



An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics

Motsamai Molefe



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*To the memory of my mother [Modichi Molefe]
and
brother [Ketsho Isaac Molefè]*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is part of the overall project of contributing to the development of the discipline of African philosophy. Specifically, its contribution will be in the branches of moral and political philosophy. To achieve this goal, I build on those philosophical contributions in African philosophy that focus on the normative idea of personhood. I single out the normative concept of personhood as the foundational moral category to theorise about African moral and political thought. I do so for two reasons: firstly, the idea of personhood is arguably the most salient moral notion in the tradition of African philosophy. This view implies that the idea of personhood is one of the most important indigenous axiological resources; it requires our earnest philosophical consideration if we are to articulate a robust monistic moral and political theory. Secondly, I am attracted to this idea because there are facets of it—specifically in the moral and political branches of philosophy—that remain under-explored in the literature (details of which, I will provide below). I believe that the philosophical development and elucidation of these facets will contribute to the aim of articulating the robust monistic theory I seek.

This book, therefore, focuses on the under-explored and under-developed moral and political facets of the idea of personhood. My ultimate aim is to have the idea of personhood inform a fully fledged moral-political theory.¹ I am partially motivated to do so by one of the leading scholars of African philosophy, Kwasi Wiredu's (2009: 16) observation that:

The philosophical implications of the normative conception of a person are legion, and we will not pursue them here.

In this book, then, I intend to pursue some of the ‘legion’ moral and political implications of the idea of personhood. To give the reader a bird’s-eye perspective of the philosophical issues that constitute the focus of this book, I structure this introductory chapter as follows: since my central focus is the idea of personhood, I begin by providing conceptual clarity regarding the view of personhood relevant to the discussion. I do so because the idea of personhood is ambiguous (see Wiredu 1992; Ikuenobe 2006a). To eschew this ambiguity, I distinguish four distinct concepts of personhood in the literature, which many scholars of African moral thought do not handle with the dexterity characteristic of philosophy. I then proceed to identify some of the interesting and recent developments in the literature on personhood that I deem relevant. I do this literature review for the sake of identifying (some of the) gaps that constitute the focus of this book. Next, I proceed to specify the moral and political issues that constitute the focus of my discussion. I conclude this chapter by outlining the structure of the entire book.

THE CONCEPTS OF PERSONHOOD IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

I identify at least four *concepts* of personhood in African philosophy. Two of these concepts are *metaphysical* and the other two *normative*. The first metaphysical notion of personhood pertains to facts that constitute a thing called a human being; it is a specification of the biological classification of human beings as a species—*Homo sapiens*. For example, imagine that one is hunting, and when about to shoot is notified: ‘Don’t shoot, that is a person!’² It is this notion of a person that Kwame Gyekye (1992: 108) seems to have in mind when he makes the following comment:

What a person [human being] acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he, *qua* person acquires and thus becomes the subject of acquisition, and being thus prior to acquisition process, he cannot be defined by what he acquires. One is a person because of what he is, not because of what he acquires.

Here, Gyekye refers to the notion of personhood in which one is a person (human being) prior to any process of socialisation or acquisition

of habits/character. Since a person (human being), in this sense, cannot be defined by what he acquires, this implies that there are certain ontological facts that constitute a person *qua* human nature that have nothing to do with any social or cultural factors. Scholars of African thought refer to the philosophical inquiry that speaks to what defines a person *qua* human nature in terms of the “ontological” or “descriptive” notion of personhood (Wiredu 1996: 159; Ikuenobe 2016: 144; Oyowe 2014a: 46). The ontological notion of personhood is concerned with specifying the descriptive features that constitute human nature. Commenting on this concept of personhood, Ikuenobe (2016: 118) states that:

A descriptive conception of personhood seeks to analyse the features and ontological make-up of an isolated [human] individual.

Just as philosophers are apt to give metaphysical accounts of the mind, of time, place, God and so on, with regard to this notion of personhood, the task is to specify the ontological properties that constitute human nature. Scholars will differ in terms of whether they take human nature to be a function, entirely, of physical stuff or a combination of physical and spiritual properties (Kaphagawani 2004). For an instructive example of the philosophical debate regarding the metaphysical/ontological conception of personhood in African philosophy, the reader may consider the debate between Kwasi Wiredu (1995) and Kwame Gyekye (1995), where they offer competing conceptions of human nature in the Akan culture.

The second metaphysical notion of personhood involves issues pertaining to the nature of *personal identity*. The debates in African philosophy regarding the idea of personhood *qua* personal identity draw their influence from debates between liberals and communitarians in the Western philosophical tradition. There, the debate pertains to the role, if any, the community plays in accounting for the socialisation and development of personal identity (Neal and Paris 1990). On the one hand, liberals tend to conceive of personhood in terms that de-emphasise the role of social relationships; while, communitarians, on the other hand, tend to accentuate the role of social relationships in accounting for personal identity.

This debate regarding personal identity in the African tradition tends to diverge between (1) those that account for it entirely in terms of social relationships and (2) those that account for it by invoking a combination

of individual and social features. Scholars like John Mbiti (1969) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) tend to construe personal identity entirely in terms of social relationships. For example, Menkiti (1984: 171, emphasis mine) commenting on personal identity notes:

... the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, *man is defined by reference to the enviroining community.*

It strikes me as obvious that Menkiti's reference to the idea of 'man' is not referring to the ontological notion of personhood *qua* human nature. This is the case precisely because the 'enviroining community' is not one of the properties of human nature that one can single out like the body and so on. The 'enviroining community' is a property that is external to human nature. In this light, it is safe to conclude that Menkiti (with Mbiti) is pursuing the notion of personal identity that one acquires by being embedded in a community. Gyekye (1992), on the other hand, in his defence of moderate communitarianism (among other things) offers a conception of personal identity that balances the individual and communal facets—I will say more on this specific discussion in the next chapter.

Both of these accounts of personhood are metaphysical insofar as they specify some descriptive properties (facts) as the basis to account for the respective *concepts* of personhood under consideration. On the one hand, personhood *qua* human nature is a function of the body, the spiritual component and any other property that is taken to be constitutive of human nature; and, on the other, personhood *qua* personal identity specifies internal or external features that are crucial for accounting for socialisation or humanisation (Molefe 2018).

Furthermore, the literature tends to distinguish between two normative notions of personhood in African philosophy. The first claims that one can assign moral value to some entity in virtue of possessing certain ontological properties that render it morally significant. This idea features significantly in bioethical contexts and also in political discussions of dignity/rights (Behrens 2013; Toscano 2011). To be called a 'person', in this sense, is to be specified as a moral patient, i.e. a being towards which we owe direct duties of respect (DeGrazia 2008). Another term used to capture this idea of personhood is that of *moral status*, which specifies things towards which we have direct duties of respect (Molefe 2017a). What is crucial to note with regard to this

notion of personhood is that it invites respect to the entity in question merely because it possesses the relevant ontological properties—be they rationality, consciousness, or sentience—without regard to how one uses them (Singer 2009; Metz 2013a).

The second notion treats talk of personhood as appropriate when praising the agent for being a moral exemplar. Personhood, in this sense, concerns the moral evaluation of the conduct/performance of the agent in the light of some norms/values of a society (Presbey 2002). If the individual performs well, then she counts as a person and if she does poorly, then she is assigned the status of a non-person. In some crucial sense, the ontological status of the humanity of the individual, on this view, is not under scrutiny at all. What is under scrutiny, in this discourse of personhood, is how the agent uses her ontological abilities, to either perfect or defect her humanity. To be called a person is to acknowledge that she has added dimensions of moral virtue to her humanity. And, to be called a non-person is to acknowledge that she has lived below the abilities of her humanity, without denying her humanity and the basic respect due to her merely as a human being (Wiredu 2009).

Environmental ethics expert, Kevin Behrens (2013), aptly distinguishes the two normative notions discussed above. He distinguishes between them in terms of one being *patient-centred* and the other *agent-centred*. The patient-centred notion grounds respect on the basis of certain ontological properties; and the agent-centred notion identifies beings that have lived up to the standards of excellence prescribed in their societies. It is the agent-centred notion of personhood that is “dominant” or “germane” or “the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory” (Masolo 2010: 135; Ikuenobe 2006a: 117; Wiredu 2009: 13). So, the central focus of this book is on the agent-centred notion of personhood. It is this notion that is salient in the tradition of African philosophy.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LITERATURE ON PERSONHOOD

What are some of the interesting developments regarding the notion of personhood in the literature? I divide this literature review regarding personhood into three areas of focus: firstly, I consider the classical debates regarding the notion of personhood; secondly, I look into some of the recent (and salient) contributions in the discourse of personhood; and finally, I consider criticisms against the idea of personhood.

The classical debate regarding personhood pivots around two influential African philosophers, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye (Matolino 2013). The debate in the literature has been between those that defend the radical version of communitarianism and those that defend the moderate one.³ Many scholars take Menkiti as the father of radical communitarianism. The defining feature of radical communitarianism is its (supposed) denial of rights (Menkiti 1984: 181).⁴ The defining feature of moderate communitarianism is its recognition of the primary status of rights in the plausible characterisation of Afro-communitarianism (Gyekye 1992, 1995). There are some thinkers (myself included) that defend the view that Menkiti is no radical communitarian. In fact, these thinkers tend to think that Menkiti, correctly construed, promises a robust moral-political philosophy—an alternative moral-political vision (Molefe 2016, 2017a; Ikuenobe 2017).⁵

Opposed to this characterisation, there are those scholars who tend to think that there is no substantive difference between radical and moderate communitarianism insofar as they both ultimately jettison rights (Matolino 2009; Famanikwa 2010). What is not entirely obvious to me—at least from where I am standing—is whether there is any relationship between the normative idea of personhood advocated by Menkiti and the idea of (natural) rights prevalent in the Western moral-political tradition. If Menkiti, in the final analysis, is pursuing an analysis of the normative notion of personhood, then one can rightly ask the following question: How did the idea of rights become a central consideration in this philosophical debate about the correct characterisation of Afro-communitarianism? One of the ideas that I will be defending in this book is the view that the idea of personhood embodies a moral-political theory that takes duties to achieve the common good to be primary. Rights, if they feature at all, will only do so incidentally. In other words, the argument will be that rights are foreign to the axiological system characteristic of personhood (Donnelly 1982). The idea of personhood imagines a good society on its own terms rather than by invoking the idea and discourse of rights.⁶

It is important to take note of some of the positive developments in the literature regarding the idea of personhood. Bernard Matolino (2014), in his monograph titled ‘Personhood in African philosophy’, intervenes in the debate between radical and moderate communitarianism. Dissatisfied with both positions, Matolino proceeds to defend what he calls *limited communitarianism*. Limited communitarianism endorses

the foundational status of rights by following the trail of the naturalist interpretation of rights similar to the one defended by Gyekye (see also Matolino 2018a, b; Chemhuru 2018). Matolino, in his contribution to the idea of personhood and communitarianism, does not quite tell us why we should take the idea of rights seriously (Matolino 2009, 2013). He simply assumes the ontological veracity and moral-political universality of the idea of rights.

Another interesting development regarding personhood is by Polycarp Ikuenobe, one of the leading contemporary scholars of the idea (2006a, 2016, 2017). Ikuenobe invokes the idea of personhood to respond to the accusation that the idea of dignity is useless or vague (Macklin 2003). He argues that the idea of personhood offers a plausible conception of dignity. Typically, in both the Western and African tradition of philosophy, dignity is construed in terms of some ontological property (Gyekye 1992; Ilesanmi 2001; Deng 2004). The mere possession of some ontological property, be it rationality on the part of Immanuel Kant or capacity for harmonious relationships on the part of Thaddeus Metz, accounts for dignity (Metz 2010, 2011, 2012). Ikuenobe insists that dignity is a function of how the agent uses their ontological properties, i.e. dignity is a function of developing personhood. He proposes an interesting approach to the discourse of dignity given that the idea of personhood will be used in political contexts to identify beings towards which we owe basic respect. I will develop the idea in this work that the idea of personhood is not suitable to ground the modern idea of dignity since these ideas play two contrasting moral-political roles.

Another interesting development with regard to the idea of personhood is in the discourse on development (Klaasen 2017). The move here is to ground the idea of development on the moral resources prevalent in the African cultural context, specifically, the idea of personhood. This, in many ways, is a novel and promising project, but it does not quite spell out how the idea of personhood could ground a plausible conception of development. One useful way to do this is by comparing it to approaches endemic in the discourse of like development ethics or even the capabilities approach (Goulet 1997; Nussbaum 2011). In this book, I will not consider the idea of development in relation to personhood. Given the space, I would have argued that developed societies are characteristically those that provide the socio-economic and political conditions that make the pursuit of personhood possible.⁷

In my opinion, Jason Van Niekerk makes a crucial contribution to the discourse on the idea of personhood. Van Niekerk's (2007) engagement with the idea of personhood begins as a response to Metz's (Metz 2007a) contribution to the debate regarding a plausible interpretation of African ethics (of 'ubuntu').⁸ Metz (2007a, b) identifies six possible interpretations of African ethics, and he ultimately defends a relational interpretation. Van Niekerk (2007), responds to Metz (2007a: 331) by defending a view that Metz describes in these terms: "This is probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature". This dominant interpretation is based on the idea of personhood. Metz (ibid., emphasis mine) points out that "[m]any thinkers take the maxim 'a person is a person through other persons' to be a call for an agent to develop her *personhood*". Van Niekerk (2007) defends the view that the idea of a person—which he construes as an *autocentric approach*—is no worse than the relational one defended by Metz. In his doctoral thesis, dedicated to African ethics, he jettisons the autocentric interpretation of the idea of personhood for the perfectionist interpretation of this idea (Van Niekerk 2013). In turn, I will take the perfectionist interpretation as a point of departure.⁹ I will also elucidate the components of this interpretation that do not feature in Van Niekerk's analysis, such as the humanism and individualism that characterise it.

Recently, a special issue dedicated to the Menkiti-Gyekye debate was published in the journal of *Filosofia Theoretica*.¹⁰ The special issue largely focused on the "individual-community question in African philosophy", and we are further informed that this issue "is closely tied to the question of personhood" (Agada 2018: 46). Some of the major themes that emerged in the special issue deal with (1) the place and relevance of (personal) autonomy (Chimakonam 2018)¹¹; (2) The use of the Menkiti-Gyekye debate to rethink African political philosophy, particularly in the light of decolonisation (African political) philosophy to rethink some "our ethical outlooks and our social and political theories to accommodate insights ... from African philosophy" (Eze 2018: 1); (3) The question of the place, relevance and justification of rights also emerged in the special issue¹² (Eze 2018; Chimakonam 2018; Matolino 2018a, b); (4) Crucial issues regarding the problematic methodology—parasitic on Western assumptions—employed by both Menkiti and Gyekye also feature (Amato 2018; Chimakonam 2018); The question regarding animals ethics in the light of personhood also receive critical attention (Horsthemke 2018).¹³

The reader should bear in mind that the burden of this book is interpretative rather than argumentative. The aim is not to argue that the idea of personhood, in and of itself, embodies the most plausible way to think about morality and politics. This comparative task is beyond the scope of this book. At this stage, the aim is to offer an interpretation of personhood and pursue some of its under-explored philosophical themes. To offer only an interpretative book may not satisfy some readers, but this does not mean that we should give up on the project. This project seeks merely to lay a foundation for further comparative and argumentative projects that others can venture into in the future.

We can now turn to some of the criticisms that have been levelled against the idea of personhood in the literature. Three such criticisms stick out for me. Firstly, there is the complaint that the idea of personhood is ‘gendered’ or male-centred, i.e. the idea of personhood is sexist or patriarchal. The idea of personhood is denounced for reducing women to a secondary status (Oyowe 2013, 2014a; Manzini 2018; Eze 2018). I am not entirely moved by this criticism. It is not clear to me whether the criticism is focused on the nature of the concept itself, as an embodiment of moral ideals, or on the sociology of the term—on how the term tends to be used in African societies. It occurs to me that the problem is not intrinsic to the term itself, it is the problem of cultures and academics that are prejudiced by their male-centred societies. My hunch is that the problem is with the practitioners, be it philosophers or cultures of praxis, and not so much with the normative concept of personhood. I believe this idea is open to interpretations that are “gender-neutral” (Oyowe 2014a: 53). Or, at least, I will be using this concept in a gender-neutral way insofar as it embodies moral insights that are true for all genders.

Another crucial criticism against the idea of personhood comes from Mpho Tshivhase (2013). Tshivhase’s major criticism is that the idea of personhood is overly other-regarding. The excessive emphasis on other-regarding features in the discourse of personhood renders it unable to accommodate crucial individualistic features necessary for a robust human life. Specifically, it neglects *autonomy* and *authenticity*, which are important concepts in appreciating the uniqueness of individuals. The individual, on the moral system imagined by this overly other-regarding concept of personhood, is so absorbed in social relationships that her personal life is neglected. It does so in a way analogous to the way, according to Susan Wolf, that Western consequentialist and

deontological accounts produce ‘saints’ that are slaves of morality, with no regard for non-moral interests. The essence of her objection is that this idea of personhood does not and cannot accommodate *options*—that morality has limits and that we have interests that have nothing to do with morality (McNaughton and Rawling 2006). In Chapter 4, I will defend the view that the idea of personhood, at least as interpreted, can accommodate options.

The third criticism is of a political nature. It argues that the idea of personhood is essentially inegalitarian. As such, the political discourse generated or implied by the idea of personhood will fail to capture the plausible egalitarian features that capture modern political thought (Oyowe 2018). The idea here is that those that have achieved personhood will be treated better in terms of distribution of resources/opportunities than those that have not. In Chapter 7, I will offer what I take to be a plausible construal of the politics embodied by the idea of personhood, which will address Oyowe’s concerns.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I divide this book into two sections: one focusing on moral issues and the other on political ones. The first section of the book will deal with the following moral issues: (1) personhood as a moral theory; (2) the meta-ethical debate between partiality and impartiality; and (3) the idea of options in the light of personhood. I will also focus on three political themes in relation to personhood, namely: (1) dignity; (2) rights; and (3) historical injustices.

I structure this book as follows. The second chapter conceptually maps the idea of personhood in African philosophy. In it, I revisit some of the influential texts and debates on personhood in African philosophy. This mapping is necessary because many of the discussions of the idea of personhood have been characterised by conceptual ambiguity and confusion. If this book is to be a success, it must revisit important texts with regard to the notion of personhood to dispel all conceptual confusion. This chapter is important insofar as it will help the reader to get a sense of how I read extant influential accounts of the idea of personhood. The third chapter concerns itself with spelling out the idea of personhood as a moral theory. Ultimately, I advocate the humanistic and perfectionist egoistic view of personhood as a moral theory. The fourth chapter focuses on the meta-ethical question of whether personhood is