebrated this life as a communal responsibility from the moment of birth (cf. Bereng 1987: 36). The women of the village would bring various gifts and be around for a week or two to help the family and take care of mother and child. Many African peoples as a result lived life primarily as a communal thing and there was very little if any at all of the notion of a personal life in the individualistic sense. In other words for Africans life by definition was that which is to be lived in community and never individually.

Because life was essentially communal it was permeated by strong social concern. This started with the smaller and inner circle of the extended family community, where it was most intense, but by no means did this end there. It went beyond this level to the broader level of the village community, which in turn is part of the larger national community. As Moyo points out

it is this sense of belonging together, of being a community of related person, that makes it possible for members of traditional society to share what they have with the needy in the community (1992: 53).

So what we see here is how the African understanding of life as a communal enterprise influenced social behaviour and lead people to a sense in which members became keepers of one another and feeling responsible for every other (Ibid. 1992: 52). This seems to be a more plausible explanation for the interest in community among Africans rather than mutual dependency for the protection of self interests, as some critics have supposed. This traditional understanding of life was not only significant but determinative of the way the African looked at life, understood his or her identity and conducts himself or herself. Within the African worldview holism as the totality of reality, played a very important role as that which informed daily conduct in community.

Since my argument is that there is a need for a paradigm shift in ethical thought and practice, a shift away from a universalistic and individualistic ethics to a communal and local approach to ethics, I need to clarify the secondary claim I am making i.e. the value and necessity for community. In other words in order to make this argument persuasive it is necessary to explain the moral significance of community as understood and experienced generally by Africans, in view of drawing out the implications and lessons of such an understanding for how we should build communities in our present way of life.

5. THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE OF COMMUNITY

Earlier I pointed out that moral decisions are made from the stand point of the persons we are. Among the Basotho people "who we are" which was essentially to have "*botho*"-personhood, is intrinsically bound with community, because according to traditional thought there is no existence apart from the community. The community as the social embodiment of a specific configuration of values and virtues, therefore, did not only confer roles and responsibilities, which formed part of the moral identity of its members, it was also the moral context within which people found their identity and character. It was in the community that character was formed and shaped. Because of this it was not only unthinkable that one could live one's moral life outside it, but

that one could choose their identity or character and way of conduct. As the primary context within which individuals lived their moral life, the community determined what was good and what was bad. It gave content and meaning to "right" and "wrong". It is in this way that Richardson explaining the ethics of Aristotle says that

there can be no way of judging the goodness or otherwise of the person without reference to the particular community in which the person belongs (1994: 93).

According¹² to this, not only is what is good socially relative, but that which is regarded as morally acceptable in one community is not necessarily going to be regarded in the same light in another community. Again this shows the contextual nature of ethics and the normative function of community. The following description of community among the Basotho is, therefore, to illustrate and explain this function of community because that which is good must be understood according to the describable nature of each community (Ibid. 1994: 93). The most explicit statement about community in Basotho culture is perhaps found in the well known proverb "*motho ke motho ka batho*¹²", a person is a person through other persons.

Since it was not of the nature of traditional African thought to be formulated with the kind of scientific and philosophical style normally found among academics and scholars, it is in such expressions as this that the deepest convictions and what was regarded as important was communicated, narrated, retold and preserved. In this proverb we get important beliefs such as the Basotho understanding of community and of "*botho*", personhood. We find in it the deepest and most profound statement and understanding of the importance and value of community and the place of the individual in it. It expresses the African version of what Augustine Shutte describes as intersubjectivity of persons whereby

there is a unique form of dependency on other persons for the exercise, development and fulfilment of precisely that capacity that makes us persons and subjects, the capacity for self-awareness and self-determination (1994: 28).

The proverb is in this way both a theory of community and of individuality. In it there is on the one hand what it means to be a community and what community ought to be, and on the other hand what it means to be a person and what a person ought to be. To analyze this proverb I am

¹² . In Zulu and Xhosa there is similar proverb "*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (Shutte 1994: 28). The Vendas too have a similar one, "*Muthu u bebelwa nunwe*", a person is born for the other (Kasenene 1994: 141). While I can not speak for the these people, I do however believe that in these proverbs we find an expression of what it means to be community.

going to look first at its communal implications and in the following chapter at its imperatives to the Basotho understanding of *botho*, being a person.

5.1 The Community as a Moral Criterion

The proverb as a statement about what ends the community wanted to achieve and what values it wanted to embody, expresses how the Basotho understood not only their personal relationships, nor what it meant to be a person, but also the moral function of their communities and their purpose. In it we, therefore, have the richest deposit of Basotho thought and insight about the role and purpose of community. The proverb expresses the ideal of communal solidarity as the basic feature of their life.

The idea that *motho ke motho ka batho*, communicates a deep seated sense of mutual dependence of persons, solidarity and concern. This is understandable because the way of life as found in the family and village communities of the Basotho was primarily communal and each person felt called upon and understood it as their responsibility to care for the other. Thus according to their understanding to be a person, as our proverbs indicates, was essentially linked to the idea of being community. Describing this Shutte points out that this expression

presents us with the distinctive African idea of community that underlies so much of African culture and so many traditional practices and institutions. It is a view of community that is sharply opposed to all kinds of individualism. It is, however, equally opposed to collectivism of a European kind (1994: 29).

It did not only underlie traditional practices but also traditional African ethics. Traditional African morality and its ethical system did not evolve in a vacuum. Rather it developed and functioned within a specific context, namely the community (Kasenene 1993: 3). What this shows is that traditional morality emphasised and focused on inter-relationships. While ultimately it was about proper conduct of a person or a group, its main objective was the quality and exercise of this in relation to one's relationships with neighbours, subordinates, seniors and the community at large (cf. Ibid 1993: 4).

This means that African ethics governed social relationships by indicating the individuals proper places and prescribing course of conduct (cf. Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992: 165f), and in this sense it was a form of communal ethics. The community through its well known customs and norms thus

became a moral criterion because, breaching these constituted a moral offence.

The community was the moral standard and as such the criterion for evaluating and judging the conduct of its members. In other words it was on the basis of which the moral conduct of the members was checked against. In expressing the normative character of the experience and understanding of community often the members of the community will use the expression "this is not how we do things". This understanding of community as the moral standard echoes Hauerwas' phrase that the community does not so much have an ethic, but is an ethic itself (cf. 1983: 99).

What we observe in the Basotho way of life, customs, practices and rituals is in this way a manifestation and a living out of their ethic. As an ethic, the community thus becomes that to which moral reference is made and that by which people refrain from doing certain things on the one hand and allow themselves to do certain things on the other.

The community as an arena for moral co-responsibility, also became a moral criterion by being a point of reference for judging what conduct would be teleologically appropriate i.e. whether it is coherent with the aims, goals and purposes of the community. In other words it acted as a kind of measuring line for what would be in line with what the community regards as its ultimate ends purposes and characterises of the good life. This ties in with the traditional understanding where by ethics was about proper ways of conduct as a purposive shaping of one's life towards final goals and ends.

I am going to argue that this idea too is implicitly the meaning of the proverb *motho ke motho ka batho*. The reason it may not be that obvious seems to be the exclusive understanding of the proverb in terms of its social meaning. In so doing the teleological aspect has become less and less recognizable. As such to the majority of Basotho today this idea will be regarded as suspect, but a closer look and analysis of the proverb and familiarity with how it is used will show that the suggestion is not in opposition with the meaning behind this proverb.

If I am right, besides telling us that Basotho lived their life in community, the proverb is also a statement about what goals and ends they wanted to achieve and what purposes they had. These goals and ends were that which was behind their actions, the *ultimate* end and hence the reason behind the way they lived. The proverb, therefore, tells us that communion with others was for the Basotho a central part of their purposes and goals. This makes sense because according to

traditional African thought to be a person, which is the ultimate end and purpose of every individual, was understood as achievable through communion with others. So being in communion with others, in thought and practice, would have been understood as one of the purposes and ultimate end for people. This communion because of the African view of reality, would include both one's relations with the living and those who have already gone or the living ~~the~~ dead.

Among the Basotho communion with the latter becomes prominent in their burial rituals¹³. These rituals shows the great concern to be the person's acceptance by the community on the other side of the grave. A person seems to have indirectly prepared for this by a proper conduct during their life time. So conducting oneself properly formed part of a person's goals and purposes because it played an important role within the larger goal of communion with the living dead.

According to MacIntyre traditional morality by being contextual, was such that human purposes played a major role in their conduct (cf. 1981: 57, my emphasis). Morality was a common responsibility and a purposive shaping of one's life towards final goals and ends in community. The morality of the Basotho can be described as such a morality. The community and its well being was the *telos* or the purpose guiding their conduct and that by virtue of which they conducted themselves. It was that on which all other purposes found their true meaning. So in answer to the question "how do we arrive at what is right or wrong, good or bad?", which is the essence of ethics, the Basotho would say "through identification with the community". This meant a person or their actions were all judged good or bad on the basis of their impact and how they affect the community. Kasenene, describing this, points out that

community is the key to understanding the African view of a person. A person's identity, worth and, indeed very life are valued through membership of a group (1994: 141)

In this way we can see as Kasenene says that according to African philosophy, a person is a person through, with and for the community and as such the individualistic conduct that we are now seeing is something new to Africa (Ibid. 1994: 141). In the same way the moral goodness

¹³. According to Basotho burial practice a person was placed in the grave in a squatting position facing east. This is because they believed that death was a passage by which they return to where they originally came from or "home" as they would say. And according to traditional belief that home is "Ntsoana-tsatsi"- where the sun comes from. And so they buried their dead facing east, so that the person could rise with the sun at sun rise to go home.

or ugliness (badness) of actions and conduct was evaluated in terms of the community.

5.1.1 Evaluation of Character

Our conduct as people is not only about what we do i.e. actions, it is also about who we are or our characters i.e. our being. In traditional African ethics, character and personal identity were judged and evaluated in terms of the community. This means it was in the nature of the individual's ability to live in community that he was judged either good or bad. Such judgements while they referred to the actions of the person, they were primarily statements about the person's character. The concept *botho* (personhood) which refers to qualities of character was, therefore, a moral attribute indicating the person's moral character. So statements like "James *ha se motho*" (James is not a person) or "James *ke motho*", (James is a person) were statements about the person's low or high regard and the value they place on community. In the case of someone who was regarded as particularly lacking in this he or she was called "*phoofolo*" (a beast)¹⁴. Some one who was thus called was as it were symbolically stripped of human status and given the status of animals i.e. a creature which is incapable of having qualities of *botho*. In other words disregarding communal values and expectations was like self excommunication. The understanding was that such a person had automatically disqualified themselves of the honour and privileges of people who have character or *botho*. Eugene Casalis, one of the early missionaries among the Basotho, describing this points out that :

the external appearances of moderation and decency constitute in the eyes of the natives what they call *botu*, (sic) the title of dignity of man, in opposition to *bopofolo* (sic), the brute life; a name they apply to every immoral act of an excessively scandalous nature (1861: 303, my emphases).

Immorality as used in this sense should be understood as referring to any conduct that would be seen as not befitting a person who is a person or who has *botho*, and this need not be excessively scandalous. Casalis' view is, therefore, slightly misleading, because these qualities of moderation were understood as more than just external appearances. The expectation was that they become characteristics of one's identity or character. As such their external appearance was to be only

¹⁴ . Such people would often not enjoy most of the benefits the rest of the members of the community enjoyed. Often this meant withdrawal of communal support, something like economic sanctions on a person. In other words their treatment would be a symbolic exclusion from the rest of the life of the community. While nothing would be taken away from the person, nothing would be offered either.

a reflection of the internal character of the person. The community as a kind of a yard stick on the basis of which a person was judged good or bad, was also a statement about the character of its members and what it should be.

5.1.2 Moral Co-responsibility

The function of the community as a moral criterion also meant that the community had moral authority. That authority had a corresponding role for the community and that was to *form* its members into "*batho bao e leng batho*", people who are persons in accordance with its identity, history and tradition. It was also on the basis of this role and responsibility that the community made moral claims and demands upon people without this necessarily leading to major conflicts. This was possible because the community as a moral centre not only did it provide members with a common moral base, which made it possible for people to have shared goals and values, it was also the embodiment of the general will or all the community's ideal.

The fact that members of the community shared common values did not mean blind obedience or repression of individual thought. Rather it meant *moral co-responsibility* and mutual dependency, because as Shutte points it is important

to see dialogue or conversation as the typical activity and, indeed, the ultimate purpose of community as understood in traditional African thought, since this is a co-operative activity that is achieved simply by the presence of person to person, rather than them fulfilling any further function, as would be the case in some practical activity such as building a house (1994: 30).

Moral co-responsibility highlights the necessity for inter-dependency. It leans away from privatization of the moral life to a collective responsibility of ways of conduct. It is a communal undertaking, where all the parties concerned are equally charged with the responsibility of the moral life of the community. This made it possible for authority to be constructive as a guardian of the community's moral ideals, without it being perceived as hostile to the interests of the individual and thus an enemy of the individual. At the same time it made it possible for individuals to make an input into the moral tradition of the community. In this way the community must be seen as Shutte suggests like a family. It has no function outside itself and as a means of growth for its members, it became an end in itself in which there was an interaction, conversation, companionship and learning between the younger and elders members

of the family (Ibid. 1994: 30). In such a social organization the community was the bearer of moral ideal and teacher of what was appropriate and what was not.

This is how valuable the community was to the Basotho and in turn how influential it became to their moral life. All this was by way of highlighting the significance of community and in turn its moral value and function. While much of this experience of community is fading and in some cases lost the legacy of these traditional Basotho communities, i.e. their sense of what is good and bad still underlies much of the present day Basotho life style including how they make moral judgments. Kasenene makes a similar observation that in modern day Africa,

new or adapted institutions have been introduced and some new social patterns have emerged, but the traditional ethos has survived" (1994: 138).

It is because of this that in the context of contemporary moral environment, many Basotho experience an inner moral conflict hence the moral inconsistency they exhibit in their lives.

5.2 Community and Moral Individualism

The central role of the community in the moral thought and practice of the Basotho means that their ethic is going to be in conflict with individualistic and privatizing moral tendencies. It also means that it is not going to be inclined to be universal, because being ethics of community, its primary context is the local and particular. As a type of communal ethics its objective is the good of the whole i.e. the community. It is in this sense that the African experience of community as co-dependence of persons must be understood as sharply opposed to individualism. Shutte is, therefore, correct in his observation that

the traditional African idea of community...avoids individualism by insisting on our dependence on other persons for our development as person (Shutte 1994: 30).

This understanding of community encouraged a way of conduct that placed value on the good of the whole and values and virtues such as *ubuntu*, *kutloano* and goodwill. When understood in this sense community must not be misunderstood as a kind of collectivism¹⁵ because

¹⁵. According to Menkiti quoted by Shutte, collectivism has strong overtones of an aggregation of individuals and denotes mere collection of individuals, while community 'asserts an ontological independence to human society, and it moves from society to individuals' rather than, in a manner of European thought, 'from individuals to society' (1994: 29f).

community being

founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person (Ibid.1994: 30).

As the experienced and lived reality community, denotes unity of persons, where the dignity and value of the individual is not ignored. The African idea of community as a rejection of individualism should however not be seen as opposed to individuality. While it rejects individualism, it does not ignore the well being of the individual.

Shutte further more makes an important statement, that as volitional beings we depend on the influence, in particular the strictly personal causality, of other persons in the community for the exercise and growth of our capacity of self-realisation (1994: 29). As moral agents we are equally dependent on the community for our moral growth and self-realisation as moral subjects.

Community among the Basotho functioned in much the same way. It was that which was the arena of moral inter-dependency. As such even though the community had priority it was at the same time that in which the individual grows, develop and found their identity. In such a worldview, the individual existed corporately in terms of the family, the clan, the tribe, and the whole nation. It is in this sense that for the Basotho, the primary principle for conducting one's affairs, would not have been "I think, therefore I am", but rather "*re batho ka ba bang*",-we are people because of others- or "I am because We are". This meant that moral judgements would always be made in terms of what was good for "us" i.e. the community. Accordingly what was good for me as the individual was that which was good for my community. This collective conscience did not only end with personal identity, it extended to personal conduct. My moral life as a person was thus never going to be my own personal and private affair. The community which formed and continues to form me, was a stake-holder in it, because as a member I represented its moral values and virtues. In this way the community became not only a critique of moral individualism, but also curbed individualistic moral tendencies.

5.3 Community and the Practice of Virtues

The moral value and function of community, as the location and social arena where people are "conspiring together i.e. united among themselves even to the very centre of their being (Ibid.

1994: 30) was to provide the individual with the context more conducive for moral growth and development. It was also the living social reality in which they learn *through practice* to integrate moral values and virtues with their over-all way of life. As the context in which the practice and perfection of moral virtues took place the community was the place where people learnt to be virtuous. This was because the community, as a configuration of norms, values and virtues, was itself a kind of exercise. The kind that could not be practised alone or individually, but rather the kind that MacIntyre describes as a

coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to the form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity...(1981: 175).

This means that moral virtues developed in the individual and thus became part of his or her character, through active participation in this practice. It was, therefore, not enough to know that I ought to love, or care for others. I needed to learn how to be a loving, caring person, and this was provided by the experience of community. Such a practice or learning of virtues as this, becomes possible only in the smaller social context of community and less so in a society. A society which is a multiplicity of communities is too big and because of this it lacks the feeling of intimacy and friendship of a smaller group both of which are essential for the exercise and practice of these, and hence their development in the person.

Once we have learned to practice these with those who are intimate with us or those with whom we are more familiar, it will be easier to apply them -even to those who are not so familiar to us. The community offers us that manageable environment within which, in the context of contemporary society, we can take the risk of practising these virtues and in so doing making them part of our character.

5.4 Community and Shaping of Loyalties

Loyalties are another area of human life that has direct impact on our ethical conduct. Recently this idea has been a focus of attention in the field of what is called contextual therapy or inter-generational therapy. What therapists working in this field have discovered is that loyalties or legacies, have great bearing on people's lives and that often they assume a normative character.

These therapists noted that in human relationships (communities) there are legacies or specific configuration of expectations and invisible loyalties with obligations, that the individual has towards those in relationship with him or her e.g. family members. They further discovered that the effects of loyalty coupled with legacy expectations upon the individual, are such that they assume a *normative* function in the person's life. The reason is because they are perceived as things one ought to do rather than things one would like to do (Van de Kemp 1987: 292), and because they are perceived that way they become factors that influences conduct. In other words they become the basis for people doing certain things and not others, included here also are things ethical or moral.

The experience of community among the Basotho, and indeed among many African peoples is in many ways a living out of a complex multiplicity of inter-generational human relationships, e.g. of ancestors, family, friends and one's village neighbours. All these have their own implicit expectations, all of which form the content of what is expected of individuals. These in turn become things that people become committed to and they too become people's loyalties. Understood in this way the ethical implications of legacies and invisible loyalties, are not only applicable and relevant, but also help to clarify the relational orientation of Basotho ethics where the emphasis is on a healthy give and take between the individual and the community. Here too the idea of community as co-dependence of persons, highlights further the ethical function and value of community among the Basotho.

As people we all have loyalties, and often very diverse loyalties. These loyalties influences the way we present ourselves as moral agents in the world in all kinds of ways. Because of this we need a framework by which we determine which of the various loyalties are proper and which are not. The role and function of the community once again has to be stressed here.

In Sesotho the individual is expected to value the community highly and regard its well-being as one's responsibility and ultimate purpose. In other words the individual must be loyal and be seen to be concerned about the good and well being of the community. This loyalty to the community is that by which all other loyalties were interpreted and evaluated. Because of the high value placed on loyalty to the community, it does not only become morally significant it also assumes a normative function. This is because in many ways that loyalty to the community determines what we do and in part what sort of persons we become. Charles Kammer thus points

out that whereas worldviews emphasizes the cognitive influences on our moral life, loyalties emphasize affective influences on our moral life (1988: 23). The loyalty to the community acts as a link which connects the individual with the basic framework, namely the community which provides the necessary information in determining what are proper loyalties and which ones are not. The point about all this is to show that among the Basotho there are certain expectations about the individual in relation to the community, and that these loyalties and expectations assume a normative function because they become what one ought to do. In other words, they are the reasons that inform the individual's choice of action, and hence the process by which he or she arrives at moral judgments.

5.5 The Community as a Guide to Personal Conduct

Since African ethics has to do with ways of conduct within the context of community, then it follows that the community would have a significant role to play as a guide to conduct. This is because as a type of communal ethics, African ethics deals primarily with the question of "what am I as a member of this particular community supposed to be?" and not so much "what ought I to do?". The emphasis of such an ethic is, therefore, on "how" the individual arrives at making moral decisions. With African ethics the answer is "by way of the community". This means that the primary source and reference point towards answering this question is the community itself. In other words if I found myself confronted with a situation in which an ethical decision has to be made, such as seeing an opportunity to steal some money with a great chance of getting away with this without being caught, I will ask myself the question, "as a Mosotho i.e. a member of the Basotho community, which has its own ethical standards, are we the sort of people that would steal if we can get away with it? My answer to this question will be in terms of an answer to another related question "is this what we do as Basotho?". And it will be on the basis of how being a Mosotho is understood that I will steal or not steal that money. This means using a certain range of reasons for acting rather than others. Reasons which have to do with who I am as a person and member of my community. On this MacIntyre makes a very important observation when he speaks about the general passing of moral judgements. He says that

up to the present in everyday discourse the habit of speaking of moral judgements as true

or false persists; but the question of what it is in virtue of which a particular moral judgment is true or false has come to lack any clear answer (1981: 57).

In African ethics the answer is clear. It is by virtue of people's identity i.e. who they are both as individuals and as members of communities. It is in this way that Bujo describes the morality of the African as community focused (cf. Bujo 1992: 22). African morality can thus be described as anthropocentric and so is the Basotho's. Using the community as the answer to the question "why do you do what you do?" does not mean a fundamentalist reply such as "I conduct myself this way because I belong to such and such a community". It is on the contrary a much more serious act of explaining one's convictions, ideals, goals and ends, factors which not only influences conduct, but are part of who we are and the way we want to live our lives. What it means for African ethics is that the people used the community as justification i.e. reason for their conduct, because the community was like the embodiment of these factors. From here the person then goes on to show why these are valid reasons for conducting oneself in that particular community by pointing out that "this is what we" i.e. as this community. In other words what they will allow or will not permit themselves to do and not to do. This in turn was further explained in terms of what "we believe and value as this community" together with the ethical imperatives involved in being a member of that community.

This was then how Africans came to make judgements of right and wrong and in turn how the community was a guide to conduct. This did not mean that individuals acting in this way had no moral autonomy. As we have said earlier the dynamic relationship or interaction that exists between the individual and the community ensured this (cf. Bujo 1990: 95). The community as a kind of family, had conversations, dialogue and participation between members. Besides this, by *choosing* to adopt the ethical imperatives of the community, and using that as a guide for conduct the individual is in fact making those values and ethical imperatives his or her own, and owns them from the moment he or she chooses to respect them. They are no longer external guides which he or she still had to decide upon. Rather they are internal qualities belonging to his or her character.

The freedom to choose to act in a particular way is what guarantees moral autonomy. Even though as individuals we do not always choose the communities we belong to, we do nevertheless choose to remain part of them, and hence choose their moral values and thus make

them our own. By choosing to remain part of these communities both physically and emotionally, we are, by implication endorsing their moral values as the norm both for our personal lives and that of others in those same communities.

This is also how we should understand moral autonomy within traditional societies. Another important point about this is that the person's adoption and owning of these values can not be a pick and choose reappropriation. It is a commitment to the whole moral system, not a half hearted commitment. That is not to say that the system can not be challenged or pose problems even for those within it. Rather it means that any criticism and questioning of the adequacy of the system, which always happens, is done from the perspective of one from within i.e. starting on the firm believe in the value of the system as a whole.

Perhaps this is why traditional communities seemed to have had less differences in comparison to our communities today. It would seem that it was not so much that there were no differences, because no amount social control no matter how strong can effectively do away with all public unhappiness or dissenting voices. On the contrary it seems more plausible that there were unhappiness, but the important difference was that when people did differ and subsequently criticise the system, they still believed in the system. They were not raising their unhappiness and differences primarily from the perspective of people who had lost faith and hope in the whole system, something which contemporary Africans seem to find very easy to do. This means that even though important ethical questions of "what am I to do?", were answered in terms of one's membership to the community, this was not a simply following of what has always been. Rather it means people explained what they do in terms of the community and commitment to its moral framework.

Put differently we can say it is by knowing who I am first that I know what I ought to do, and knowing who we are and what we ought to be is something which we learn by virtue of our corporate existence i.e. living and growing up in community. For members of the community to do or act in a particular way was, therefore, a consequence of their being or who they were. As members of the community they were beings that were supposed to do things that will not harm the good of community and its well being. In other words they ought to be people that live according to the will of the community.

In order to avoid a very individualistic interpretation of what was the will of the community,

which sometimes can have adverse consequences, the priority for its interpretation, was located in the community and not outside it. In other words the discernment was done within the context of life in common. When ethics is understood in this sense it means that there can be no radical dichotomy between ethics and the community which formed its context. This was not only because of the holistic orientation of the African world view, but also because as we pointed out, the community as the social setting which gave meaning to ethics was in that sense itself an ethic for its members.

5.6 Community as a School for Character

According to what we have been saying it will have become apparent that the focus of moral formation and hence of ethics, for the Basotho was not so much on the decisions that individuals had to make, but rather on the type of people that would make those decisions. The function of the community was, therefore, primarily the formation of character and acquisition of its qualities. The concern of the community and in turn the aim and goal of ethics was the integrity of the persons that it produced and who in turn shaped the quality and nature of the community which they were apart of. Such an ethic, unlike much of contemporary moral attitudes and modern ethics which places more emphasis on "doings", is primarily concerned with what goes on before even coming to making those moral decisions. It is concerned with persons or "being" hence the centrality of character and its formation to such an ethic. By putting great emphasis on what its members ought to be, the community *payed* its attention not on actions as such, but rather on persons. The task, therefore, of formation and development of the person's character was one of the fundamental functions of the community. In this way the community was a school for character. Describing the moral relevancy of character, Hauerwas quoted by Neville Richardson, says

character is thus the qualification of our self-agency, formed by our having certain intentions (and beliefs) rather than others...Our character is our deliberate dispositions to use a certain range of reasons for our actions rather than others..., for it is by having reasons and forming our actions accordingly that our character is at once revealed and molded (1994: 92).

Our character is in this sense a qualification of the way we present ourselves, because it

expresses the type of person we would like to be. However this is not done through preferential choice, which pays no attention to one's commitment, obligations and communal goals. It is done rather by habitually doing certain kinds of actions and not others in community. The community helped members to achieve this by providing them with a context for moral goodness and the attainment of virtues. In other words the community availed itself as a form of practice in which the person in communion with others practices moral values and virtues necessary for character formation and development. So our character, i.e. the agents' intentional action, is not something that we possess naturally, nor is it something that people can develop by themselves. It needs the input of already existing systems of intentions, on the basis of which its further development can take place.

Among the Basotho character formation meant the community making its members "*batho*"-persons, a quality which is acquired by being taught to value certain things and not others and what are good and bad intentions. The term "*motho*"- person, therefore, as a statement about character means a certain level of achievement or performance (through practice), in which one has shown excellence in moral values and virtues. In other words to be regarded as a person, "*motho*", meant one had proven themselves (in the eyes of the community) to be a moral person. This does not mean that people strove for maximum integration of these values and virtues with their way of life in order to get community recognition. They did so because they valued and wanted to have "*botho*"-personhood, whether the community was there to observe or not. On the other hand if a person failed to prove themselves in this regard i.e. to integrate values and virtues associated with being a person with his life and hence become part of his character, the Basotho would say of such a person, "*ha se motho*", he is not a person. In other words such a person lacked the moral depth and qualities of one who was a person, "*motho*". While this may be said of someone in relation to the person's lack of depth, credibility or integrity in various spheres of life, the meaning behind such usage originates from the moral description of a person and their lack of moral character.

So even though the significance of character to moral issues may not appear to be that important in daily life it character is an important component of ethics and it plays a major role in the kind of people we choose to be as members of the community and moral agents.

Among the Basotho the community played a major role towards the formation of character for

its members, but this did not mean that individuals had no input in the process. This is because character as referring primarily to the capacity of the individual for intentional action (Macquarrie & Childress 1986: 82) cannot happen without the individual's involvement. The only significance of the community in this was in its influence on the development of character, because one's character could be very different depending on the nature of the community in which he or she was formed and grew up. Depending on the type of influence the community was exerting, this capacity to intentional action could either be individualistic or communal in orientation.

Since the Basotho way of live was primarily communal it follows that its influence the character of its members would be such that it encouraged the spirit of community rather than individualism. So as the context within which the individual's character was formed, the community naturally encouraged a communal character in its members. In this sense ethics of the Basotho resembled Richardson's understanding of Christian ethics whereby the moral reference prior to any consideration is the character of the Christian person i.e. their identity (1994: 100). This implies that the main ethical concern would have been the question "what am I worthy of doing?" rather than "what is right?". As I have pointed out earlier, our identity i.e. who we take ourselves to be is defined partly in terms of the community to which we belong. For the Basotho community, the goal was to form its members in such a way that their basic approach to personal conduct would be based on their character, where the main consideration prompting them to action was "what may I permit myself to do in the light of who I am". By placing the moral weight on character, the focus is not so much on rules and laws or the right thing to do but rather on what is worthy of its members. In this way it is the character of the person that would determined the course of action a person chose. It is, therefore, as Richardson points out not enough just to ask the general moral question "what is right?" but "what is right for me?". The latter question requires making a careful consideration of our identity and who we are (Ibid.1994: 91) as members of a particular community. It is in this way that the community among the Basotho was a school for character.

5.6.1 Moral Formation and Personal Responsibility

The general perception about traditional communities regarding the relationship between the community and the individual is often an unhealthy one. The picture that is often painted is of

individuals having no active role in what happens to them. Unfortunately this is not true as we have shown in the explanation of the African idea of community. Likewise in terms of moral formation this is not true because as I have pointed out the concern with being a "person" and acquiring the corresponding quality of character called "*botho*" was the person's felt need and as such this was their active role in their own moral formation.

The role of the community in the moral formation for members was such that it taught its members what were proper intentions and what were bad intentions. As the context within which character formation took place, the community must be understood as an availing of historical and cultural setting for the appropriation of grand-narratives and the way of conduct they contain (cf. Macquarrie & Childress 1986: 83), through the community's grand-narrative, stories of the good life and in general the purpose of life. The role of the individual in this must be seen as participatory involvement whereby the individual responds to such grand-narratives or stories. The response which enables a re-evaluation of one's historical givenness and provides normative criteria for exercising the capacity for intentional action. In this way the responsibility for moral formation, will not be something that happens without the active participation of those in being formed. This role is better understood in terms of what Bujo describes as morality of the heart (1990: 95). It is important to make this clear because often claims for community, particularly regarding moral issues, are sometimes perceived as depriving people of personal responsibility. The impression is that in most traditional societies the individual was so absorbed by the community that he or she had say in their own life. However a closer look at African morality of the heart shows that people did in fact ^uhad a say and an active role towards their own moral formation and that of others (Ibid.1990: 95). Explaining this Bujo point out that

a deeper insight into African life shows that...he has a deeply embodied moral consciousness...this is shown by the ...fact that the *heart* is looked upon as the main seat of moral life (1990: 98).

According to this the heart is the African way of understanding interiorization of the ethical code, because from the heart comes forth virtues or vices. It is that which makes a person humanity and character. In Sesotho one of the commonest ways to describe character is in terms of the heart, and so we say of person "*u pelo e mpe*" or "*u pelo e ntle*", which the good or bad character of the person respectively. According to African ethics it is this capacity of willing good or bad

that is the essence of personal responsibility and in term moral autonomy.

So even though the African person took responsibility for his or her community, he or she was personally and most profoundly affected by its ethical demands. He or she did not follow blindly or automatically the inherited norms and values. Rather the respect of these traditional values and way of conduct were things that put before the African the choice and the decision for good or for evil. So through the principle of participatory involvement, the individual made an interior decision to respect or not to respect these communal norms and values (Ibid 1990: 97) and by so doing they expressed their personal responsibility.

Formation of this nature must, therefore, be understood as happening in a dialectical manner or in a reciprocal relationship, where the community and individual mutually fed into each other. Moral formation was thus governed by the principles of intersubjectivity and inter-dependency between the community and the individual. Neville Richardson's description of how character is shaped makes this point much clearer. He says

the community shapes my character and, reciprocally, my character contributes to the kind of community of which I am a member (1994: 93).

According to this our membership as moral agents to a community is an important aspect of how as individuals we are not absolved from personal responsibility in our moral formation. Traditional African communities must be seen in this way too, whereby it was only by virtue of the individual's membership to the community, that he or she was able to account for what is morally good and bad.

6. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SELF TO ETHICS

Traditional societies were not only unique in the value they placed on community, but also in the conception of the self that they had. Like community, the African understanding of what it means to be a person had a significant influence on their ethics. As I said the proverb "*motho ke motho ka batho*" is both a statement about community as well as individuality. In order to understand this with regard to the latter we must ask what sort of relationship between the community and the individual was envisioned in this proverb. I believe it is in the examination of this relationship that a clear picture of the African understanding of individuality and

personhood will emerge. This is important for two reasons. Firstly because much of contemporary moral attitudes are based on what is taken to be the nature of this relationship, the debate favouring more and more the individual than the community. As we have pointed out earlier, this has resulted, in part, in the general confusion and lack of certainty being experienced by individuals, mainly because people are expected to carry all the moral responsibility on their shoulders without the necessary corresponding resources as was previously the case. Secondly it is important to take a closer look at this relationship because it is a hint to the understanding of what is taken to be the nature of humankind and in turn what it means to be a person. And depending on what our views on this are, we are going to arrive at different moral values. As I will argue, ethics is largely shaped and given meaning by what is believed to be the nature of man, i.e. his purposes and ends in life. Morality, therefore, as a code of conduct by which people both as individuals and collectives live will be coherent with this belief, and it is on the basis of this belief that certain things are forbidden while others are allowed and encouraged. This means that our understanding of the self is central to moral questions and differences we experience. This has significant impact on both private and social morality or how we live our moral life. For instance if a white farmer *believes* white people are superior to black people he may well see it as **right** to act in a superior manner towards black people working on his farm. This will not be the case with someone who believes in the equality of all people irrespective of their race. To such a person the farmer's conduct will be judged as **bad** and hence **wrong**. This demonstrates how significant our belief about human nature is to the way we conduct ourselves as moral agents. It is that by virtue of which we say some things are bad and wrong, and that others are good and right. This implies that the meaning and hence interpretation of moral concepts or judgements is relative to what we believe as communities to be the nature and purpose of human beings. Moral terms such as good and right, bad and wrong presuppose what we believe and taken to be our purposes and ends in life.

In order to understand why certain things are forbidden and others allowed it is imperative to know the conception of the self informing such judgments. We must unearth the ground upon which moral concepts grow and see what gives them life. In ordinary discourses this is not always possible to do. However if we were to analyze our moral arguments in this way we would find that often there are many more missing premises. We would discover that those that are

explicit in the argument would be like sub-arguments and that they presupposes other missing or implicit premises. It is these missing premises that form what I call our basic beliefs or assumptions.

The reason we are not aware of them is because they form part of our worldviews, and often we take these for granted, they are like the air we breathe. And since we have interiorised so much of the contents of our worldviews likewise we have interiorised these assumptions. For this reason it is impossible to completely disown or rid ourselves of these basic moral assumptions. They have become a part of who we are and of our moral identity. If I am right the reason for moral differences lies in that which is assumed and implicit than what is explicit and said. What this reveals is that depending on what is our understanding of what it means to be a person, we will most likely arrive at different moral standards or ethical imperatives and indeed different policies (Sandel 1984: 6). This is because in ethics we commend and forbid certain things on the basis of

how we determine good and evil, that is to say, on our moral, religious, intellectual, economic, and aesthetic values; which are, in their turn, bound up with our *conception of man*, and of the basic demands of his nature... our solution...is based on our vision, by which we are consciously or unconsciously guided, of what constitutes a fulfilled a human life (Berlin 1984: 31, my emphasis).

In other words our belief about the nature of human beings is that by which we are consciously or unconsciously guided of what constitute a fulfilled human life, and in turn what is good and bad.

This can be seen in the debate between those on the one hand who follow the Kantian liberal tradition and those on the other hand who espouse the communitarian ideals or follow the Aristotelian tradition, where one of the key areas that they differ is on the conception of the self. In view of our purpose I will not go into this debate¹⁶ again here. I will only recast the debate as it concerns the conception of the self that they both suggests.

6.1 The Communitarian Conception of the Self

¹⁶ . For an in depth examination of this debate see Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, 1992. Communitarianism and individualism, Oxford University Press, and Chapter one of Daly's book Communitarianism A New Public Ethics, 1994. Wadsworth Publishing Company, or Phillips D.L. 1994. Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

One of the central features of the communitarian position is the significance of narrative to its account of the self. In this view the self can never be fully understood as utterly distinct from its social embodiments. A person is thus understood as one who is a bearer of roles and a particular social identity. Unlike the liberal self which becomes what it chooses to be, the narrative self is a self whose life story is embedded in the story of the community from which it derives its identity (MacIntyre 1981: 205). In this way such a self is never wholly self chosen. Its life is always a joining of an already existing story. Such a self is therefore in key part what it inherits, namely a specific past that is present to some degree in its present (Ibid.1981: 206). Liberals reject this because not only is this seen as running the risk of dissolving the self into a mere reflection of the various roles imposed by its social positioning (Phillips 1994: 181), but also because

being so thoroughly embedded in the community, then, the individual is portrayed as lacking the intellectual independence to examine the community's morality and compare it either with morality else where or with a set of independent standards (Ibid. 1994: 183).

According to the liberal perspective as individuals we are not bound permanently to live according to the dictates and within the parameters preset by our social positions and situations.

This is because

no matter how deeply implicated we find ourselves in the roles and practices of our society, we are capable of questioning the value and justification of those roles and practices. And while the specific roles and practices help constitute who we are, we all have the capacity to envision ourselves without our present relationships and preferences, and with *different* ones altogether (Ibid. 1994: 179)

It must be pointed that this seems to be only a theoretical possibility, rather than what is really the case. Either way it does not take away the fact that while liberalism does not seem to reject so much the idea that the contents of the individual's aims, preferences, and interests are social, it does reject the idea of a self constituted by social roles and that one's identity is decisively determined by factors such as birth, sex, upbringing, race etc. etc. This objection however seems to be derived from a wrong supposition about the narrative self. In anticipation of such suppositions MacIntyre pointed out that to say that the self finds its identity from its social roles

does not mean however, as some theorists have supposed, that the self is or becomes *nothing* but the social roles which it inherits (cf MacIntyre 1981: 30, my emphasis).

What this means is that the self does not find its moral identity apart from the community. This

is because we are who we are, *partly* due to our history. According to this our individual life stories form part of a set of interlocking narratives. These carry within them moral expectations of one who is formed by such narratives i.e. rightful obligations and expectations. It is this that forms the givenness of our lives and identity. As such we have no choice about it because whether I recognize it or not

I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in individualist mode, is to deform my present set of relationships (MacIntyre 1981: 205).

It is this attempt to undermine current personal relationships by liberal individualism that gives rise to the concern with modern societies which are experienced as exhibiting more cases of frustrated, confused people who feel lost as a result of the lack of common purposes and meaning. According to the narrative account as agents we do not conduct ourselves only out of following customs, we do so also as bearers of social roles, and in relating to someone we regard that person's role or their relationship to us as really making that treatment right. In other words the fact that a woman is my sister makes it wrong and bad to marry her, and that this man is my chief makes it right that I respect him. My relationship to these people, as a result of our membership to a social organism called community makes it obligatory or impermissible to act in certain ways towards them and permissible to act in certain ways (cf. Charlton 1993: 9f). In this way identifying terms like; father, mother, parents, child, banker, lecturers, judge, minister, teacher, and many more are essentially designating roles. Roles have an inherent ethical function and that is they tell us how we ought to relate to and treat one another.

In relating to one another we cannot simply relate to individuals as such. We always relate to people partly in view of their social roles. I as a student know how I should relate to someone who is my supervisor on the basis of these roles. The same is true in the case of child-parent roles. As a child of Mr and Mrs Mokolatsie I know how I am to relate and how I should not relate to these people as my parents.

This because as people we live as social beings and our activities are conducted with an eye to these relationships and their corresponding obligations. In other words it is because roles as denoting and as a way of describing a certain relationship between people e.g. the role of father which describes the relationship between a parent and child, will always include duties or obligations to act and refrain from acting in certain ways towards those we are in a relationship

with (cf. Charlton 1993: 8).

6.1.1 The Self as Situated in Community

According to the narrative account people are essentially beings that are located within social relationships, because as Charles Taylor points out

men cannot simply identify themselves as men, but they define themselves more immediately by their partial community, cultural, linguistic, confessional, etc. (1984: 193).

This understanding of human nature recognises our embeddedness as people. Thus by contrast to the liberal self the narrative self is a self situated in community. It is not a free floating individual with no particular locale as its context. As people we are not born into a moral vacuum where we have to create our own moral standards, but at the same time this does not mean that we are inescapably held captive to the moral particularity found in our communities.

Against such an impression MacIntyre says one must notice that

the fact the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, ...and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 205).

This is because there is no perfect moral system and members of the community need to be consciously of this fact, and in turn be open to an engagement of their moral tradition in a critical dialogue both from internal voices and external ones. What is important in this is for the self to acknowledge the possession of such a moral particularity, unlike the unencumbered liberal self who cannot simply be identified with any particular moral attitude or point of view (Ibid.1981: 30). It means that as people with such moral particularity we have a specific moral starting point from which we can dialogue with other moral particularities.

The refusal by the liberal self to be identified with any particular moral attitude and insistence on the centrality of choice for personal conduct seems to serve as a safe guard allowing the liberal self to continually recreate itself in accordance with the demands of preferential choice. In this sense it is hard to envisage a liberal self as having any consistent character, and in turn its moral identity is enigmatic and unpredictable. By contrast the situated self is almost predictable. Its moral identity is consistent because it has a social status i.e. roles and obligations.

As such it does not change significantly in the way it presents itself in the world. This is because its character and identity are constituted by its social attachments, attachments which secures enduring qualities of character. And because of this its deliberations go beyond purely preferential choice. Such deliberations are conducted in view of the suitability to the person "I already am". I ask as I deliberate not only "what I want" but "who I really am", a question which takes me beyond an attention to my desires alone to reflect on my character itself (Sandel 1984: 173).

6.2 The Moral Universe of the Self

Besides the conception of the self the narrative account poses a different view about the moral universe than that of the liberal perspective. Sandel says that the moral universe inhabited by the independent liberal self is devoid of inherent meaning and that

only in a universe empty of *telos*,...is it possible to conceive a subject apart from and prior to its purposes and ends. Only a world ungoverned by a purposive order leaves principles of justice open to human construction and conceptions of the good to individual choice (1984: 168).

In other words in such an environment we become perfect self originating sources of valid claims. This is the self that has been described by some critics as the democratised self, a self with no necessary social content and social identity. This becomes possible when the self evades *necessary* identification with any particular contingent moral attitude or point of view. In such a moral universe the self

finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgement...Everything may be criticised from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of stand point to adopt (MacIntyre 1981: 30).

In the liberal moral universe to be a moral agent is as MacIntyre points out

precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgement on it from a purely *universal and abstract* point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity (Ibid. 1981: 30, my emphasis).

Such a moral habitat that requires total detachment from all social particularity in making moral judgements, means that the self will naturally find it easy to become anything or take any point

of view because it is in and of itself nothing. This denial of the fact that we are primarily local animals as opposed to universal animals, "is an illusion with painful consequences" (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 206), because it has resulted in some moral particularities presenting themselves as universal and assuming a superior attitude in contact with other moral particularities. MacIntyre's warning must once again be stressed because as he says

when men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do (Ibid. 1981: 206).

As moral agents our basic form of existence and identity are located in the local and particular habitat, and it is from this that we inherit and develop our purposes and ends. The universal habitat that is suggested by liberalism, through the evasion of particularity, does not only make of the moral subject a self-created individual whose identity is not only chosen but one who has no necessary ties with its aims and attachments. Thus Rawls could afford to say that no transformation of our aims and attachments can cast doubt on our identity because as individuals we have the moral power to reconstitute, define and pursue our conception of the good, and that

the continuity of our identity is unproblematically assured. No transformation of my aims and attachments could call into question the person I am, for no such allegiance, however deeply held, could possibly engage my identity to begin with (Sandel. 1984: 172).

In other words according*to moral environment proposed by liberalism whatever social positions or attachments I may have as a person they are not constitutive of who I am, nor do they have any significant moral relevance to my personal identity.

According to the narrative account we can not regard ourselves in this way because we are basically created animals. To do so will greatly cost us in

those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are-as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history...(Ibid 1984: 172).

This is because such loyalties, obligations and convictions are more than just values I happen to have or inherited or aims I espouse at a given time. They go beyond obligations I voluntarily incur. They are *part* of who I am and *in part* define who I am. As such to imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent but to imagine a person wholly without character and moral depth (Ibid. 1984: 172). MacIntyre in

similar words describes such a self not only as utterly distinct from its social embodiments and lacking any rational history of its own, but also as having a certain abstract and ghostly character (1981: 31).

What we have said about the moral universe of the situated self should not be understood to mean that the self is locked in history and incapable of reflecting on its history. On the contrary, as the only creatures that are self-interpreting, we are indeed able to reflect on our history. What it means is that we can distance ourselves from our histories, but this distance will always be a precarious and provisional one. It is one which is never utterly secured outside such a history (Sandel 1984: 172). In the moral environment suggested by the narrative account even as one reflects on their history, one knows nevertheless that they are heavily implicated in various ways in that history.

6.3 The African Understanding of a Person

In this section I want to give a broad articulation of the African understanding of what it meant to be a person. As I have mentioned the expression "*Motho ke motho ka batho*" is also a statement about individuality. What will be important is to find out what conception of the self is reflected and projected in this expression and in turn how this informs and shapes ethical conduct. In other words what view of the person do we get from the African worldview and how does this shape their ethics. In looking at the African understanding of personhood we need to slightly change our language and as such I will not speak so much about the African conception of the self because most African people do not think like that. Instead what makes sense to them, and hence how they would speak about what we are investigating is how personhood i.e. "*botho*" is understood.

While the expression is generally known for its communal ideal, it is at the same time a description of the relationship of the community to the individual and the significance of the former to the latter. In other words in this proverb is a rich deposit of how personal identity is understood within African thought. Following our previous explanation of the meaning of this proverb, it follows that regarding identity like wise its meaning is centred around the community i.e. collective identity. According to this then, personal identity is essentially understood in terms

of the corporate identity. In other words it is in and through its relationships with others that the self truly finds its identity. In this way the self ~~does~~ could not create or choose its own identity, just as much as it could not create and choose those social relationships it inherits, which gives its identity. This means that the individual cannot not be envisioned as utterly distinct from his or her relations with others. As such a person exists always corporately i.e. in terms of the family, the clan, the tribe or the village community. The reason is that as Shutte points out

as *human* subjects,...we depend on the influence, the strictly personal causality, of other persons for the exercise and growth of this capacity for self-realisation towards fulfilment (1994: 29).

In other words as people, and more so as moral agents and subjects we are not the sole producers of personal growth and its development. Others too have an important role to play in my personal growth. Our growth develops from being both knowing and known subjects. The self is in this way constituted by an internal relationship to itself i.e. knowing and affirming oneself, and also in relationship to what is other than itself i.e. the natural and social environment, and especially other moral agents (Ibid.1994: 27). This is because as Kammer says

the development of our humanity is a collective undertaking. We are largely formed by the communities of which we are a part, and through our actions, which shape our communities, we influence the development of ourselves and others. For better or worse we are inescapably tied to each other and offer each other new possibilities for development, while placing significant restrictions on each other's development (1988: 141).

According to this human development in each one of us is significantly shaped by our communities. To be a person, therefore, in the African understanding was closely linked with living in community. However this in itself was not enough. To be a person implied a particular way of living with others in community. It had to do with the quality of that relationship. As such, not just any kind of relationship would do. Living in community was supposed to be valued and respected. To be a person was then to be able to live well in the community and to value the common good, which was all the objectives, purposes and ends of the community explicit and implicit. Describing this Maritain says

the common good of the society is their communion in the good life; it is therefore common *to the whole and to the parts*, to the parts, which are in themselves wholes since the very notion of *person* means totality (1986: 94).

A person who did this well i.e. one who did well in being in communion with other in life, as

I have pointed was thus regarded as a "person" and someone who didn't was regarded as "not a person"-*"hase motho"*. What was being said and hence the meaning at the heart of this statement was the person's deliberate failure to live well in community or with others, and to respect community values often as a result of self centredness, pride, greed and inability to share. What this shows is that personal identity, according to African thought, was basically communal or social and as such it was not *only* the individual who was an end, but rather the corporate person i.e. the individual in community who is the end, and never the individual apart from the community. In this way the individual would not, as a member of the community be

serving an end separate from him, rather he is serving a larger goal which is the ground of his identity, for he only is the individual he is in this larger life (Taylor 1984: 182).

This is because in the community as Maritain says the common good

is common to the whole and its parts over which it flows back and which must all benefit from it. Under pain of being itself denatured, it implies and demands the recognition of the fundamental rights of the person (1986: 94).

According to this in the community people go beyond the conflict and tension of self-goal/other-goal. In similar words Bujo says

when we say that, on the grounds of the participation theory, an individual is not in a position to live outside the community, then the same community must be eager to promote and to support the interests of the individual (Bujo 1990: 97).

Traditionally once the self sets itself apart from the community it loses that status and significance possessed by *batho bao e leng batho*-people who are persons i.e. selves in community. It could no longer enjoy the corresponding privileges and treatment but rather those appropriate only to those who did not belong to the community. The community i.e. the corporate existence as the end, was that in which all else found their proper significance and meaning including personal identity. Traditional understanding was that a person becomes conscious of his or her own personal identity, only in terms of other people, his duties, privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. The individual's identity was understood as being shaped in part by and found in the community. The individual could only say "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti 1969: 141). So in an African worldview the individual who is stripped of the membership of a variety of social groups in order to discover the "real self" simply did not exist. The self embodied by the African worldview is

one which has social roles and obligations.

MacIntyre describing the situation of the self in pre-modern societies says that it was through

his or her membership of a variety of social groups that the individual identifies himself or herself and is identified by others. I am a brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover 'the real me'. They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligations and duties (1981: 32).

In an African view this was precisely how personhood was understood. This did not mean a static and fixed form of being, but rather being placed and given a certain point in the ongoing journey i.e. the grand narrative of the particular community. Because the individual could not exist alone except corporately, he owed his existence to others.

Showing how significant the community was to personal identity and its formation, Mbiti states that physical birth was not enough in order for the individual to be i.e. have personal identity, the community had to make, create or produce the individual (1969: 141). It was in this sense that the community was so important for the African and the way he lives. Without this, without the presence of the community the African was indeed living in a very precarious situation. Thus describing the contemporary African situation in which the majority of Africans are increasingly living in an environment where it is very difficult to become develop this corporate identity, Mbiti laments that the contemporary African, exposed to modern change, is in a severe strain due to increasing processes by which individuals become *detached* from their traditional environment, leaving them in a vacuum devoid of solid religious foundation.

And not only are they devoid of religious foundation they are also bereft of communal foundations and solid moral foundation (Mbiti 1970: 3).

Such foundations i.e. traditions, customs, rituals and history of people not only kept individuals from dislocating, but also had the effect of instilling confidence about oneself, they made it easy for people to know what were appropriate intentions and which were not. The common life ensured by these foundations minimised the feeling of alienation, which comes about when the individual ceases to define his identity principally by the public experience of the society and

on the contrary, the most meaningful experience, which seems to him most *vital*, to touch most the core of his being, is private. (Taylor 1984: 187).

These foundations enabled individuals not to see the goals, norms or ends which define common

practices or institutions as irrelevant or even monstrous, or redefine these norms in such a way that their practices appear a travesty of them (Ibid. 1984: 186).

The status of the individual in an African understanding was, therefore, such that the individual was an ally of the community or on the side of the community and not on the opposite side. In such a context and world view, it was hard to imagine a person detached from his or her community or with aims and goals different from those of his or her community.

7. CHARACTERISTICS OF BASOTHO ETHICS

If ethics is that which has something to do with ways of conduct, and if ethics is a reflection of a particular people's history in response to questions of who we are and what we ought to be, and not so much what we ought to do (cf. Hauerwas 1983: 116), then Basotho ethics will be a reflection of their self understanding of who they are and ought to be. We have seen that as Hauerwas says all ethical reflection occurs relative to a particular time and place, necessitating what he calls a qualified ethic. Consequently ethics always requires an adjective or a qualifier (1983: 1). This is important because even though ethics does

address an identifiable set of relatively constant questions-the nature of the good or right, freedom and the nature of human behaviour, the place and status of rules and virtues...any response to these questions necessarily draws on the particular convictions of historic communities to whom such questions may have significantly different meanings (Ibid. 1983: 1).

In other words ethics will always be contextual whereby it will reflect particular convictions, goals and values that each community regards as important. For the Basotho one of these convictions was community as a communion among people in a common life and the unity thereof. Like most African peoples they understood life as a unity in which there is no separation between the ethical and the social, between morality and religion or religion and life in general. As such their way of conduct or ethics was weaved in all these aspects of life, and in turn was shaped by them.

At a first glance it is not very obvious how the African worldview influenced and shaped their approach or attitude to ethics. I have already shown how this belief formed the basis for the sense of community among the African people. Here I want to show how this belief is the rationale and

basis for the communal nature of African ethics.

The emphasis by the African worldview on the basic unity of all things (cf. Kinoti 1992: 76) implied that the same unity ought to apply to human beings too. So according to traditional thought, it would not have made sense that human beings would be in communion with nature but not with one another. This means that people were not only expected to be in communion with one another, it was what they ought to be. The kind of communion required was that in which there is a strong sense of belonging, commitment and accountability to one another. Such a communion meant that people approached life i.e. theirs and that of others as communal responsibility.

Such a view of life had implications to other aspects of life, and in particular the moral life. In this sphere it meant that people were to be in communion with one another regarding personal conduct. Being in communion with another in this sense means co-responsibility and a sense of common duty towards ways of conduct. It is in this sense that African ethics was communal. This makes sense because personal conduct as an aspect of the community's life formed part of the common good and as such could not be wholly an individual responsibility nor could it be equally become a private matter. In other words this aspect of life like all others, was subject to the logic of communal living i.e. communion in a common life including the moral life. It is in this way that the link between the experience and concept of community and African ethics is neither accidental nor incidental. It is essential.

In order to understand ethics of Africa this link must not only be known but be maintained. This is because the community is the primary context giving African ethics its meaning, authority and significance. In other words the experience of community is fundamental to a proper understanding of African ethical traditions and moral practices.

Because of this traditional African ethics was primarily communitarian in orientation and hence it could only be intelligible within that context. Unlike contemporary Western ethics, where personal conduct is largely a private matter with the community having little or no place in it, in traditional communities ethics was of its very essence the business of the community. It was a communal practice in which the existence of the community stood in a substantive way towards being perfect at it. We can thus describe such an ethic as an ethic that took pride of its context. This is what contemporary African ethics needs to do and in the process maintain that contextual

perspective. This means that as an ethic that is closely connected to its context, it must allow Africans to be able to reflect on their history and in this sense distance themselves from it, while at the same time being aware that such a distance is always precarious and provisional and that the point of reflection is never fully secured outside that history itself (Sandel 1994: 172).

As an ethical reflection it should aim at helping Africans to achieve *some* degree of independence to allow them to transcend and suspend their own loyalties and worldviews *temporarily*, so that they can see more clearly who they are (cf. Kammer 1988:26), and having reflected on this know what they ought to be and in turn what they can and cannot do, what they will allow themselves to do and refrain themselves from doing. This will keep African ethical reflection not only closely linked to its context but always remain true to its context.

Stanley Hauerwas, arguing against universalisation of ethics describes ethics as a reflection of a particular people's history and experience (1983: 96). This means that ethics is not only contextual but also historical. According to this then contemporary African ethics over and above being true to its context, will have to reflect the history and experience of the African people particularly their moral tradition.

This is very important in the light of the individualistic nature of contemporary ways of conduct. As such it is also important to be aware that history as a story or an account of human experiences is always of a people and not of individuals. So when it is said ethics is a reflection of history, it is history in this sense. Communities have histories and not individuals. Only through the history of the community can the person speak of having a history. These histories contain not only historical facts, but also people's moral traditions, values, aims and goals. This means that as we reflect on ethics of Africa we need to examine their history in particular their traditions as they unfold and are enacted in their lives, particularly in their communities.

This is because in these communities chapters and chapters have been written and continue to be written about ethics and many other aspects of the African way of life. I say continue to be written because the community is not a static thing, it is a living and evolving reality. The village community that my mother belonged to as a little girl in the remote parts of Lesotho, was not the same community I grew up in when I lived there with my grandmother. In many ways it had changed and yet in more fundamental ways it had not e.g. most of its values were still the same. To fully understand this one has to experience and be fully familiar with the African way of life

in particular the experience of community in its local variance. How this is interpreted will often depend on the local variation of that experience and conception of community.

For this reason African ethics as a reflection on the moral life of African peoples and the adequacy of their norms and values can never be understood or studied in abstract concepts. This is because African ethics is always situated in a specific social context. As an ethical reflection it is best done by taking note of how common African ethical concepts and experiences often take on local variance. It cannot be understood in the same way ethics has generally come to be understood in the West where it has the status of a separate discipline. Rather African ethics will be an inclusive account in which religion, culture and the political life of the people all have a part to play in one time or another. By contrast with much of western ethics, African ethics is not a separate compartment of life, nor is it a set of dogmas or do's and don'ts. It is a way of life founded on the logic of communal living. That is why the community is not only important but central to it. This is particularly significant in the context of modern Africa, where as in so many places, the democratization of society and indeed of the individual has meant an over emphasis on the individual and their rights on the one hand, and a loss of the sense of community on the other.

As such any study of African ethical traditions and moral practice which begins with the complacent assumption that the community is less important than individuals and devalues the moral significance of communal obligations, is going to fail to understand the logic of the moral thought and practice of the African. Secondly a study of African ethics that does not recognize internal links with its context, i.e. the community, will remain superficial and fail. It will fail because a way of conduct informed by other conception of reality like the individualist bourgeois or liberal capitalists, and is lived within the framework of free choice and rights, will espouse very different set of values from a way of life based upon *kutloano* - friendship, where the bond of friendship is the common good. Here personal conduct is informed and influenced by concerns with communal solidarity, sharing and mutual care of one another. While the one emphasises freedom and autonomy of the individual, and places the primary locus of ethics on the individual, the other by contrast stresses a dialectical relationship between the individual and the community. A relationship in which social roles and obligations due to each member are important aspects of the community as the primary locus for morality. Because of the significance of the experience

of community life African ethics is, therefore, by definition, communal ethics. Owing its origin from traditional morality, it is an ethic that centres and emerges from communities. It is an ethic from "below" and not from "above" and it gets its social content and meaning from its context i.e. the community. In other words it will not be individualistic in approach or tone but rather communal.

7.1 The Primacy of Good over Right

The proverb *motho ke motho ka batho* as a statement about community points to life in common or being community as the object of desire which everyone was encouraged to be. As an object of desire community was at the same time an ideal to which the community aspired. According to traditional thought it seems it was desired because it was thought to be good and not because it was right. So to live as closely as possible to this ideal was regarded first as good and only afterwards as right.

In this way the proverb is an implicit statement about the priority of good over right in moral judgments among the Basotho. Goodness as the ability to accomplish some desired end or goal is thus differentiated from right which has to do with conformance to rules or principles (cf. Kammer 1988: 84). However this should not be understood in exclusive terms. Rather that the priority is placed on ability to do good and sometimes in order to do this there is a need to observe certain norms.

So according to traditional thought and practice, what was right was essentially linked with the good, and the good is that of the community or the common good. This means that the good of the community¹⁷ in addition to that of its members was that on the basis of which the Basotho made evaluations and determined rightness of conduct. So the value of community among the Basotho as we have just seen, was such that its wellbeing and good were major factors influencing personal conduct.

This reveals another character of ethics among Basotho, and that is its teleological perspective.

¹⁷ .Because the African worldview and their communities in general emphasised the oneness of all things, the common good i.e the good of the community as a collective must be understood in the most encompassing manner, where it does not only mean the good for humans.

by the people express exactly what it denotes, that which is ugly or dirty. To say, therefore, that something "*e mpe*" meant that it was morally ugly and dirty, and it was because it was thus that it was wrong. This was and still is the basic pattern for making moral judgements in Sesotho. Evaluations and judgements are not made in terms of what is right and wrong, rather in terms of what is good and bad. In other words among Basotho it was the latter that formed the underlying basis of most judgements of right and wrong. The prevalence of the concept "*bobe*" and "*botle*" (goodness) in the moral language of Basotho means that for them it would make no sense to speak of moral judgements apart from the idea of goodness and ugliness. The activity of evaluating conduct was intrinsically linked to the idea of goodness, specifically the common good which was their purpose and an end which they aimed for.

This shows the extent to which Basotho ethics was teleological. Because of this a full explanation of their behaviour required some reference to the value they attach to the community as a common good and purpose. This is because as Sandel says

we must consider people's aims and values if we want to understand who they are. We cannot analyze their behaviour as if they were abstract entities, as if their values existed somewhere in the distance, 'outside', so to speak (Avineri & de-Shalit 1992: 3).

As people we value and aim for certain things because we see those things as good. This is ultimately the process by which we make moral judgements i.e. in terms of what we see as good. In African ethics this was in terms of what was good in its most broadest sense i.e. common good. In other words something was judged right or wrong because it was good or bad and in turn this was assessed in terms of the common good i.e. well being of the community.

7.2 Community as the Moral Sovereign

One of the basic features of ethics as found among Basotho and Africans in general was that it starts from the basic premise that moral sovereignty rests with the community. It begins from the conviction that morality is the thing of and designed for communal living and practice. It is because of this that African ethics is primarily relational ethics. It is ethics derived from the relationships that obtain between people as inter-dependent social beings who bear social roles. Social roles which map out how people are to act towards one another and how not to act

towards one another. In other words "because this lady is older than me", by which reference is to her social role and public status as an elder, "it is good and, therefore, right that I respect her", or "that this person is my sister she cannot marry me". In other words because of the type of relationship obtaining between us, brother-sister in the case of the latter, and older-younger in the former, it is proper that I treat them -and they treat me- according to the way people related in that way are to relate to each other.

Within the moral framework that does not recognize communal roles and their inherent normative function this sort of judgement will appear suspect and irrational. According to such a moral view ways of conduct are a purely personal matter which is not socially dependent. In other words the community or society has nothing to do with personal conduct. This is not true. Personal conduct always has social implications. It cannot just be that which affects me as an individual, and for the Basotho this is why it made sense that moral sovereignty be with the community and not the individual.

Take for instance the case of suicide. For many people this is regarded as wrong and often there is a strong social reaction to it. The reason for this is the implicit belief that individuals have no right to take their own lives. If this is so, the question is "who then has the right to determine what is wrong and what is right, if not the individual?". The answer will be found in the underlying assumptions behind such social attitudes and reactions.

Often underlying such social reactions is an important, but often unacknowledged, truth about moral judgments, namely that they derive their normative authority from the community. Personal conduct is not just a matter solely for the individual. It is also in part the business of the community. It is in this sense that a way of conduct that condones or involves things like promiscuity, dishonesty, lying or selfishness are disapproved in many communities. In the case of someone killing himself the strong social reaction is an implicit reprimand to the individual concerned in which the person is, as it were, being asked "who told you that can do that when we, the community clearly have not said so?"

Although it is not always explicitly stated or acknowledged the priority to determine what is right and wrong, and what is good and bad, does not always rest with the individual. It may be argued that in practice it is individuals who make decisions not the community and this is true, but even here those decision are more often than not consistent with generally held standards of conduct.

So even though at times it may appear as if moral sovereignty rests with individuals, something which contemporary moral attitudes wants us to believe, this is nevertheless done within the framework of what the society upholds. In others words such sovereignty, where it exists, must be understood as conferred upon the person and as such subject and subordinate to the higher level of authority. It is important to stress this because often the moral atmosphere in which ethical decisions are made in modern society is one in which on the one hand, at the conscious level, an impression has been created that the choice is with the individual to make moral decisions, while on the other hand, at the subconscious level, there is a deep seated belief that it is with the community. This tension is no where clearly visible as in the thorny issues of abortion, prostitution and gay marriages, where in spite of modern attempts to spread the gospel of rights, autonomy of the individual and free choice, the society has not given up the moral claim to these ways of conduct.

This goes to show that it is not entirely true that individuals have the final word in what happens to their lives. If it was so then there is no reason for all the emotions and in some case violent behaviour about some of these issues. The fact that one finds the public so divided on such issues shows that the moral sovereignty on this particular issue at least, if not on almost all major moral issues, does not lie entirely with the individual as liberalism suggests. The extent to which governments ensures that there is enough consultation before making any decision on such issues as abortion is also indicative of how strong is the community's claim as the moral sovereign, as opposed to individuals.

Among traditional Basotho communities this claim was even more forceful. The reason is that in their understanding, and this should not be taken lightly by contemporary Basotho, ethics and morality consisted in real relationships among people which are defined in terms of social roles, and social roles are properly categories found within a community and not individuals. They describe relationships more than personal descriptions. This can be seen in the terms like father, mother, brother, sister, child, lecturer, priest, woman or banker. These terms do not only denote personal identity and one's status in a hierarchical structure.

What is more important about social roles is that they also describe they way people are related i.e. a social relationship. They tell us how we are to act towards one another and how not to act towards one another, which is what ethics is all about. The community as a moral sovereign is

an arena of practical relationships and whence it is there that the drama of morality and ethics is played out. It is in this sense that the individual can not be a moral sovereign.

7.3 Ethics as a Communal Enterprise

In the previous section we saw that among the Basotho the understanding was that moral sovereignty did not rest entirely with the individual. However this should not be understood as saying that ethics was therefore entirely the responsibility and business of the community either. Such a mutually exclusive "either or" interpretation of ethical approach can not be applied to Basotho because for them ethics, like other aspect of their life, functioned within the framework of community, community as a co-dependence or inter-subjectivity of persons. This means that ethics was going to be lived by the principle of co-responsibility. According to this individuals never exist solely as individuals. They are always members of their communities and in what ever they do they reflected something of the community from which they come, because they are representative of their own communities. That is why ethics is, in the least, a co-responsibility between the community and its individual members. In other words a communal enterprise.

For this reason the individual's way of conduct was necessarily of concern to, and the responsibility, of the community and as the term suggests co-responsibility requires the active participation all those involved i.e. participation of individuals. This happened through the principle of participatory involvement by the individual in ethics as a communal practice. To this Bujo says that freedom and the ethical responsibility of the individual within the black community is attained through the reciprocal relationship between the community and the individual (1990: 97). Such a participation will always be in communion with others, and never apart from others because as a common practice, ethics is something that has to be practised together. Such an attitude to ethics makes it essentially a communal enterprise. Among the Basotho this was how ways of conduct were understood: a joint responsibility of the individuals and the community. This meant that even though in practice it was individuals who give the concrete social expression of ethics this was done with a clear consciousness on the part of the individual, that what ever they do is a reflection of their community, because they embody the ideals of the community. As such their way of conduct was not just theirs alone but the

community's as well. This meant that individuals approached personal conduct with much greater awareness of its communal dimension that perhaps is the case nowadays.

So even at this seemingly personal level ethics remained a communal enterprise in its application. This implies that it can not then be something that is solely my responsibility which I can do as I please or rather as I choose with it. In Sesotho for instance if some one had done something wrong this became a communal matter. The whole community would be involved in dealing with it through the village gathering or "*pitso*"¹⁸. These gatherings had a moral function which gave expression to the community's moral responsibility and role regarding personal conduct. This could be seen in cases where a crime or an offence has been committed. At the "*pitso*" which was attended by every adult person, the issue would be presented and discussed. The people involved would be reprimanded or punished in front of the whole community gathered there because often crimes were not only seen as criminal offenses but also as moral offenses, due to their impact on the wellbeing of the community. For example if children, say boys stole someone else's mealies they would be brought to the "*pitso*" and all their age mates would also be summoned to be present. The "bad boys" would be caned in full view of their peers. What is significant that the boys who were innocent were also called.

The reasoning behind this is that as part of its moral function i.e. formation of its younger members, the community shows the other boys by this act what not to be. This is because in Sesotho it is believed that it is important that the wrong doer i.e. the *person* not so much the *deed*, must be corrected in public so that he can not teach others, because as we say in sesotho "*u tla ruta ntsi*" (Sekese 1994: 69), "he will teach others". In other words a person who did something unbecoming was as it were being presented to the rest of the community as an example of a bad person. In this way the community would be saying to those present "this is not what we are as this particular people" and in turn what you should not be i.e. by doing such deeds or conducting yourself in that fashion.

What becomes clear out of all this is two things. First there is the *common moral formation* of the young generation. Secondly there is the *common moral responsibility* by the community. All

¹⁸. This seems to be a development from the traditional "*khotla*", the chiefs public court, which was only attended by men (cf. Casalis 1861: 124; Bereng 1987: 70ff). But a village "*pitso*" that I am talking about was meant for all adults, male and female because it was here that legal and some administrative matters were discussed.

this goes to show the degree to which ethics among the Basotho was a communal affair. For them ethics as a communal practice, therefore, was thus oriented to what is acceptable human conduct and manner of speech that allow order and peace in the community. Eugene Casalis, describing this said of the Basotho that

morality among these people depends so entirely upon social order, that all political disorganization is immediately followed by a state of degeneracy, which the re-establishment of order alone can rectify (1861: 302).

What Casalis calls political disorganization is in fact the break down of community, particularly shared beliefs and common values at all levels from the smallest scale of the family community to the largest scale of the national community. From this we can see that the main thrust behind this type of ethic was the community and not so much individuals. This is because according to traditional thought and general understanding of Basotho, what may be called rules of conduct were not primarily for the individuals' conduct in relation to themselves. Rather they were for the individual's conduct in relation to the community i.e. social relationships between peoples. This is perhaps the chief difference between an ethic expressed by African traditional morality and Western ethics. According to traditional African morality it is clear that rules are not primarily about the well being of the individual, but rather of the community. Most of these rules were simply known through tradition and were passed down the ages through communal legacies and customs.

The community as the hallmark of ethics among the Basotho was, therefore, the basic framework upon which all other ethical imperatives found their true meaning. And within the larger spectrum of their worldview, community was one of the most fundamental aspects of their life, giving coherence, meaning and rationale to their moral norms and values. Ethics was thus communal both in practice and in the way it was thought about. It is because of this that their experience of community was very central to how they arrive at making moral judgements. This means that ethics as a communal enterprise is concerned primarily with the horizontal plane, i.e. relationships between people. Its area of operation is in the here and now of inter-personal relationships. Its orientation is "this worldly" and not "other worldly". Like many Africans the moral order of the Basotho was seen as a matter not of the relations between human beings and God, but of the relationships between human beings themselves in their communal living (cf.

Bujo 1992: 32). This means that as regards relationships with the ancestors and ultimately with the supreme being, these could only be right and authentic if social relationships on the horizontal plane were in order. In other words if there was "*kutloano*" i.e. living together in friendly interpersonal relationships. Without this any such relationship would be false. I will, therefore, argue that one will find no reference within traditional Basotho morality of an offence against the deity and that any such reference in which moral conduct is described directly in terms of the ancestors or God is the influence of Christianity and Christian upbringing. This implies that these relationships did not play a leading role in this regard. However this does not mean that they were not important. To be sure such relationships were very important as can be seen in the case of ancestors. It must be stressed that the moral life was not lived in direct reference to these or as the primary moral reference point guiding ways of conduct.

Ethics among the Basotho was situated and functioned not only on the horizontal plane it was also a practice to be practised communally and properly the game to be played on this plane.

7.4 Problems in Basotho Ethics

The picture of ethics that I have presented has said very little about the weaknesses and problems of the ethical model I have presented. Before looking some of these problems it is important that we understand how the situation that will be described as problems has come about. Since I have argued that most of the problems in Africa have come about as a result of modernity, we need to understand how modernity works and in particular what happens when it interfaces with other cultures. The best way to describe this and one which I found very helpful is one in which the project of modernity has been compared to a luxury passenger bus, like Greyhound or Translux. According to this the most distinctive feature of modernity and its mode of operation in relation to other cultures is that either they climb aboard or get run over. Modernity and modernism allow no alternative forms of social institutions and cultural expressions.

African communities have been the worst hit by this attitude. Contrary to the widely held assumption that these communities have no room for plurality, and as anyone who has experienced modernity from the outsiders' position will know, it is modernity that is most intolerant of other cultural attitudes. Life in the modern is lived on subtle fixed rules with less

room for plurality than was before. So every aspect of life has nicely been placed into a particular category or partition and as such we have our private life, love life, public life, religious life and not only are these not to be mixed in any one time, they each have their own fixed rules and modes of behaviour. As such it would not be seen in good light today to let your love life influence your public function e.g. choosing to hire someone because they are your boyfriend's sister. In the economic sphere liberal capitalism is the way to go, any other form of economic arrangement is tactfully made to appear as self defeating and labelled as uneconomical, when in fact it has not been given room at all.

The modernity bus with its heavy luggage of modern ethical standards was particularly hostile and uncompromising when it interfaced with traditional African morality. There was no room for dialogue and most probably no "time", that most revered modern concept. African culture was thus left with only two options since it could not run away nor keep the bus from coming. It either had to climb aboard or curl itself, eyes closed and hold its head and wait to be run over. For many cultures the latter was no alternative and so they climbed aboard with their baggage of traditional morality. However since in the modern luggage is limited to so many kilos, many of these African passengers were forced to reduce their luggage and take only what they considered essential. So they did, right there on the road side. With very little "time" they were given, mind you the bus has a strict time schedule, they sorted their belongings, took what they could and left the rest. Many of these items were run over by the bus as it continued on its journey. Many reflections by Africans on their culture such as this one are reflections *en route*. They are written on board the modernity bus with its tempting comforts and luxuries.

As such to speak as if one were entirely free from its influences is not only impossible but is simply being dishonest. This is important to say because often critiques of modernity like this one, are sometimes quickly dismissed, by pointing out that those making them are themselves typical products and beneficiaries of modernity. As a friend of mine Sipho once said in seminar when I was presenting my proposal " Chris is the right person to talk about adulteration of African culture, because he is a living example of this by wearing a cap indoors". What Sipho was saying was true. Many of us have not been and are not immune from the influences of modernity, and it is precisely because of this that we are critical of modernity or as Kinoti pointed out because as the new emergent African, Western educated and Christianized we are

indeed something of a caricature, least pleasing to ourselves (cf. Kinoti 1992: 80). So in many ways such critiques should not only be seen as a way of addressing the reality of contemporary African culture by these individuals, but also as addressing the same reality in one's own life. The imaginary scenario of the luxury bus, seems to be the best way to tell the story and explain the moral problems of contemporary African societies. As I hope to show it will be in understanding this story that many of the problems in African ethics can be understood with better clarity.

We all know what happens if you pack in a rush as many of the African cultures had to. Many of the essential things get left behind, and either upon arrival or on the way you discover that you have brought a whole range of single items that are supposed to be in pairs. e.g. socks something I always do. With out the other pair these socks are pretty useless. If in spite of this you go ahead and use them i.e. wear different colour socks for instance, you will not only look funny, but the whole thing begins to make no sense, unless you are clown. This is because those socks no longer serve the *purpose* or an end for which they were designed for as pair. They may well be able to perform certain functions, but not the purpose they were meant for such as looking decent by not wearing socks of different colours is one of them.

This is largely what happened to African ethical traditions with the advent of modernity. In the rush to get on board many of the essentials of traditional morality were left behind and a whole range of single items or fragments were taken. Among the essentials that were left behind, or rather correctly which are not present in the modern is the communal moral framework within which the various African values and virtues functioned and found meaning. Without this many of these are like single items. They are fragments which not only do we not understand but are often vulnerable to abuse. The communal moral framework, of which I am not sure would have been allowed on board, ensured that this does not happen. Along with it was the social organization that concretized the social application of its moral values and virtues. One such institution beside the family was the community which unfortunately many African cultures were not able to bring along with them.

Most of them managed to bring aspects of traditional morality e.g. communal solidarity, sharing, giving of gifts to people of authority, respect for authority and many more, and in the context of the modern framework all these are like fragments of a moral framework that has seriously

been damaged. Because of this, that which bonded them together has been lost and as such they are made to function without that vital guiding principle i.e. community. In other words for their meaningful use and function they need the moral framework and corresponding socio-political organization which gave coherency to their application. Without these they are vulnerable to abuse and misuse. This is where many of the problems in African ethics derive.

In other words the situation is similar to MacIntyre's view of the status of contemporary language of morality. According to him

in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the ... state of grave disorder... what we possess...are fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality...(1981: 2f).

Contemporary African moral environment bear many similarities with this analyses, and I believe it is these fragments and their use in the context of modern ethical systems that constitute the bulk of what we now experience as problems in African ethics. The reason is that as Kasenene points out many people have found it difficult to smoothly intergrate traditional values with Western ethical values, because

on the one hand there is the African ethics which is based on a different type of social organization, political system and economic structure; a base which emphasises communal solidarity, appreciation of authority with gifts, unity of person and office, respect for seniority... On the other hand there is the Western philosophical system emphasising impartiality, accountability, individual responsibility and a separation of office from one's personal life (1993: 6-7).

With modernization of African communities, new socio-political and economic systems and organizations have been introduced and it is within the context of these new types of social organization and systems that the problems in African ethics must be seen. I will look at some of these problems and attempt to trace their socio-cultural origins. It is only in knowing this that I believe we can be able to effectively deal with them by exploring and devising appropriate measures. For this purpose I will borrow a lot from Peter Kasenene's reflection on the subject and his outline of problems facing African ethics.

7.4.1 Communalism or Nepotism

As I have already pointed out earlier, according to African thought "*motho ke motho ka batho*".

According to this belonging is of the essence of one's existence. The individual only becomes aware of their own being and identity in terms of the other. As such one of the highly regarded values was the welfare of the community or group to which one belonged. In Sesotho for instance we say "*metla khola u e lebisa ho oabo*", which denotes the idea that in your fortunes always remember your own kind i.e. family, relatives, friends or your group. Azariele Sekese says the proverb means that when a person has found a fortune he must not forget his people (1994: 98). This idea is again found in another proverb "*Bana ba khoale ba bitsana ka mololi*"¹⁹ (Ibid. 1994: 52). In all these people are discouraged from keeping fortunes to themselves, but to think of other members of the community. This kind of understanding of common welfare and the individual's place in it has serious ethical implications in the modern way of living. (It's) practice within a social organization that has no place for communal solidarity will seem to be nothing other than blatant nepotism, particularly with regards to places of work and public offices. Communal solidarity as a way of life in which sharing plays an important role thus seems incompatible with socio-political and economic systems of modernity which encourages individualism and demands impartiality. Such systems with their corresponding conception of the person are key to understanding the phenomenon of nepotism e.g. in public service. Many Africans who render public services and hold public offices often find themselves in a dilemma and uncomfortable situation as a result of being subjected to Western assumptions upon which much of modern work ethic is based. Many of these people were not only raised within a social framework that does not make a distinction between the person and his office, they have also inherited elements of a cultural background that values communal solidarity, sharing, and mutual aid to one's family or community (Kasenene 1993: 10). In the modern these have been stripped of any public status. At best they are values appropriate for one's private conduct. So many people have been forced to make a distinction between private and public spheres, a dichotomy which is not part of their worldview. All this has resulted in a situation where by that which was good within a particular social organization e.g. communalism has developed and become something bad i.e. nepotism.

¹⁹ . This proverb derives its meaning from the obligations brothers have towards one another when they are in a battle. They are being told in this proverb that their responsibility is to look after one another other and seek one another when the home side is loosing.

The challenge then for African ethics is to become a tool for social analysis that will enable Africans to understand better, both as individuals and communities, how this transformation happened. Having done this African ethics will then enable us and lead us to explore and identify, within the new types of social organizations, areas in which values such as communalism can be legitimately practised and encouraged, without the current misuse and abuses. What has happened is that because of the prevalence of nepotism even the good that is found in communalism tends to be lost. As a result communal solidarity is increasingly disappearing from all aspects of life today, to the extent that even where we live or the so called private lives e.g. in our homes, neighbourhood or communities we find it difficult to be community.

The truth is that we can not turn back the clock and go back to old social organizations in which it was possible and easy to practice communalism in almost every sphere of lives, but we can certainly stop the modern work ethic and individualistic spirit of liberal capitalism creeping into our communities and relationships. In other words African values will need to be redefined bearing in mind the living conditions of modern life style. Values like communal solidarity e.g. with relatives will need to be carefully watched so that it doesn't become a cover up for the abuse of the person's kindness by relatives or the community.

In the changed modern conditions not only are these traditional values vulnerable to misuse due to the demanding nature of the individualistic modern life styles, but as Bujo points out, in some cases unadapted practice of some of these traditional notions provide room for injustices e.g.. solidarity where it can be used in a discriminatory fashion to those not belonging to one's own group (1990: 102). African ethics as an ethical reflection must help us to see through current distortions and avoid destructive alternative by defining the border line between the genuine obligations of charity on the one hand and exploitation or parasitism on the other.

7.4.2 Authority or Power

Another grey area within contemporary African societies is that between authority and power. The line between these two is so fine that the danger of slipping from the former to latter is a real one. We have already seen that according to traditional morality the person's concern with and striving for the common good or welfare of the community was not only regarded as good

but was encouraged. This means that within the African way of life beneficence became a highly valued virtue and often commended. As a result it was not strange for people to take initiatives and sometimes even commit sacrifices to bring good for the community.

On the socio-political level this often led to a kind of paternalism, in particular regarding the relationship of the leader and those whom he leads. This was because in an African community the leader was also regarded as the custodian of the community's welfare. The leader had authority even to make and take decisions when necessary on behalf of the community (Kasenene 1993: 15). The reasoning behind this is that as the leader he was trusted to have the interest of the community at heart.

Thus as Casalis observed of a certain chief named Libe. People "would gladly have rendered homage and obedience" to him, but because he did not have their interests at heart, but instead "disgusted one after another of his most devoted adherents ...he was forsaken" (1861: 216). So there was a lot expected of the leader and as such when he did take a decision the understanding and expectation was that it had to be for the good of the community.

Because of this there were rare cases where a leader would make a decision that is clearly to the detriment of the community. This made the leader or person of authority to be highly regarded and respected. Such a figure was not expected to fail or do wrong e.g., by being selfish or unkind and merciless. His character was supposed to be like that of a father towards his family i.e. one full of care, love and compassion. It is within this context that expressions like "father of the nation" must be understood. A person of authority was the embodiment of all that the community regarded as good and was meant to serve as an example. Because of this often such a person would not flaunt their authority. Contrary to what modern views want us to believe such figures were very careful to be accountable to the people, hence the saying in Sesotho that "*morena ke morena ka sechaba*", a chief is a chief through his people. In other words these figures were conscious not only of the community's trust in them but even more importantly of the fact that the authority they have is given to them by the community. This is the chief difference between power and authority.

We mentioned that a person of authority was expected not to fail or to err. This was the ideal to which the Basotho aspired in their leaders. As such it was not necessarily that which was always found in actual practice, because often what ought to be is not the same as what is. So

if these people in authority did err or abuse their authority the moral gravity of their offence was regarded more serious^{ly} than if the offence was done by some one who is not in authority. This is the picture of authority in the context of traditional society, which is not the case any more. In contemporary African culture, a modified version of this conception of authority continues to function with its significantly impoverished framework of accountability to the community. This has transformed authority into sheer exercise of power in which the consent of those upon whom it is to be exercised is often disregarded. Power in this sense means authority that does not recognize the consent of the community for its legitimacy and exercise. Once this happens it will not be long before authoritarianism, dictatorship and domination take the place of authority and beneficence. The political manifestation of this in African is the pervasive dictatorial forms of governments.

With the modernization of African social-political institutions and systems, this is what developed in many African countries. Many cultures brought on board the modernity bus as it were the traditional conception and notions of authority, which was often enshrined in mystique (cf. Casalis 1861: 214), but stripped it of socio-political framework. Needless to say this was the beginning of unaccountable exercise of authority within African social and political life. No one describes this better than Kasenene. He points out that

in many African countries, after independence, a mentality developed regarding the leader, the party and the nation as one. The interests of the leader and those of the party were seen as one with those of the nation (1993: 15).

This mentality he argues made it easier for dictators or life presidents to emerge because these people riding on the traditional notion of beneficence justified their actions by saying that they know better what is the best interest of the people or that their actions are for the good of the people (Ibid. 1993: 15f).

One of the realities and behaviour that has baffled most people is the seeming complacency of many Africans with one dictator after another. The reason is that the African conception of authority is conducive to these opportunists and partly the close similarity between the African conception of authority and the tactics of these modern dictators.

The contribution that African ethics can do regarding this, is not only to disapprove of this abuse and misuse of the people's trust and respect for authority, but also help the people to see through

some of these distortions.

7.4.3 Gifts, Bribery and Corruption

Another aspect of the African way of life that has been negatively affected by modernity is the tradition of giving gifts to people particularly important people. In their social life the African people often gave and presented gifts to their chiefs or people with authority, e.g. when these figure visited or when a person needed a favour from them. According to tradition this was not only good but the proper way to conduct oneself in the presence of such community figures. However as Kasenene points out the practice of this in the context of contemporary social organization in Africa has resulted in a serious moral problem of corruption. Describing this he says

in all these cases a public motive is replaced by a private one in performing one's duties. Corruption involves a violation of public duty or trust in exchange for or in anticipation of personal gain (Ibid. 1993: 12-13, my emphasis).

The important difference between this and the traditional practice is the secrecy that often surrounds this. So what we see here is that due to the changed social conditions, we have something that was essentially good to the community being transformed into something bad. Corruption of this nature is a product of the abuse and often misuse of the tradition of the respect of authority.

Bribery which is the commonest, as the social manifestation of corruption is a practice that is found both among those holding positions of authority e.g. public officials, or any office holders and those whom they serve i.e. the public in general.

What is worth noting is that bribery as we know it i.e. as a general state of corruption, was something not so rampant in traditional African societies. In the past such presentations of a gift were not a precondition for getting services from a chief or a person of authority. But today people in authority do not only ask for such "gifts", in most cases they are a prerequisite to getting any service. In order to overcome attitudes like these and the abuse of such values, African ethics will need to reflect and put under scrutiny the traditional ethic of presenting gifts to those in authority as one possible origin and explanation of bribery and corruption in contemporary Africa (Ibid. 1993: 13).

7.4.4 Excessive Community

Another area that African ethics will need to look into, especially in the context of contemporary African social organization, which is increasingly becoming individualistic, is the possibility of clash of interests between the community and the individual. In other words a clash that could result into the community being in error and therefore being bad. Within traditional societies the community was always right, because it was a collective embodiment of the general will of its members. Describing this Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that

the general will always be right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the resolutions of the people have always the same rectitude (1994: 32, my emphasis).

In those social systems the community was essentially about common interests or the general will as opposed to the will of all, which Rousseau describes as a collection of private interests, not common interests. Only when the community is seen as the will of all i.e. a collective of private interests, is it possible to think of it going wrong. This is because being wrong in this sense would be an external statement made as a result of dissatisfaction with the collective, but when community is understood as the general will i.e. a collective embodiment of the moral will of all those who belong to it, it will not only be sovereign, but always right. Since wrong and right are essentially relational terms, if such a community were to be said wrong who would it be wrong against? Certainly not its members or in relation to its internal relations. This is because such a community could only be seen as wrong from the perspective of one who does not share its values, and ideals. In other words only in terms of its external relations i.e. from the outsiders' viewpoint, a stranger or one who does not belong could the community be wrong.

But the situation today in Africa has changed, more and more people paradoxically understand and see community as a collective of private interest, not as a collective of the general will, while at times they will identify themselves with it. For most people today they are increasingly defining themselves as separate from their communities. For this reason the community could in some cases be experienced as a negative thing. As Bujo points out

the individual... is deeply rooted in the clan community, but besides the many advantages, there are also negative elements which must not be ignored (1992: 101).

Within contemporary African situation it is possible to argue, theoretically at least that the community could be wrong. It is here that the job of African ethics become necessary. First it

must help Africans not to make an arbitrary distinction between self and the community. Secondly it must help communities not to make unwarranted communal demands on individuals. As an ethical reflection, African ethics must assist Africans to avoid excessive community on the one hand and extreme individualism on the other. It must help us both as individuals and communities to know what is our rightful expectations and deserts, so that the two mutually enrich each other, while avoiding an antagonistic relationship towards each other.

What I have been discussing was by way of showing some of the problems in African ethics in which I showed that the change in the existing social organization brings with it change in the moral sphere and that this is what happened with African ethics. As such in order to address adequately some of these problems we encounter within contemporary African culture we need to realize that

African ethical values were adequate and relevant in the past. Now that there is a different social set up, new standards have to apply (Kasenene 1993: 18).

In other words what Kasenene is saying is that new ways of thinking about and living out the ethical values of traditional morality will have to be found. However these will have to be meaningful and consistent with the African way of life, their conception of the good life, of who they are and what they ought to be. Such ethical exploration must be such that it aims at rediscovering traditional African values for the purpose of learning how to use them communally in order to transform contemporary moral attitudes in which they are either intentionally abused or misused.

7.5 WHY COMMUNAL ETHICS

As we have shown in the course of this work, among the Basotho and the African people in general ethics as a vehicle by which a people were to move from who they are to who they ought to be, was essentially a communal thing. As such it was embedded in narrative or the story of the community. The examination of ethical traditions of Basotho within the larger context of African ethics was by way of demonstrating this communal or narrative nature of ethics as found among traditional African communities. This in turn was an attempt to show why the contemporary moral framework, which is largely universalistic and individualistic is not only

insufficient, but has failed as a foundation for the moral life of both individuals and communities. By implication I am, therefore, suggesting that a communal account of ethics, similar to that of traditional African communities is a better alternative offering a real solution to the pervasive moral individualism. This is even more significant for us in Africa because not only does it threaten to destroy the fabric of traditional African morality, it threatens our culture and the essence of who we are as Africans.

For this reason a modified re-discovery of traditional ethos, a re-instating of a communal approach and adoption of a contextual perspective to ethics is not only important but necessary. The reason is not only because ethics is fundamentally a game or practice which properly belongs to communities. It is also because as human beings we are political-moral animals, and because we are moral animals, we have a natural sense of what is just and moral. We cannot be moral while our communities or societies are immoral, and in order to have moral communities, we cannot do it as antecedently individuated, independent selves, but as communities in which we are interdependent on one another. This calls for common vision and a communal perspective to conduct. In other words as human beings we need one another for a meaningful and coherent moral life. For this communal ethics is not only necessary, but is better placed to address this than the individualist model. The realization or bringing about of a just and moral socio-political and economic society, can not be left entirely to the care of personal ethics. The hundred and so many years of the history of mankind in which his systems were largely informed and run by principles of individualistic ethics bear testimony to this. As such in agreement with Niebuhr we can say that although individually men are moral, this in itself is insufficient as an impetus for creating moral societies. The responsibility for making our society more moral and just than they are can not be left to the individual's conscience or personal ethics (cf. 1960: xii).

Individual ethics or the Western model is thus insufficient as a leaven to society and hence of bringing about both people and communities that are not only moral but have goodwill. As Niebuhr points

as individuals, men believe they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command (1960: 9).

The reason that our natural inclination towards justice and goodwill quickly fades in such

groupings is that when people relate to one another as big groups, that face-to-face presence and proximity, which enabled the OTHER to be known gets lost. In the absence of this, our interactions become faceless encounters, and when inter-personal relations are primarily conducted in an atmosphere like this they become impersonal and less just. This is not the case when people relate to one another in face-to-face presence, a real I-THOU²⁰ encounter because that natural sense and inclination towards what is just and moral is evoked and activated because the OTHER can be seen. They are right there in front of us. In other words their presence is real. Niebuhr makes an important observation here namely that

"moral attitudes develop most sensitively in a person-to-person relationships" and that this is "one reason why more inclusive loyalties, naturally more abstract than immediate ones, lose some of their power over human heart" (Ibid. 1960: 54). Such moral attitudes that Niebuhr is referring to are easier to develop in much smaller groups of communities and likewise when our communities are moral and just, our society has a greater chance of being moral and just. For this to happen ethics and ethical reflection need to be a much broader business involving not just individuals but communities. In this way ethics will function as a kind of self imposed coercive method to check upon the selfish impulses and attitudes. It is for this reason that I will suggest that communal ethics or the narrative account is a better model towards this larger objective. Niebuhr, commenting on this, points out that throughout history society has failed to reflect that moral code found in its individual members and that its greatest ethical challenge is "the tragedy of man's collective behaviour" i.e. the inability for society to conform its collective life to the individual ideals (Ibid. 1960: 9). In other words it is very rare to find in society those moral ideals that often individuals have and may even live by. This is because the natural impulse is not powerful enough to apply with equal force on social groups or group behaviour (Ibid. 1960: xi, 13).

The gravity of the situation that Niebuhr is describing is by implication indicative of the necessity of bringing back a communal account of ethics to ethical reflection, and it further validates my point about the necessity for a communal perspective to ethics. It is precisely because of this and

²⁰ . For more on the I and Thou relationship see Martin Buber's book I and THOU, 1958.

the fact that people as a whole cannot live happily in an immoral society that the need for a communal approach to ethics is necessary. It is also because personal ethics or our natural impulse towards justice, sympathy and a fair measure of consideration for the other has failed to make its impact on our inter-personal relations and social interactions.

But in those societies where the predominant ethos has been founded on the logic of communal living there has been a fair measure of man's individual ideals or moral code, his natural sense of what is right and what is good, being reflected and having an impact on the larger community. This was made possible by the communal approach to ethics that these societies had. The problem of group egoism in contemporary societies I will argue is partly explained by the fact that our "communities" are really not communities, but a collection of individuals with no shared values and interests.

8. CONCLUSION

The basic argument I have put forward is that modern ethics is inadequate as a moral framework within which communities live their lives. Basing my argument from the past experience of traditional African communities I have suggested a paradigm shift from the mainly individualistic and universalistic modern ways of doing ethics to a more communally oriented and contextual approach reminiscent of traditional ethics. I have argued that if we hope to avoid the current moral individualism we need to develop a moral framework that encompasses both the ethical code governing the individual i.e. personal ethics and the ethical code governing social groups and their conduct. That framework will be something similar to the communal model that we see in traditional African communities. What has happened in the course of time and as societies become more advanced and social organizations more complex, is that the ethical code governing individuals became the main focus of ethical reflection. In Africa the role played by religion in this regard cannot be ignored, in particular Christianity's idea of personal salvation, which developed into an introverted religion concerned with the self-centred quest for personal immortality and wellbeing (Kammer 1988: 146).

Whatever the reasons, with the advent of modernity morality became more and more that which has to do with individual ethics. As I said communal ethics is necessary because it is like a

bridge between personal ethics and social ethics, while the community is the link between the individual and the society. For this reason communal ethics has a much greater chance of injecting society with those moral ideals with which human beings are endowed with naturally (cf. Ibid. 1960: 13).

One of the problems with modern ethics as we saw is its attempt to be universal or what Hauerwas terms "unqualified ethic". If we are to avoid this kind of moral universalism we need to re-introduce a contextual perspective to ethical reflection. This will help in the development of a moral framework that acknowledges its particularity and rootedness in a particular tradition and history. Only when ethical reflection is based on such a foundation will its universal component not seek to find moral absolutes upon which a universal ethic can be constructed. Such an ethical reflection will ensure that ethics remains true to its context, even as it explores the universal implications of conduct and dialogues with other moral particularities. In other words in view of modern approaches to ethics, as individuals and communities we need a moral schema that will go beyond the limitations of moral individualism and universalism, both of which have failed to provide contemporary African societies with a solid moral foundation and a coherent moral thought and practice. The pursuit of both as a basis for developing a system of values that enjoys a shared public rationale and justification has failed. Communal ethics, with its concern which goes beyond individual concerns is, therefore, a timely corrective. By acknowledging and recognising the uniqueness of the local and particular on the one hand and the social dimension of personal conduct on the other, it avoids both the dangers of moral individualism and universalism. It also lessens the intolerant impulses because it seems most likely that moral intolerance emanates from universalistic moral tendencies and the felt need for moral absolutes, which manifests themselves in similar fashions as any totalitarian ideology would i.e. accommodating no alternatives.

The adoption of a communal and contextual perspective to ethics should be the new paradigm. This requires first a conscious effort not only to make physical communities, but to think, act and, most importantly develop attitudes coherent with being community; attitudes of caring, moral goodwill, and communal solidarity. Secondly it means not only identifying what forms of community are appropriate and possible in the context of modern life styles, but redefining the meaning of community. Whatever the social climate of our times and, no matter how awesome

human developments become, now and in the future, the basic requirement of life in community namely *kutloano* i.e. the bond of friendship as the basic tone of inter-personal relationships, will be essential to any new forms of communities we will have to create. This is because such relationships are conducive for the functioning and coming into operation of an approach to personal conduct that is communally based and created, as opposed to individually chosen and manufactured.

For this reason I have maintained that when it comes to ethics the priority of the community within which ethics must be our starting point. The community precedes, as it were, reflection on ways of conduct because ethics emerges out of a community as that which Hauerwas calls a reflection of a people's history and experience (1983: 96). This means that the logical relationship between ethics and community is such that the community comes first and hence determines and gives meaning to ethics. In the same way morality does not exist out there independently of its context, nor does it come down from above and communities apply it to their life. Morality, rather is a creation of the community, and as such it is something that emerges from below.

The African way of life, as a social expression of African ethics is basically a life lived in community and for the sake of the community. As a way of conduct of a people who understands themselves basically as a community it is fundamentally communal in orientation and functioning. This is because being a form of communal ethics African ethics emerges out of the life experiences of the community who make up its context. It emerges from below where it gets its meaning and content. As an ethic that takes the particular community seriously African ethics is firstly a reflection on the question and answer; "What am I to do, I who am a member of a particular community with its own history or ethical standards?" Secondly African ethics is an ethical reflection to help Africans to achieve some degree of independence to allow them to transcend and suspend their own loyalties and worldviews temporarily, so that they can see more clearly who they ought to be (cf. Kammer 1988: 26) and subsequently what they can and can not do. This implies that in the context of contemporary African communities, African ethics will not only have to uphold those positive and relevant aspects of traditional morality, but will also need to help contemporary Africans to avoid current misuse and abuses that have resulted in problems like nepotism, corruption, parasitism and many others.

We also pointed out that community as one of the basic features of the African way of life, was the criteria by which Africans arrived at making moral judgements. As we saw in the brief exploration of the significance of the experience and concept of community among the Basotho, the community played a major role in the formation and interpretation of ethics. We also saw that because of the holistic approach of the African worldview and their conception of the self, their way of conduct became necessarily communal because the understanding was that people belonged together and because "people are people through other people".

Such a worldview did not only influence and shape their understanding of what it means to be a person, it also shaped the way they organised their life, which was mainly in communities. These communities as we saw emphasised a life in common in which relationships were characterised by *kutloano*.

In describing the African understanding and idea of community, I have also introduced a conception of community and a theoretical model for our times, and that is the conception of community not so much as a locale but rather as a an attitude. An attitude along the lines of *kutloano* in a face-to-face presence and proximity of the other. The immediate problems with this conception and its ethical implications is the absence of concrete examples. In the absence of these it may then be dismissed as nothing but nostalgia for the past, motivated more by theoretical speculation than by concrete positions. As a result it might also be argued that there is not much sense in entertaining such a model because we can not go back to pre-modern African forms of life on the one hand and neither can we have community in this sense because of our diverse interests and values today on the other hand.

To ask for concrete cases is not being premature, but also pre-judging the model. What I have tried to do with much difficulty, because it is very difficult to describe sufficiently what is community, was to present an alternative way of thinking about community. An alternative that I believe offers a real possibility for establishing the necessary supporting communities for a contextual and communal perspective of ethics.

To the extent that it is a conceptual alternative it will be inappropriate to ask for concrete cases and in turn to have misunderstood its purpose. As a theoretical conception it is not only a model, but indeed an ideal that may never be *fully* realised. In some ways it's like a vision of the goal to be achieved and of the communities to be created.

It is a vision prompted by the realization that

any significant response to our human dilemma must begin with the awareness that personal destinies are forged with the destinies of our societies... We are...tied to our communities. Our personal destiny, the very shape and quality of our humanity, is linked to that of all the other persons who are part of our community (Kammer 1988: 151, 153).

And like all true visions it will at best be approximated, but never be fully realized in actual history. Its perfection is not only contained in our aims and purposes, it is the content of history itself and its full realization transcends temporal existence (cf. Niebuhr 1960: 22).

In view of this, the conception of community and its ethical function that I have put forward, was probably never fully there even in the past, but in comparison to the modern age it was much closer to this ideal that we are. What is important, therefore, is what we can learn from this conception of community and its function in ethics. Its value is it helps us to find new ways of thinking about community and the alternative communities it promises thereof.

One of those ways is to think about community in terms of the spirit or emotional tone of interpersonal relationships. That spirit is what I have referred to as *kutloano* or friendship as a social and political relationship. The lesson that we can learn as modern people is, therefore, not so much to seek and think of community in terms of geographical place, or homogeneity, or even common history, but that in our heterogeneous complexities of modernity, we strive to establish friendship in the way we relate to one another. That we develop the emotional tone of our relationships with one another along the lines of *kutloano* or *ubuntu*. What this means among other things is that, since this functions better in the context of community as a basic form of social organization, there is an urgent need to reconstruct those communal structures that are relevant and re-define afresh those corresponding moral attitudes.

In other words we must first start re-building and in most cases build those intermediate social structures that exists between the individual and larger society which have been destroyed or broken down by the ills of modernity. The first of these is the family community both in its narrower Western understanding of a nuclear family and the wider African understanding of the extended family. No other institution or structure has gone through turbulent times as the family has and continues to be the case in the face of modernity. In places like South-Africa where families have been torn apart by the political situation or violence, this need is imminent. Equally great is this need in other places like Lesotho where not only did migrant labour system disrupt

families but like many modern African societies the very concept of family is under going a phenomenal transformation in the wake of the growing number of single parent families (cf Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992: 161). The idea of single parenthood as the basic form of the family of the future for many people means that we have to re-adjust our conception of family and re-work its new ethical role. In other words the theoretical task facing us today in this regard is the construction of new ways of thinking and reflecting about the nuclear family, as the basic unit of the community.

Life in the modern world makes it very difficult to be community and in turn have shared values and standards. It is going to be a hard thing to do, but it is not impossible.

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