

Engaging with the Philosophy of Dismas A. Masolo

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## EDITORIAL

Determined to bring *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, up to date again, this is the third annual volume we publish within half a year. Two more are lined up for imminent publication, which should put the record straight once more. The present volume marks *Quest's* 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and we wish to thank all authors, readers, members of the Editorial Board and the advisory Editorial Board, subscribers (their patience and trust have been severely taxed in recent years), and readers, for helping us attain this milestone. We are particularly indebted to the two founding editors, Roni M. Khul Bwalya (†) and Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, who launched this journal as a daring undertaking from the Department of Philosophy, University of Zambia. We are also immensely grateful for the institutional support which *Quest* has received over the years, initially from the University of Zambia and from Groningen University, and in the last decade from the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands. For the present annual volume 25, we have been fortunate to draw on the intellectual efforts of a guest editor, Professor Thaddeus Metz, Professor (Research Focus) and Head, Philosophy Department, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. This special issue *Engaging with the Philosophy of Dismas A. Masolo* reflects an important and critical exchange between one of the leading figures in African philosophy, and a group of prominent South African philosophers clustering on the Johannesburg Department. The debate has been heated, and initially the positions were so far apart that constructive dialogue took long to materialise; also due to a series of serious medical problems, the collection for a long time risked to be left without Professor Masolo's incisive and illuminating 'Reply to critics'. However, when that text was yet written under very trying circumstances, the road was clear for another one of the memorable discussions for which *Quest* has been famous over the years. We thank all contributors, and particular Professors Masolo and Metz, for their hard work towards this special issue.

Wim van Binsbergen, Editor



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# QUEST

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## *Engaging with the Philosophy of Dismas A. Masolo*

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in collaboration with Wim van Binsbergen

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# Engaging with the Philosophy of D.A. Masolo

by Thaddeus Metz

*Abstract: Engaging with the Philosophy of D. A. Masolo.* This is an introduction to the special issue of *Quest* devoted to D. A. Masolo's latest book, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. It situates this book in relation to not only Masolo's earlier research on African philosophy but also the field more generally, sketches the central positions of the contributions to the journal issue, and in light of them makes some critical recommendations for future reflection.

*Résumé: S'engager avec la Philosophie de D. A. Masolo.* Ceci est une au numéro spécial de *Quest* consacré au dernier livre de D.A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Il situe ce livre par rapport non seulement aux recherches antérieures de Masolo sur la philosophie africaine mais aussi au champ plus générale; il esquisse les positions centrales des contributions au numéro de la revue, et fait quelques recommandations essentielles à leur lumières pour une réflexion future.

*Key words:* D. A. Masolo, African philosophy, identity, method, knowledge, sub-Saharan morality, personhood

*Mots-clés:* D. A. Masolo, philosophie africaine, identité, méthodes, connaissance, moralité subsaharienne, personnalité

## 1. Overview

Professor Dismas Masolo is an elder in the African philosophical community, a well-known contributor to the field from Kenya alongside the likes of John Mbiti and Henry Odera Oruka. Masolo's most significant contribution, at least up to now, has been his *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, published in 1994 and still in print 20 years later. As most scholars of African philosophy know, it is a critical, wide-ranging discussion of a variety of the metaphysical, epistemological and methodo-

logical themes that largely dominated the field in the post-war era.

*Self and Community in a Changing World*, published in 2010, is Masolo's major sole-authored follow up.<sup>1</sup> It, too, is in the first instance a work of the history of African philosophy, albeit peppered with independent judgment, and it also discusses important authors and ideas from Franco-phone, Anglophone and, often enough, indigenous language literatures.

*Self and Community in a Changing World* differs from the earlier book mainly with regard to the topics on which it focuses, namely, philosophical anthropology, ethics and politics. Whereas major themes in *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* are Tempels' ethnophilosophy, Mbiti's conception of time, and Kagame's categories of being, in the new book salient topics are the nature of mind and personhood in Kwasi Wiredu's oeuvre, the analysis of immorality to be found in work by the poet and anthropologist Okot p'Bitek, and communitarianism and socialism in Leopold Senghor's writings.

As it is fairly rare for substantial, single-authored monographs to be published in the field of African philosophy, at least by such a well-regarded thinker, a number of us based in South Africa decided to come together for a two-day workshop at the University of Johannesburg in March 2012 in order to critically analyze various facets of *Self and Community in a Changing World*, and to do so in the presence of the author himself. Those of us who gathered came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of nationality, ethnicity, age and philosophical orientation. The present volume of *Quest* consists of selected proceedings from our conversations with Professor Masolo.

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<sup>1</sup> Notable papers since *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* and leading up to *Self and Community in a Changing World* include Masolo (1997, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Also worth mentioning is *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, a collection of essays edited by Masolo and Ivan Karp (2000).

## **2. Methodology and epistemology**

Although the main thrust of Masolo's latest book discusses human nature, its communal orientation, and how best to live in light of it, when doing any sort of African philosophy methodological issues are hard to avoid. Masolo takes up a variety of them, as do contributors to this volume.

In his article, Mogobe Ramose addresses the questions of which language(s) to use when doing African philosophy and what the ethical import is of this choice. Masolo by and large recommends that philosophers write in their indigenous tongues, but makes what Ramose calls a 'concession' that these languages are not well suited for 'practical professional' purposes (Masolo 2010: 44). Ramose disagrees, contending that it is best to do African philosophy in an African language, and unethical not to do so for tending to lead to distortion, even suppression, of other peoples' cultures.

Ramose does not argue that one should *never* do African philosophy in a non-African language. After all, he has written his own article in English, while advancing a moral perspective that is presumably grounded on an African worldview. One might wonder, however, whether the fact that Ramose has expressed himself in English suggests that there are indeed 'practical professional' reasons that often recommend discussing African philosophical issues with a non-African vocabulary. Is there a tension here or not?

Another contributor who explores mainly methodological issues is Pedro Tabensky. Whereas Ramose discusses which linguistic means to use when doing African philosophy, Tabensky reflects on the proper final ends of doing it. Most of those doing African philosophy are interested in obtaining knowledge, or at least justified belief or the truth, but Tabensky finds in Masolo's work the suggestion that there are also non-epistemic reasons to do it, namely, to overcome 'dependency' on others, especially intellectuals who come from a Western culture that spawned colonialism. Tabensky maintains that there are additional non-epistemic reasons that

do and should drive people to engage with sub-Saharan philosophy and worldviews, namely, interests in promoting self-esteem, the ability to cope with stressors, and other forms of psychological health.

Tabensky's essay explores the subtle tensions that exist when one does philosophy for competing aims; although it is rare that self-esteem will be enhanced by believing in a perspective recognized to be false, there are probably many times when it can be improved by believing in a view that is false but not recognized to be, perhaps because of a self-deceptive neglect of evidence. How to balance cognitive interests in knowledge or justification with non-cognitive concerns to be self-confident or otherwise motivated is a tough matter of judgment.

That is true not merely in the first-person case, but also when interacting with others. Suppose that by deceiving others one would be likely to foster their self-esteem to an important degree. What should one do? Or, setting deception aside, one might sensibly ask whether it was right for Tabensky to present the findings of his article, or for Masolo to discuss them publicly with Tabensky, or for me to suggest that they be published in this journal. Is it so clear that *informing* people about their competing interests in the epistemic and the non-epistemic will foster the right balance between them? Does so informing favour the epistemic, perhaps to the detriment of the non-epistemic? If Tabensky is correct that interests in 'discovering the world' need to be balanced with those in 'creative world-making', should he perhaps have kept his mouth shut, and not shared that very discovery?

Kai Horsthemke can be read as having little patience for non-cognitive values in his critical discussion of Masolo's sympathy toward something he believes is fairly called 'indigenous knowledge'. One motivation for the comparative dimension of Masolo's work, e.g., where he contrasts Kant's conception of human nature with Wiredu's, is that there are different perspectives on knowledge that vary depending on their cultural origins and that can be judged in terms of their similarities and differences. Horsthemke is interested in whether one can sensibly do more than just

compare. It appears that two perspectives can conflict about a common subject matter, and, if so, which is to be believed, and for what reasons? Merely because beliefs have been long-standing and widely held in a particular locale does not mean they are justified, so Horsthemke maintains, which, for him, means that automatically labelling such beliefs ‘indigenous *knowledge*’ is inappropriate. Whether they are constitutive of knowledge is something that has to be ascertained over time.

One sympathetic to Tabensky or Masolo might suggest some non-cognitive reasons for bestowing the dignity of the title of ‘knowledge’ on African beliefs. Or it might be that the word ‘knowledge’ tends not to be used so literally by advocates of so-called ‘indigenous knowledge’, and is meant merely to indicate a system of beliefs, abstracting from whether they are justified or not. Note that if African beliefs have not yet been determined to count as knowledge, Masolo’s comparative project still seems worth undertaking. However, Horsthemke’s question about which beliefs to hold consequent to the comparison does beg for an answer.

Horsthemke is interested in what might be called ‘objective’ knowledge claims, those about the nature of reality as it truly is. In contrast, in his contribution Abraham Olivier takes up ‘subjective’ knowledge about what it is like for an individual to experience the world in a particular way. More specifically, Olivier primarily aims to answer the phenomenological question of what it is like to be an African (which differs from the ontological question of what it is to be an African). In general, Masolo conceives of a variety of issues relating to the self in communal terms. Running with that general perspective and extending it to experiential issues, Olivier constructs a way by which to grasp—in relational or social terms—the content of a characteristically sub-Saharan way of perceiving the world.

Olivier does not suggest that he is an African, and even suggests that he is not one, and so one might wonder whether he is suitably qualified to speak about what it is like to be an African. Doesn’t it take one to know one? In reply, Olivier would likely claim that his article is not intended to

provide a detailed account of what it is like to be an African, but instead an analysis of the general social structure that would necessarily inform such an account. If that is correct, then another paper waits to be written that would fill in the details.

### **3. Morality: Status, virtue, rightness, justice**

The remaining four contributions to this special issue focus on four distinct aspects of morality. First off, Kevin Behrens notes that the word ‘personhood’ is central to debates in both African ethics and Western bioethics and that in both discourses personhood is distinguished from mere biological species. These facts give one *prima facie* reason to doubt that personhood is ‘the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory’ (Masolo 2010: 135), a view that Masolo attributes to Kwasi Wiredu with apparent approval. However, Behrens ends up contending that, upon reflection, one sees that the same word is used differently in the two discourses.

In a sub-Saharan context, ‘personhood’ most often indicates virtue or human excellence, a quality that varies from individual to individual based on her attitudes and decisions. In contrast, Anglo-American bioethicists use the same term to pick out moral status or standing, a feature that is often thought to be invariant among individuals (or at most to vary based on differential capacities, rather than actualizations of them). Basically, in the West, a person is one owed moral treatment, whereas below the Sahara, a person is one who has given others moral treatment they are owed.

The title of Behrens’ article speaks of ‘two normative conceptions of personhood’, but it is worth noting a third, descriptive understanding of personhood, one that is arguably shared by both traditions. This third sense of the word ‘person’ is roughly the idea of an individual aware of itself over time and able to act consequent to deliberation, such that human babies are not yet persons and God is always already a person (on some

conceptions). This concept of personhood is ontological, and does not include any moral ideas about values or norms. I submit that the Menkiti-Gyekye debate on personhood should be revisited while keeping an eye on these three distinct senses of 'person'.

In her article titled 'Personhood: Social Approval or a Unique Identity?', Mpho Tshivhase is clearly addressing the sense of personhood as human excellence or good character. She finds in Masolo's lengthy discussion of this characteristically African concept two logically distinct respects in which relationship with community might make one virtuous, but she questions both, and for the same basic reason. At bottom, Tshivhase doubts that human excellence is entirely a function of other-regard or relationality. She argues that at least some of what constitutes a genuinely human way of life is individualistic, involving ideals of autonomy and authenticity that communal considerations fail to capture.

One way of putting Tshivhase's point is to say that 'a person is a person through other persons', but not *merely* through other persons. No doubt many African philosophers, including Masolo, will want to contest her position, and it would be of interest to see how they might do so. Note that it will not suffice for critics merely to point out that sub-Saharan philosophy has its own, social or relational ideals of autonomy and authenticity, according to which one is governing one's true self just insofar as one is a communal being. For Tshivhase's point is that there are non-communal, irreducibly individualist elements to the best understanding of these values.

In my contribution, I focus not on good character but rather right action. I argue that Masolo's discussion of the nature of sub-Saharan morality indicates two conceptions of what fundamentally makes actions permissible that he, along with the field more generally, does not adequately differentiate. On the one hand, there is the idea that an act is right insofar as it promotes the welfare of those in the community, while, on the other hand, there is the view that an act is right insofar as it fosters (or honours) communal relationships, some of which include welfare promotion. I

work to clarify the differences between these approaches, and to argue that the latter is preferable to the former.

Of course some in the field might welcome a pluralist basis to morality, and contend that both approaches are not only typically African, but also philosophically attractive. Perhaps permissible behaviour from a sub-Saharan perspective is that which either promotes well-being or enters into community. However, I work to show that there are cases in which one cannot do both and must choose between them, requiring an answer to the question of which is to be preferred to the other. In addition, I maintain that moral concerns about the well-being of others are adequately captured by a prescription to prize communal relationships.

In the final contribution, Bernard Matolino raises serious concerns about a tendency to 'essentialize' African thought in communal terms. Although he is content to grant that communitarian views have been very influential in sub-Saharan philosophy, he firmly rejects the idea that a philosophy counts as sub-Saharan only to the extent that it is communitarian. In addition, Matolino believes that an overriding interest when theorizing about justice and related matters in social and political philosophy should be to establish and hold positions that are plausible for accepting kernels of truth in modernity, regardless of whether they are African or not. On both counts, Matolino finds Masolo's approach to communitarianism welcome, more welcome than both the 'extreme' form of communitarianism associated with Ifeanyi Menkiti (1979) and the 'moderate' form that Kwame Gyekye famously advances (1997: 38-70).

Defenders of Menkiti or Gyekye will of course want to consider whether Matolino has succeeded in providing reason to transcend the duality between them that has dominated the field for about 20 years. In addition, it is worth considering whether, even if one should reject both Menkiti and Gyekye, one should accept Masolo. Another sensible project to undertake at this point is to consider whether there are problems with Masolo's version of communitarianism that should lead us to search for still another version.

#### **4. How to learn from elders**

While some contributors agree with the views that Professor Masolo supports in *Self and Community in a Changing World* and develop them further, and while others disagree with them and point us in a different direction, all have found his new book to provide the occasion for serious philosophical reflection. A good book is not the last word, but is instead one that prompts many more words.

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# The Concept of Identity in Masolo

by **M. B. Ramose**

*Abstract: The Concept of Identity in Masolo.* In this article, I use D A Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* as a springboard for critical discussion of the appropriateness of doing African philosophy in languages other than indigenous ones.

*Résumé: Le Concept d'Identité chez Masolo.* Dans cet article, je me sers de *Self and Community in a Changing World* de D A Masolo comme un tremplin pour une discussion critique de la convenance de faire de la philosophie africaine dans d'autres langues que les langues indigènes.

*Keywords:* identity, African philosophy, self, community, indigenous knowledge

*Mots-clés:* l'identité, philosophie africaine, individu, la communauté, la connaissance indigène

## **Introduction**

One of the famous works of Masolo is: *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. This title suggests that African philosophy and identity are the major topics for discussion. Furthermore, the suggestion appears to be that the topics will be discussed from the perspective of searching, "in search". The importance of this suggestion is that the debate over what is African philosophy continues. Philosophers like Hume and Berkeley deliberated extensively on the question of "identity", in particular, "personal identity" as a philosophical problem. Neither solved the problem definitively and so, the debate over the meaning of "identity" continues.

Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* may be considered as part of this debate except that he does not discuss the concept itself in the manner of either Hume or Berkeley. Instead, he simply uses the concept in its ordinary meaning. He argues for this usage in these terms: "The

meaning of a specific word in ordinary language, ...must be sought in 'what it stands for' for the majority of its speakers, who never have to qualify first as metaphysicians before they qualify as speakers of their own language, whether it is their native language or a new one" (Masolo 1994: 102). Having thus set aside the need to adopt the philosopher's, the linguist's or the "expert's" use the concept of identity, Masolo then turns to a discussion of some of the specific phases and faces of African philosophy. The text itself reveals and revolves around the many faces and phases of the identity of African philosophy. This is a better rendition of "identity" in general and the identity of African philosophy in particular.

It is necessary to emphasise that the question 'what is African philosophy' is distinct and different from the question, 'does African philosophy exist?' The latter is not the primary focus of Masolo in the text mentioned nor shall I devote special attention to it despite its persistence among some scholars and lay sceptics. I take the view that African philosophy exists and from this I propose to inquire into its identity in the preferred sense of the faces and phases of African philosophy. Does it follow from this that a study of Masolo's text will provide the identity of African philosophy according to him? What Masolo does in the text referred to is what he continues to do in the new text, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. He gives a critical philosophical analysis of the faces and phases of African philosophy. By so doing, he maintains consistency with regard to his approach to the meaning of identity. Also, Masolo retains focus on the regulative concept of "identity" in his thought by recourse to "Self" and "Community" as neither can exist with absolutely no "identity". Thus the answer to the question whether or not Masolo gives a specific identity to African philosophy is that for Masolo African philosophy does have many identities. It does not have an immutable and permanent identity.

Furthermore, Masolo preserves the idea of "search", found in the previous text, through the use of the term "changing" in the title of the second text. The temptation is almost irresistible to aver that the second text is the continuation of the first in terms of its content and method. With re-

gard to the former, new emphases are laid and, certain arguments are re-fined. Concerning the latter, there is no change either insofar as the procedure is first to adopt the ordinary meaning of the key words, especially “identity”, “self” and “community” and then present the different phases and faces of African philosophy. These two submissions will receive further elaboration below.

The third step will be the consideration of the question whether or not the title of my essay is justified. The point of discussion in this context will be the question why “in” and not “according to Masolo”. The discussion is important, as it is a focus upon the method of Masolo as distinct from his approach to the question of “identity” or the “self” of African philosophy in both texts. This will be followed by ‘methodological considerations’. The meaning of identity and the self will also be discussed separately.

Following upon the discussion of the method, I will discuss, ‘philosophy and indigenous knowledge’ from Masolo’s *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Instead, of a broad focus on this I will select in particular the section entitled ‘the language of the indigenous’. My proposal in this context is to engage in critical dialogue with Masolo. In this connection Masolo presents contending arguments on the problem of the translatability of African languages. By and large, his commentary on this problem is fair and balanced. The commentary deserves special admiration in the light of his conclusion that despite the practical question about the intellectual benefits of writing in African vernacular languages and the challenge related to such an enterprise, the writing “must be attempted for two reasons: to encourage local debate about the understanding and interpretation of indigenous concepts and theories and to preserve these thought expressions in their original rendition”. (Masolo 2010: 44) This conclusion is vitiated by Masolo’s concession, in the same paragraph, that the beauty of our African languages is “less attractive for practical professional reasons”. My argument is against this concession. It is that beneath the pragmatism inspired “practical” is to be found the surreptitious borrowing and transportation of an epistemological paradigm that is con-

ceptually and practically not necessarily consonant or harmonious with the indigenous African vernacular to which it refers. Such borrowing is philosophically problematical especially if it ultimately results in the distortion and subordination of the indigenous vernacular epistemological paradigm. If the latter is the result then the borrowing is also unethical. Accordingly, there is an ethical dimension to translatability and this must be taken into account at all times to prevent suppression and oppression.

### ***Masolo's approach to African philosophy***

The first of Masolo's texts mentioned in the preceding discussion leaves no doubt that African philosophy is the subject matter. The same cannot be said about the recent text prior to actually reading it. This is because it leaves open the question of whose "self" is precisely under discussion. This question is answered at page 1 of the "introduction", namely, that African philosophy is the subject matter of *Self and Community in a Changing World*. This answer is reaffirmed in the statement of the two aims of the book (Masolo 2010:14-15). Like its predecessor, the recent text is about African philosophy.

I have already suggested that both texts share a common approach to the study of African philosophy. What is this approach? Masolo selects specific themes such as ethnophilosophy. He discusses the evolution of the selected theme and in the process delivers critical commentary on the positions adopted and defended by the proponents of the position. The number and variety of the themes selected appear to be the object of the implicit message that: all these phases and faces described and discussed in their complexity constitute individually or collectively the identity of African philosophy.

Masolo's approach to the question of the identity of African philosophy in the manner described above is neither isolated nor peculiar. It is, for example, similar to the one adopted in Organ's *The Self in Indian Philosophy* and Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern*

*Identity*. The terms “self” and “identity” in Taylor’s title are an interesting coincidence appearing in the separate titles of the two books of Masolo. Like Masolo, Taylor does not devote special attention to the conceptual discussion of these terms. Organ does the same with regard to the term “self”. Taylor discusses the “self” through the articulation of the “history of the modern identity” of the West (Taylor 1989: ix). With regard to Taylor’s idea of “history” we do find yet another coincidence with Masolo. One of his aims in the writing of *Self and Community in a Changing World* is to provide the reader with “a handle on the *historical* origins and broader contexts” of African philosophy (Masolo 2010: 14). The concept of “history” refers to the evolution of the “identity” of African philosophy in the case of Masolo and, in the case of Taylor the “self” refers to the “history” of modernity in the West. In these two cases as well as in the case of Organ, the evolution is described and explained in terms of specific themes. It is then left to the reader to infer the “identity” or the “self” of the subject from the description and explication of the themes. There is merit in this approach to the extent that it leaves the reader to decide on the meaning of “identity”. The decision of the reader is likely to deepen and widen one of the themes. By so doing, it would contribute to the ongoing debate precisely because identity is subject to the frequentative “in search”, that is, “a changing world” which by implication may result in a changed identity.

### ***Justification of the essay title***

It may be objected though that the merit of Masolo’s approach is not sufficient reason to neglect the conceptual clarification of the “*self*”. The question remains despite the identification of African philosophy as the “self”. As already stated, the question what is African philosophy is different from does African philosophy exist. The desideratum for conceptual clarification might be construed as an expression of the contested claim that the function of philosophy is the clarification of concepts. One of the reasons for questioning this claim is that it sidesteps substantive

problems of philosophy and concentrates instead on its methods. My suggestion that a conceptual clarification of the “self” is required does not rest on this contested claim about the function of philosophy. Nor does it rely on its opposite namely, an over concentration on the substantive problem at the expense of the method (Organ 1964: 12). Instead, it is the point that the “self”, as a concept, need not be restricted to African, Indian, Chinese or Western philosophy. For this reason, a separate elaborate discussion of this concept is important so that the reader can relate the themes to it and understand why they constitute its “identity”.

In expressing the need for a conceptual clarification of the “self”, I am aware, for example, of the argument that:

“what is” questions are never fruitful, although they have been much discussed by philosophers. They are connected with the idea of *essences* – “what is the self essentially?” – and so with the very influential philosophy which I have called ‘essentialism’ and which I regard as mistaken. “What is” questions are liable to degenerate into verbalism – into a discussion of the meaning of words or concepts, or into a discussion of definitions. But, contrary to what is still widely believed, such discussions and definitions are useless (Popper and Eccles 1977: 100).

Suffice it to state, by way of response, that contrary to the declared futility of conceptual questions, the authors proceed for the next nineteen immediately following pages to engage in a conceptual discussion of the “self”. Surely, such a discussion is unwarranted in terms of their own argument. Their disregard of their own argument affirms the utility of discussing conceptual questions. I take their criticism that ‘what is’ questions are likely to be grounded in “essentialism”. But this is merely a likelihood and not an inevitability. For my purposes, the ‘what is’ question is crucial since it will assist me to stay clear of attributing to Masolo ideas or concepts that he does not espouse explicitly. I now turn to methodological considerations.

## ***Methodological considerations***

Masolo's method, as distinct from his approach, is to give an exposition of a particular theme and in the process of doing so, provide a critical commentary. As such it is an invitation to the reader to consider: (i) the reliability of his exposition; (ii) tenability of his criticism and, (iii) depending on the outcome of the deliberation on his criticism, to decide on whether or not to construct Masolo's concept of the issue discussed under a specific theme.

### ***Identity and self***

Identity as a concept presupposes a specific bearer of qualities. The bearer may be understood as the "self". This is consistent with the standard meaning of the word offered, for example, in the 1980 edition of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Identity can also mean that one thing is the same as another if and, only if the two coincide in every feature. This meaning is not particularly relevant to my discussion. Identity can also mean that one reference can be understood in two senses, that is, the denotative and the connotative. This meaning is relevant to my discussion especially in view of the approach to African philosophy adopted by Masolo. "In another sense, one speaks of the identity of a single object maintaining itself through the passage of various outside influences; ... Closely related to this is the notion of PERSONAL IDENTITY, which remains the same throughout one's lifetime...." (Vesey and Foulkes 1990: 147). This latter is the meaning of the "self". I accept this meaning on the proviso that it is not associated with essentialism. Against this background I turn to Masolo's discussion on '*the language of the indigenous*'.

### ***The language of the indigenous***

One of the commonplace assumptions about philosophy is that it is born of experience. A common experience of humankind is the possession and use of an own language. Often language is considered as one of the elements constituting one's identity. The language in which one is born and

which one learns initially to the exclusion of all other languages is one's vernacular: it is one's indigenous language. Human contact has revealed the existence of a multiplicity and diversity of languages which form the vernacular of one or more groups of human beings.

An extended story on language according to Heidegger or Wittgenstein, for example, is not called for here. Suffice it to state that language is the medium through which meaning is conveyed in the course of communication; oral, written or even body language. Rootedness in experience means that all experience is not necessarily the same. Thus words, concepts and their meaning may differ according to the existential experience in which they are rooted. Communication in the course of interaction between different linguistic groups gives rise to the problem of the translatability of words, expressions and concepts. The critical issue here is the question whether or not translation transports and conveys the same meaning in the original language into another different language. This is one of the problems discussed by Masolo rather obliquely in chapter four, *Language and Reality of African Philosophy in search of Identity*. In this chapter the rubric, "Ordinary Language, or Philosophy?" is particularly important because it is here that Masolo declares,

Human languages have great importance for the inter-subjective function that they perform. Although it is the means by which we convey our ideas about the world, language cannot be reduced to a subordinate or secondary position in relation to thought. Experience shows that there are many ideas for which we have no words, as well as words that do not correspond exactly with our perceptions of reality in their general grammatical structure and classifications (Masolo 1994: 96).

It is noteworthy that Masolo refers to "languages" in plural. The import of this point is that "inter-subjectivity" in the context of interaction among languages is meaningful only if the idea of translatability or, even stronger, translation is presupposed. This is then the first hint at translation. Next Masolo distinguishes between "language" and "thought". In the next sentence he appears to use "ideas" as synonym of "thought" in

the previous sentence. He uses the distinction as an anchor for the thesis that whatever is thought is not always translatable into language and that language does not always hand itself over as a complete translation of what we perceive. He continues this discussion on the problem of translation further in these terms,

It is true that language is a good store of people's ideas about their own environment and that by learning another people's language we are better able to understand that people's worldview. But the question one raises quickly here is: How much is the language of a people a denoter of the *a priori* and not only of the referent which is the object of communication?...while it is true that language is built upon our perception of reality in its diversity, and that therefore one is able to arrive at the structure of reality of a particular people beginning from their language, language is not made dependent upon the reality of experience on the basis of an analytical knowledge of the world" (Masolo 1994: 101).

Here again Masolo reaffirms the problem of translation without actually having used the word in the two citations referred to. "Indigenous language" is the new element introduced by the second citation with the words: "the structure of reality of a particular people beginning from their language".

The above is the prefiguration of Chapter one, Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge, of *Self and Community in a Changing World*. It is particularly under the rubric, "Ethnophilosophy and the Controversy over Indigenous Knowledge" of chapter one that Masolo uses the terms "translate" and "translation" expressly at page 30 in his discussion predicated on Kagame and flowing into the views of Quine and Wiredu. There is little doubt that this discussion is in substance, an echo of the earlier one under the rubric, "Ordinary Language, or Philosophy?" contained in *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Support for this observation is that in his discussion from Kagame flowing into Quine and Wiredu, Masolo quite explicitly refers to the "ordinary language philosophy" to which the latter are "partially intellectually descended" (Masolo 2010:

31). In this instance, Masolo included the reference to Quine and Wiredu as an addition. Furthermore, both the comma and the disjunctive “or” in the interrogatively constructed early rubric already referred to are dropped in favour of simply “ordinary language philosophy”. Masolo’s option is by no means alien to the well-known “philosophy of language” – note the omission of the implicit “ordinary” – discourse. Against this background, I now turn to an extended discussion of the problem of translation.

### *The problem of translation*

From the immediately preceding discussion, it may be inferred that the problem of translation revolves around the recognition that language does not always re-present either what is thought or perceived on a one-to-one and thus complete and comprehensive basis. In the conveyance through language of what is thought or perceived something is lost. This is the case within the same linguistic community and, even outside of it. For this reason, the problem of translation does not arise only when thought or perception is conveyed from one indigenous vernacular language to another. In the light of this it is possible to understand Masolo’s question: “Do we lose anything, or put another way, can we preserve the conceptual and theoretical integrity of indigenous African thought when we use other languages to express it” (Masolo 2010: 40)? One answer is that “reasonable conceptual translation” is possible. Proponents of this reply do acknowledge that some aspect of the original meaning in the original vernacular may actually be lost. The loss is, however, something one can live with. Hence the term “reasonable”.

In some cases, vernacular languages borrow some words or technical terms from other languages. Such borrowing is simply not the insertion of a new word into the language. In my view, it is the importation of a foreign cultural epistemological paradigm into another different paradigm of knowledge. The question is not only whether or not the two cultural epistemological paradigms can or speak to each other. It is also necessary to ascertain and measure the impact of the borrowing on the overall indige-

nous cultural epistemological paradigm. By this I mean that for example, even if it may be “reasonable” to translate the concept “university” into one’s vernacular as *unibesithi*, the translation becomes the importation of the cultural epistemological paradigm that goes along with this. The importation does not necessarily carry over simultaneously the contemporary criticism of this concept as reducing diversity and plurality to one, *unius*, and; consequently perpetuating suppression and oppression of other ways of knowing and doing with particular reference – in this case – to education. It seems the necessary paradigm shift and change implied by this criticism will be postponed indefinitely for as long as the concept of “university” is not replaced by *pluriversity*. This is just an illustration of the problem connected to the concession that “reasonable” translation is possible. It is indeed possible but its consequences remain unpredictable and ethically problematical. The ethical problem arises precisely with the recognition that the suppression and oppression of other ways of knowing and doing constitute the denial and deprivation of the freedom of the other. Whenever this violation of the principle of equality of human beings is perpetrated then justification – as a question of ethics – is imperative. I turn to an elaboration of this point.

The concession to the reasonableness of translation is that the practical consequences often turn out to be the suppression and oppression of the other. One need reflect only about the translation of the Christian bible and the problems that arose and continue to afflict the indigenous African peoples who have only the translated version as their source of the knowledge of Christianity. Similarly, knowledge of philosophy as a “professional enterprise” means to date primarily the relegation of indigenous African languages to the periphery. Such marginalisation is itself ethically and academically questionable. With regard to the former we find a theoretical construct with the potential to open the gates to the subordination of the epistemological paradigm of the indigenous African peoples, or indeed, any other peoples at the theoretical level. The potentiality may translate itself into the practical subordination, suppression and oppression of indigenous African peoples. Their ways of knowing and doing are discarded and this compels them to assimilate, adopt and even adapt to

other ways of knowing and doing at the expense of their own. The result is that they become imitators. Their status as imitators is a far cry from communication and conversation proper. “Objective” scientific knowledge cannot arise out of the condition of the deliberate suppression and oppression of other ways of knowing and doing. The deficit of representativity here speaks for itself. What we have under this condition is unrepresentative “scientific” knowledge masquerading as “objective” and, without sustainable ethical justification. Such a claim to knowledge cannot pass the test of professionalism. Nor can it validly justify its academic credentials. It is for these reasons that I propose to substitute ethical for Masolo’s “practical”. On the basis of this substitution – note my change in the citation that follows – I agree with Masolo that:

the *ethical* question about the intellectual benefits of writing in vernacular remains challenging but must be attempted for two reasons: to encourage local debate about the understanding and interpretation of indigenous concepts and theories and to preserve these thought expressions in their original renditions (Masolo 2010: 44).

The wretched of the Earth have naturalised the centuries’ long coercion to learn foreign languages. Such learning has turned insidiously into knowledge of these languages by consent. This goes against the ethical principle of human equality. The imperative remedy to this is readiness to learn other languages in order to respect, defend and promote human equality. It is the democratisation of learning and education (Kimmerle 1997: 43-56). This is the route to intercultural philosophy, a human engagement that is long overdue.

## **Conclusion**

In his discussion of “The Language of the Indigenous” Masolo has brought to light the basic problem of translation. He has shown that this problem is rooted in the attempt to convey whatever is thought or perceived through the medium of language. With particular reference to Af-

rican philosophy in relation to other world philosophies (Van Rappard and Leezenberg 2010), Masolo identified “the practical question about the intellectual benefits of writing in vernacular” and advanced solid reasons why this challenge must be pursued. I accept Masolo’s reasons for accepting and pursuing the challenge on the proviso that “practical” is substituted with *ethical*. In this way, the equality principle shall be protected and this is an important basis in the pursuit and construction of intercultural philosophy.

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# Therapeutic African Philosophy<sup>2</sup>

by Pedro A. Tabensky

*Abstract:* Therapeutic African Philosophy. Taking D. A. Masolo's survey of African philosophy in his *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010) as my starting point, I will argue that epistemic and non-epistemic goods can conflict with one another and at times it may be better to privilege non-epistemic goods over epistemic ones. I will argue that the value of true belief, knowledge or understanding is tied up with the roles these play in, among other things, promoting the non-epistemic values of autonomy and self-esteem, such that, if they posed a threat to these, they shouldn't be pursued. Some general conclusions about the aims of philosophy and, more generally, intellectual work, will be drawn from this discussion.

*Résumé:* Philosophie Africaine Thérapeutique. Prenant l'enquête de D.A. Masolo sur la philosophie africaine dans son *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010) comme point de départ, je vais démontrer que les biens épistémiques et non-épistémiques peuvent entrer en conflit et que, parfois, il peut être préférable de privilégier des biens non-épistémiques aux biens épistémiques. Je montrerai que la valeur de la croyance vraie, la connaissance ou la compréhension est liée avec le rôle qu'elles jouent dans, entre autres, la promotion des valeurs non-épistémiques de l'autonomie et de l'estime de soi, de sorte que, si elles constituent une menace grave pour ceux-ci, ils ne devraient pas être poursuivis. Certaines conclusions générales sur les objectifs de la philosophie et, plus généralement, sur le travail intellectuel, seront tirées de cette discussion.

*Key words:* epistemic value, ethnophilosophy, fantasy, health, post-colonialism, self-deception, self-esteem, truth

*Mots-clés:* valeur épistémique, ethnophilosophie, fantaisie, santé, le post-colonialisme, l'aveuglement, l'estime de soi, la vérité.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Thaddeus Metz and Dylan Futter for their insightful comments on previous drafts of this piece.

My focus text here will be D. A. Masolo's recent and rich critical survey of African philosophy in his *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010), particularly the first two chapters which, among other things, deal in detail with Paulin Hountondji's "unrelenting anti-ethnophilosophy crusade" (2010: 18). In Masolo's words, Hountondji seeks to undermine "a culture of passivity or conformism" (2010: 18), which is expressed in ethnophilosophical discourse.

My aim here will not so much be to engage with the details of Masolo's discussion as much as to deal with an issue which is not sufficiently explored by Masolo or by the tradition which he describes and which I think is of central importance to it (and to intellectual work as a whole). Using the rich gamut of cases from the African philosophy tradition, most of which are highlighted by Masolo, I will defend the idea that at times there are good non-epistemic reasons for believing falsehoods. But the reasons in question are not justificatory. They are good insofar as they show why a subject should, for pragmatic reasons, hold a given falsehood even though it is the case that, if she were to discover that she was under the spell of illusion, she would be compelled to abandon it. By showing this, I will be taking up Masolo's invitation to his reader "to develop a reflection on the issues for himself or herself" (2010: 15). I will show, contra Masolo and Hountondji, that the reason ethnophilosophy is problematic has less to do with the fact that it is largely a false body of belief as it does with the fact that it is an unhealthy one. I agree with these authors that ethnophilosophy is problematic and I agree with them that this is largely because it perpetuates a "culture of passivity and conformism" insofar as it perpetuates the damage to self-esteem and autonomy brought about by colonial violence. But, contrary to them, I show to what extent epistemic and non-epistemic value can work against each other such that there could be good reasons for holding falsehoods.<sup>3</sup> These reasons do not

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<sup>3</sup> For a thought-provoking analysis of how epistemic and non-epistemic values can

justify holding falsehoods, but they explain why a given subject could and even should, for pragmatic reasons, hold them (despite the fact that she could not endorse them were she to find out that they are false). So, the mere fact that ethnophilosophy is largely a false body of belief does not necessarily mean that it is of little or no value. What is ultimately wrong with ethnophilosophy is that it is an unhealthy doctrine, so there are good non-epistemic reasons for leaving the movement behind, in addition to the standard epistemic ones. Nothing of epistemic or non-epistemic value is gained by advocating ethnophilosophy.

## 2

Franz Fanon concludes his postcolonial masterpiece, *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!<sup>4</sup>

This claim powerfully expresses a key prejudice of philosophy and intellectual work in general that in intellectual work epistemic goods should always take precedence over other goods—I will be focusing on therapeutic goods here—if they conflict with the epistemic aims of inquiry. At the heart of this widespread category of prejudice is the even more extreme view that all epistemic and non-epistemic goods ought necessarily to be in harmony with one another, making it the case that conflict is always a sign—measured against what I think is the implausible ideal of perfect unity of goods—of defect. Fanon’s prayer is Platonic at heart. His psycho-existential explorations aim fundamentally at the therapeutic aim of decolonizing the mind. But his decolonizing efforts are guided by the vision that only perfect fidelity to the truth will cure the colonized subject

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conflict with one another and why at times non-epistemic value should privileged over epistemic value see Glasgow (2009: 133-154).

<sup>4</sup> Fanon (2008: 220).

of psycho-existential woes. Only truth can cure, Fanon implicitly thinks. That is why he so strongly believes that postcolonial subjects must always question in the sense of always aiming to get at the truth, even if it is unbearably painful. My aim is to substantiate the claim that Fanon ought to replace his prayer with the following one:

O my body, make of me a healthy person!

And the ideal of health mandates that at times we engage in practices of deception (self-deception and caring other-deception). Deception can of course be very damaging to the self, but so can too much exposure to the painful truths. The position I wish to put forward here is broadly Nietzschean, but this is not the place to show that this is the case. For Nietzsche, as I understand him, the aim of life is health. And knowledge is only one aspect of mental life, which is valuable only insofar as it is ultimately at the service of health.<sup>5</sup> So knowledge, for Nietzsche, ultimately serves non-epistemic aims. And, if this is correct, it would be wrong of a subject to pursue truth if it is damaging of health. A healthy subject is for Nietzsche one who lacks *resentiment*. For our purposes, a subject who lacks this has acceptable levels of self-esteem and autonomy. Such a subject is not prone to unwarranted self-admonition and dependency as a consequence of being dominated by a party believed to be stronger (Masolo, 2010: 75-76). She, for instance, does not think of herself as inferior and has not succumbed to “herd mentality” or his or her character is not largely defined from without by, or in relation to, a dominating group. Avoiding *resentiment* may involve self-deception, often, for instance, relating to rationally unwarranted confidence in the self and one’s people or, more generally, in the abilities of mortals living, as they do, in challenging circumstances.

What I am particularly concerned to show here is that there are good reasons for philosophers and intellectuals generally to hold falsehoods for therapeutic reasons. But this can only be done at the cost of self-

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Carlisle (2003: 1-7).

deception, for one cannot hold that something is the case knowing explicitly that it is not. And it is also arguable, although I will spend little time exploring this possibility, that there is a case for the deliberate deception of others. It is arguable that there are good epistemic reasons for advancing falsehoods at times, but these are not the sorts of reasons that are relevant to our present concerns. Often, for instance, schematic approximations are more epistemically useful than cumbersome truths. Elegance—an aesthetic value—can arguably also in some circumstances be of epistemic value. But elegant falsehood can also be held for good non-epistemic reasons. Consider the case of an elegant noble lie and the role that such a lie may play in instilling positive social cohesion and hope. More generally, often we are warranted in believing for reasons that relate to protection from too much exposure to painful truths that threaten autonomy and self-esteem. It is cases of this last sort that I will be exploring, paying particular attention to the case of African philosophy. African philosophy is awash with non-epistemic value precisely insofar as it has core therapeutic aims that are less easy to detect in the Western cannon, which is not to say that they are not there.

### 3

Masolo's critical survey defends the idea that philosophy is always "part of a wider sociological process" (2010: 60) by which he means, following Hountondji in particular, who was influenced by Louis Althusser's version of Marxism, that the meaning and purpose of philosophy flows from the socio-historical space within which it is produced, and its aims should accord with the social ideal of justice, which is ultimately concerned with the betterment of the conditions of life (Hountondji 1996). And, Hountondji argues and Masolo agrees, one of the first steps required for reaching this ideal is the "termination of the dependency syndrome" (Masolo 2010: 60), which damages self-esteem and stops people from exercising genuine responsible agency (Masolo 2010: 60). But what if the termination of the syndrome requires self-deception?

Jean-Paul Sartre entertains this possibility indirectly when claiming that the Negritude movement was a “minor term” in a dialectic leading to liberation.<sup>6</sup> But neither Sartre, Hountondji, nor Masolo seem fully aware that understanding intellectual work as ultimately therapeutic challenges the dominant paradigm of intellectual work as aiming ultimately at knowledge (truth or understanding). They implicitly hold the old Platonic prejudice that both therapeutic and epistemic aims can always ideally be made to complement each other. Or, put more strongly, that intellectual truth seeking is never necessarily incompatible with therapeutic aims. I grant that intellectual truth may be ideally therapeutic and that epistemic and non-epistemic concerns should, in some very ideal sense, always be complementary, but these may not be realizable in the concrete circumstances in which intellectuals actually operate. We could speculate that this means that there is something wrong with the circumstances. And to this I reply that one must cautiously avoid utopian thinking. Much of what we value in life requires that we live in circumstances where the best alternative available to us may be self-deception.<sup>7</sup>

I should further add that my qualified defense of self-deception does not amount to a defense of alienation.<sup>8</sup> Alienation, as I see it, is a form of negative self-deception, that is, for our purposes, self-deception that negatively affects autonomy and self-esteem. So alienation requires more than merely self-deception. The self-deception in question must be damaging to health. Masolo implicitly acknowledges this when discussing the Luo proverb:

When an intruder you consider stronger than yourself steps on and breaks your mother’s pipe, you turn to your mother and rebuke her thus: “Why don’t you learn to keep your things tidily so they don’t sit in the path of those who are walking?” (2010: 75).

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<sup>6</sup> See Fanon (2008: 101).

<sup>7</sup> For an explicit defense see Tabensky (2009: 37-53).

<sup>8</sup> See Masolo (2010: 75-76).

The problem here, as Masolo comes close to admitting, is not so much that the person who rebukes his mother is self-deceived, but that the self-deception in question is damaging of health. The person is expressing his lack of self-esteem and independence from the person (or group) considered to be the stronger.

African philosophy as an academic discipline emerged at a very particular time in the history of the Continent. This was the transition between the violent humiliation of the African subject by centuries of colonial rule and the relative freedom of the postcolonial period. It emerged with a sense of urgency, not so much because of a kind of detached curiosity but because of a deep—one could even say desperate—yearning to assert something that was significantly lost: autonomy and self-esteem. This comes out very clearly in Masolo's book. And there are many dangers with this project, for one cannot simply decide to recover autonomy and self-esteem by an act of will. This is not a matter of choice in the first instance. It is, rather, a complex matter requiring, among other things, recognition from those who have for centuries seen in the African subject nothing but a caricature of the human that they have been terribly mistaken (something that can probably only occur with substantial changes in structural conditions). And it also requires acquiring a sense that what remains of the ways of being that were significantly destroyed by colonialism is worthy of being valued, especially in light of the fact that the colonial subject has largely internalized the oppressor's value system, which explicitly denigrates the African pre-colonial experience. This fundamental contradiction at the heart of the African postcolonial experience is, I speculate, what accounts for the desperate tone of much of African philosophy. This is expressed in the rarefied air of much of ethnophilosophy, from Temples to Senghor, which artificially attempts to impose identity on those who are not in a position to receive it. One cannot kick-start a new way of being by an act of will. But one cannot simply sit back and wait and do nothing about the matter. It is in difficult situations of this sort where illusion serves as a kind of escape valve aimed at relieving the tension caused by an impossible situation. In cases of this sort, where contradictions are at the very emotive heart of our beings, a fantasy may

be the only way of protecting ourselves from high level of existential pain. Since epistemic aims are part of the web of life one cannot expect that the sole aim of intellectual activities is to offer us a crystal clear window to the world (or something analogous to this naïve picture).

Those with Darwinian sensitivities should observe that this picture implies that we should aim to have sufficient knowledge of the world, where sufficiently is measured against the fundamental requirement of coping with the difficulties of life. That is why a perfectly transparent relationship to the world, assuming this was possible, may be undesirable.

If we think that philosophy and other intellectual disciplines are forms of inquiry then—assuming that to inquire is to track truth—it would be true by definition that philosophy aims first and foremost to track truth and to increase understanding or knowledge. But, what I am doing here is challenging the view that intellectual pursuits just are modes of inquiry. In my view, the aim of intellectual disciplines is to represent or to picture. Representations and pictures needn't be realistic and, in the cases that interest us, they needn't be entirely realistic. The standards of goodness that define good from bad pictures or representations are different from those that define successful inquiry, although there is considerable overlap. Good pictures or representations—at least those that are relevant here—do things such as evoke, inspire and uplift, in addition to enlightening. Good pictures or representations enlighten and make our lives better and, in this sense, promote health and hence are therapeutic. And good pictures or representations don't just better our lives by enlightening, although they do this as well. Too much light can at times be blinding and thus stunting. One of the principal problems with mainstream epistemology is that it does not fully recognize that the epistemic faculty is only one aspect of the complex web of life, and it is only good if it is not destructive of the web.

And philosophy itself has played a role in the West's high levels of confidence in itself. Many other things have as well, but one cannot ignore the power of the intellectual narrative that extends back to Pythagoras' baptismal act. And evidence of the power of having philosophy on one's side is the eagerness with which Henry Odera Oruka (1990), for instance, defends the idea that philosophy existed in Africa long before colonialism, or the essentialist eagerness with which Leopold Senghor defensively defends the idea that, although Africans are not so good in the philosophical domain, they have other aptitudes which actually make them better than philosophical Caucasians. "Emotion", Senghor tells us, "is completely Negro as reason is Greek".<sup>9</sup> The field of philosophy is often thought of as exploring the most fundamental of all truths. Cultures find pride in seeing themselves as possessors of great truths, so the therapeutic function of philosophy is largely related to the confidence that comes with the belief in the possession of the truth, or at least that one is on its path.

What I am discussing here is what could be described as the non-epistemic dimension of truth tracking. We are motivated to search for it in part because our self-esteem depends on its possession. And we are motivated to think of ourselves as possessing it, even if at times we do not. The gap that may exist between actually holding something that is the case and believing that one does may at times only be filled in by illusion. This is especially the case in times of desperate need, where deep-seated lack of confidence—in one's epistemic abilities in the case that interests us, due to colonial violence—puts pressure on the African intellectual to seek consolation by feigning epistemic confidence (The more nationalistic varieties of African philosophy, including Negritude, Sage Philosophy, and *Ujamaa*, are cases in point). Epistemic self-esteem depends on epistemic confidence.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted and fruitfully discussed in Fanon (2008: 96).

So there is a very real relationship, it seems, between belief in one's ability to have true beliefs, particularly those associated with key features of nature and of the human condition—as opposed to boring home truths—and self-esteem. The scar that colonialism left is to a large extent related to the role that it played in breaking down the conviction that Africa has something to offer by way of truth. And one of the central necessary ingredients for seeing one's people as failed is to have lost a sense that one's culture embodies a worldview that is at least largely correct. The myth of the African as primitive is inseparable from the myth that his culture has nothing to offer by way of truth. This perhaps explains why the early W.E.B. DuBois (1897: 5-17) and, much later, Senghor, found it necessary to state that all peoples have a unique message to convey to the world. "If we were missing", Senghor tells us, "civilization would lack the rhythm section of its orchestra, the bass voices of the choir" (2001: 438-447).

Conversely, the seemingly inexpugnable pride of the prototypical Western subject—male in particular, for reasons relating to domination—is also largely blind conviction of partaking of a culture informed by the light of truth. That accounts for the blind conviction—expressed in innumerable ways, as discussed by thinkers with a postcolonial sensitivity—that the West is the norm, the measure of the good. Too much confidence can lead to blinding arrogance. And it can also lead to complacency and blind acceptance. Indeed, arrogance in this case, is an illusion of superiority and it is an illusion that—through domination—can lead the psychic damage of the oppressed. And it can also lead to damage of the oppressor group, which is something I have defended more fully elsewhere (2010).

Low self-esteem can have its advantages. It encourages questioning and search whereas there is a tendency among the arrogant to be complacent and conservative about their beliefs. So, there is a very fine balance to be had between the therapeutic benefits and pitfalls of confidence. And achieving such a balance may at times require self-deception.

One of Masolo's central concerns is to show to what extent African philosophers are warranted in engaging intimately with everyday cultural practices in Africa. Following Hountondji in the first instance, he argues that objective knowledge is always grounded everyday practices and that African philosophy shows this explicitly. This move has two non-epistemic functions: it helps the African intellectual move away from epistemic "dependency syndrome" (Masolo 2010: 60) on the colonizers' science and, relatedly, it contributes to the growth of human knowledge from the vantage point of the local. According to Masolo, Hountondji's is a "call for the return of the African subject, but a responsible subject who will chart out and take up responsibility for and control of her own intellectual, social, political, scientific, and economic destiny" (2010: 61). So, for Hountondji and Masolo responsibility and autonomy are key values that must be promoted by African philosophy. Self-esteem is at the heart of their concerns, for the "dependency syndrome" is an expression of the colonial view that all belief-systems originating in Africa are primitive and pseudo-scientific, and this gets in the way of responsibility and autonomy. The "dependency syndrome", as Masolo stresses, is manifested in the nationalistic nostalgia of ethnophilosophy, which reacts to the internal mental trace of the colonial enemy by erecting static, essentialist and nostalgic fantasies which do quite the opposite to promoting responsible and independent subjecthood. Such a subject would be one who is properly able to respond to the actual conditions of life in post-colonial Africa.

One of my principal concerns with Hountondji and Masolo is analogous to my concern with Fanon (and much of philosophy for that matter). They do not seem to recognize the positive role that illusion can and does play in our intellectual representations. I think Hountondji—and Masolo largely agrees with him—is right to critique ethnophilosophy, but I do not think he fully recognizes what follows from his own critique. What follows, I think, is that what is wrong in the first instance with ethnophi-

losophy is that it does not promote health. Rather, it perpetuates the “dependency syndrome” and hence undermines autonomy and self-esteem. It is not so much because it is false that it does this, but because it is poison that perpetuates unhealthy dependency (*resentiment*, to use Nietzschean vocabulary). Ethnophilosophy is stifling insofar as it is essentialising of the African experience, aiming to force the African experience into a pre-fabricated mould. This is incompatible with the responsible agency that both Hountondji and Masolo defend.

What Masolo focuses on somewhat less than on his “standpoint” account of knowledge is on why this concern with the African standpoint should emerge in the first place and why, by contrast, Western philosophy typically does not dwell anywhere nearly as much on Western everyday practices, except, typically, to arrogantly boast about its grandiosity. And my tentative response is that culture is a problem for African philosophy, something in need of defense, something that does not sit easily with those attempting to defend it, something that the African subject has to struggle to be proud of, not for reasons pertaining to content but for reasons relating to the African subject’s relationship to his or her own culture. Colonial violence drew a wedge between Africa’s (largely) internally motivated pre-colonial historical unfolding and the African subject. The defense of African philosophy is not solely in the first instance for the sake of the advancement of knowledge or understanding. Instead it substantially aims at the recuperation of lost self-esteem on account of centuries of humiliating colonialism. The ultimate aim of Hountondji’s “unrelenting anti-ethnophilosophy crusade”, Masolo claims, is not so much to get at the truth but, rather, to undermine “a culture of passive conformism” (2010: 18). But both Hountondji and, following him, Masolo, believe that this can only be achieved by avoiding a “retreat into subjectivity” (Hountondji 2002: 28).<sup>10</sup> Both authors believe that passive conformism and dependency can only be cured if one rids oneself of all illusion.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Masolo (2010: 67).

One of Masolo's central aims is to show that all knowledge is localized and that there is no fact of the matter regarding which locale is better in an absolute sense from the epistemic point of view. This sort of move needs to be understood as a reaction against the deep-seated conviction imported into the African continent by force that Africa is the home of the primitive. The aim here is not so much to show that this view is not true—a strictly epistemic aim—but to find a path to health. Masolo argues that the African intellectual is not at best “the native informant”, as Spivak would say (1990: 59-60), or “the junior collaborator” (Masolo 2010: 24), as Hountondji's would put it.<sup>11</sup> Following Spivak's general line of thinking, it seems to me that one of Masolo's central aims is to show that African philosophy should be “taken seriously” (almost, one could be tempted to claim, a plea that it be taken seriously). He approvingly quotes Spivak:

For me, the question “Who should speak?” is less crucial than “Who will listen?” . . . The real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously (Masolo 2010: 25).<sup>12</sup>

One could say that one of Masolo's primary aims in his book is to make a further case for African philosophy to be taken seriously, but he does not explicitly discuss the fact that this is not an epistemic aim. Its aim is largely therapeutic.

Indeed, Masolo endorses Hountondji's view that the aim of knowledge creation in Africa is development (Masolo 2010: 27). Hountondji, in Masolo's words, “was concerned with Africa's performance on the global stage” (2010: 53). And Hountondji was not only concerned with the fact that ethnophilosophy was a largely false body of beliefs. He was also and primarily concerned that the texts were “directed at appeasing a Western audience” (Masolo 2010: 55). Generally, much of African philosophy is concerned to defend African philosophy as a legitimate mode of philoso-

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<sup>11</sup> See Hountondji (1995).

<sup>12</sup> Originally in Spivak (1990: 59-60).

phy, as a deserving member of “the global stage”.

Despite the fact that Masolo acknowledges that African philosophy no longer needs justification, one must wonder why this claim needs to be made in the first place. It would be odd if a representative of Western philosophy made an analogous claim about her tradition. Masolo still feels—rightly so in my view—that it is necessary to write a book explaining and defending it. And his sustained engagement with Hountondji about the idea of orality and the possibility of systematic inquiry points to the need to justify the tradition, to show that it is a tradition worthy of respect (a non-epistemic value). He also endorses Hountondji’s view that Africa needs to work to terminate its “dependency syndrome”, as the place where “raw data” is collected and left to be processed by the allegedly more able minds found in the West (Masolo 2010: 60). Following Hountondji, Masolo defends the idea that the ultimate function of African philosophy is liberation, that is, of freeing the African subject of a demeaning dependency on the West while at the same time existing side by side on the global stage with philosophies originating in the West. But he shares Fanon’s prejudice that liberation and enlightenment will necessarily go together.

African philosophy is not solely fueled by a dispassionate desire to understand. This is acknowledged by some African philosophers—particularly those having postcolonial sensitivities and who typically take their lead from Fanon. But those, including Fanon, who recognize this, believe that this is always a consequence of distortion. And I disagree. The picture that I have of mind is one of competing values—epistemic, pragmatic and perhaps even aesthetic—fighting over the same territory: the mind. And it is not at all clear to me that the values associated with understanding should always take precedence over the values associated with coping. And while an inquiring subject may never be able to justify to herself that a given belief is held for non-epistemic reasons, it is nevertheless the case that it could be good non-justificatory reasons not available to the believer. There may be good reasons for delusion. The epistemic faculty is what one could refer to as the window to the world,

but too much external vision can be a hindrance to organic life, so protective psychological mechanisms are required for sheltering ourselves from the risks that come when the window shows us more than we can deal with.

Academic African philosophy is largely a postcolonial response to centuries of damnation where the narratives that gave sustenance to hundreds of distinct peoples was replaced by the demeaning narratives of the colonizer. The colonizers' beliefs were imposed by force, which is a very effective way of entrenching beliefs. The colonial narrative that replaced what was there before is the narrative of humiliation. I think it is reasonable to suppose that all cultural narratives born from an unconquered people are of pride and self-respect. Conquest and oppression are the sole sources of cultural humiliation. Almost all civilizations have humiliated subjects and proud ones and the humiliated ones are always those who have been conquered by a dominating type (conceivably, the dominating type could be nature). Humiliation of a people always involves conquest of one sort or another, and the narrative of humiliation always finds its source in conquest. What a humiliated people lose is a sense of their own agency. They become patients of change where once they were agents.

Peoples whose lives have been taken from them, who have been made captives by others, and who later regain freedom (even if only partially), must start again. They must attempt to remember all that has been lost and take this as their starting point for a future that has yet to be built. This is a fraught process, plagued with danger, especially if the period of captivity stretches back several generations. So what I should stress here is that the explicit engagement with tradition which informs much of African philosophy is not merely localized for epistemic reasons. It is also localized for psycho-social reasons. And the energy—hope, passion and at times rage—with which academic African philosophers tend to engage with tradition is significantly motivated by the struggle to come to terms with humiliation. When Cheikh Anta Diop tells us that philosophy origi-

nates in Africa (in ancient Egypt), when Leopold Senghor tells us that the African is “richer in gifts than in works”,<sup>13</sup> when Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Senghor tell the world that socialism was invented in Africa, when Henry Odera Oruka spends his intellectual energy defending orality against the imputation that in this medium philosophy proper cannot take place, they are doing quite a lot more than merely defending certain views against the charge that they may be false. They are fighting to redeem something that has been destroyed, something at the very heart of Africa’s autonomy and self-esteem. And the fact that a large percentage of African philosophers were involved in political activity is more grist for the mill that their thought to a large extent aims at liberation, which is at bottom a social-therapeutic process.

If I am right to follow Nietzsche and think of health as the aim of human living, then we should see the space of mind as a kind of battlefield of competing values, epistemic and non-epistemic. And health—contra Fanon, Hountondji, Masolo and many others—makes it the case that epistemic value may be trumped by, say, the values of autonomy and self esteem. But the balance is, of course, extremely precarious. Autonomy and self-esteem can come at the cost of wishful thinking and too much of this is one of the central features of madness or complacency. But, on the other hand, an unwavering commitment to understanding can lead to immense self-destructive suffering. And an unwavering confident commitment to what is believed to be the case can also lead to a stifling of creativity. We are makers of worlds, and the ability to do this lies somewhere in between knowledge and fantasy. This is as true of intellectual endeavors as it is of life in general. And the ultimate criterion for successful world creation is whether such creation promotes health. The features of health that we have explored are autonomy and self-esteem.

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<sup>13</sup> See Fanon (2008: 96).

Intellectuals create representation of the world with the ultimate aim of coping as best we can. The criterion for differentiating healthy from unhealthy self-deception is what role the self-deception plays in promoting a life that is not stifled by the exigencies of life but which is also not entirely alienated from the world. An alienated subject can hardly be said to be an agent precisely insofar as he or she is the victim of radical delusion. But to be stifled is to become a slave of circumstances, unable to move beyond what is strictly given and imagine new—at times even deeply unlikely, but not necessarily impossible—ways of being in the world. We are makers of worlds as much as we are discoverers. And the ideals of discovery and creative world-making often pull us in opposite directions. Discovery speaks to a large extent to our epistemic interests and world-making is significantly a response to pragmatic and aesthetic needs. So, Fanon should have said (but does not):

O my body, make of me a *healthy* person!

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# Some Doubts about ‘Indigenous Knowledge’, and the Argument from Epistemic Injustice

by Kai Horsthemke

*Abstract:* Some Doubts about ‘Indigenous Knowledge’, and the Argument from Epistemic Injustice. In his book *Self and Community in a Changing World*, Dismas Masolo writes that ‘there appears to be little disagreement that there is knowledge that is indigenous to Africa – that is, knowledge that is unique, traditional or local knowledge that exists within and develops around the specific conditions of the experiences of African peoples’. While I agree that there are beliefs and that there may be skills that are unique and indigenous to Africa, I doubt whether the same can be said about propositional knowledge, or ‘knowledge that’. More importantly, I think that the case for indigenous knowledge is helped neither by the Yoruba definition of knowledge presented by Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo nor by Kwasi Wiredu’s epistemological theory of ‘truth as opinion’, sources on which Masolo draws extensively in his book. Consequently, I consider the preoccupation with indigenous knowledge as ‘a viable tool for transforming the world’ to be misguided. After discussing the political dimension of the debate, with special reference to the idea of epistemic injustice, I close with some thoughts about ‘truth and reconciliation’.

*Résumé:* Quelques Doubtes sur ‘La Connaissance Indigène’, et l’Argument de l’Injustice Épistémique. Dans son livre *Self and Community in a Changing World*, Dismas Masolo écrit que ‘il semble y avoir peu de désaccord qu’il y a une connaissance qui soit indigène à l’Afrique – c’est-à-dire, une connaissance qui soit unique, traditionnel ou local et qui existe au sein et se développe autour des conditions spécifiques des expériences des peuples africains.’ Bien que je convienne qu’il y a des croyances et qu’il peut y avoir des compétences qui lui sont propres et indigènes à l’Afrique, je doute que la même chose peut être dit à propos de la connaissance propositionnelle, ou du ‘savoir que’. Plus important encore, je pense que le cas de la connaissance indigène est aidé ni par la définition de connaissance Yoruba présenté par Barry Hallen et J.O. Sodipo, ni par la théorie épistémologique de Kwasi Wiredu de la ‘vérité comme opinion’, les sources sur lesquelles Masolo s’inspirent largement dans son livre. Par conséquent, je considère la préoccupation de la connaissance in-

digène comme ‘un outil viable pour transformer le monde’ d’être sans support et même erronée. Après avoir discuté de la dimension politique du débat, avec une référence particulière à l’idée d’injustice épistémique, je terminerai par quelques réflexions sur la ‘vérité et réconciliation’.

*Key words:* epistemic injustice, gbàgbó (belief), indigenous knowledge, mò (knowledge), reconciliation, truth (as opinion)

*Mots-clés:* injustice épistémique, gbàgbó (croyance), connaissance indigène, mò (connaissance), réconciliation, vérité (comme opinion)

## ***Introduction***

I came across the following story some time ago. Although it is contrived (understandably – it is in the nature of jokes that they tend to be contrived), I repeat it here, because it arguably resonates with some of the central ideas this paper is concerned with. The aborigines in a remote part of northern Australia asked their new elder whether the coming winter was going to be cold or mild. Since he was an elder in a modern community he had never been taught the old secrets. When he looked at the sky he couldn’t tell what the winter was going to be like. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, he told his tribe that the winter was indeed going to be cold and that the members of the tribe should collect firewood to be prepared. But, being a practical leader, he called the Bureau of Meteorology and asked whether the coming winter in the northern area was going to be cold or mild. The meteorologist responded, ‘It looks like this winter is going to be cold.’ So the elder went back to his people and told them to collect even more wood in order to be prepared. A week later he called the Bureau of Meteorology again. ‘Does it still look like it is going to be a cold winter?’ The meteorologist again replied, ‘Yes, it’s actually going to be a very cold winter.’ The elder again went back to his community and instructed them to collect every scrap of firewood they could find. Two weeks later the elder called the Bureau again. ‘Are you absolutely sure that the winter is going to be very cold?’ he asked. ‘Absolutely,’ the man replied. ‘It’s looking more and more like it is going to be one of the coldest winters ever.’ ‘How can you be so sure?’ the elder asked. The weath-

erman replied, 'Our satellites have reported that the aborigines in the north are collecting firewood like crazy, and that's always a sure sign.'

I have not been able to determine the original source of this story. Nor have I been able to verify whether an elder who has not been educated in or initiated into the 'old ways' or traditions can be designated or elected leader of an aboriginal community. (This *does* seem rather unlikely.) What is noteworthy about this story is that the traditional, rural community (i.e. the elder speaking for the indigenous people) and the scientific establishment (i.e. the meteorologist speaking for the weather bureau) appear to rely on each other, with regard to their epistemic justification. Each takes the assumed 'knowledge' of the other as the basis for their own predictions: which not only raises something like the 'chicken-or-the-egg' question but also causes one to doubt whether or not we are actually dealing with *knowledge* here. The joke is derived from the implication that, at least in this instance, it is *both* aboriginal knowledge *and* scientific knowledge that constitute myths.

I want to argue the following: science (e.g. meteorology) can – with some degree of accuracy, on the basis of available evidence – make predictions (e.g. about the impending seasons). Similarly, non-scientists (i.e. people not formally schooled or trained in science) can – with some degree of accuracy, on the basis of their own and others' experiences – make certain predictions (e.g. about the weather). But can one really, and meaningfully, distinguish between 'mainstream' and 'indigenous' knowledge? I do not think so – and I will attempt to show in this paper why not.

A further set of questions arises with the definition of, say, 'coldness' – not to mention individual and communal experiences of coldness. These questions do not seem to be immediately relevant to the present concerns – but it may still be illustrative how one might try to address them. While it is clear that experiences of coldness, warmth and heat vary, it can nonetheless be stated that temperature is objectively measurable. Not only that, but one might also say that (as far as weather is concerned) anything below 0° Celsius is cold, while anything above 40° Celsius is hot. Of

course, what is ‘cold’ to members of a San community is not what is so to members of an Inuit community, and the same thing can be said about experiences and perceptions of what is ‘hot’. In fact, our individual perceptions change all the time. Does this mean that everything is relative, that there are only subjective ‘truths’? No, because our personal and communal perceptions and experiences relate in some way or other to the way the world is, to how things are. For example, it is possible for me to perceive (at the same time) the same body of lukewarm water as ‘cold’ and as ‘hot’ – depending on where I have previously had my hands. If I place one of my hands in hot water, the other hand in cold water, and then place both in a bucket filled with lukewarm water, the water will feel cold to one hand and very warm (if not hot) to the other. Yet, I *know* the water is lukewarm. It just *seems* cold or hot.

There is much I agree with in Dismas Masolo’s admirably engaging and wide-ranging work. But, because this paper constitutes part of a philosophy colloquium and because philosophers tend to prize healthy misgivings and critical engagement above sycophantic agreement, I have made it my task in this paper to target phrases and ideas that on occasion suggest more extreme views in Masolo. I will argue that neither the Yoruba nor the Akan conceptions of knowledge advance the case for ‘indigenous knowledge’, a concept about which I remain rather sceptical. After also discussing the political dimension of the debate, with special reference to the idea of epistemic injustice, I close with some thoughts about ‘truth and reconciliation’.

### ***The idea of ‘indigenous knowledge’***

In his book *Self and Community in a Changing World*, Masolo writes that ‘there appears to be little disagreement that there is knowledge that is indigenous to Africa – that is, knowledge that is unique, traditional or local knowledge that exists within and develops around the specific conditions of the experiences of African peoples’ (Masolo 2010: 51-52).

Well, my voice has been, and will be in this paper, one of dissent. While I agree that there are beliefs and that there may be skills that are unique and indigenous to Africa, I doubt whether the same can be said about propositional knowledge, or 'knowledge that'. More importantly, I think that the case for indigenous knowledge is helped neither by the Yoruba definition of knowledge presented by Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo nor by Kwasi Wiredu's epistemological theory of 'truth as opinion', sources on which Masolo draws extensively in his book. Consequently, I consider the pre-occupation with indigenous knowledge as 'a viable tool for transforming the world' (Masolo 2010: 18) to be misguided.

One of 'the themes that stand out in the recent history of Africans' philosophical reflections' is 'the question of reworking and integrating indigenous knowledge into the new philosophical order'. The 'issue of the status of indigenous knowledge in contemporary Africa runs through all the matters discussed' in Masolo's book (Masolo 2010: 7):

Philosophy is always about the familiar and the indigenous, whatever its form or epistemic status; it interrogates, deconstructs, analyses, interprets and tries to explain it. Philosophy is related to indigenous knowledge as the written is to the oral (Masolo 2010: 28).

Isn't this a false analogy? At least we can be sure that 'the oral' exists. And when Masolo goes on to consider 'examples that illustrate philosophy's ties with the ordinary and with everyday language' (Masolo 2010: 28), the rejoinder might be that 'the ordinary and everyday language' is not the same as 'indigenous knowledge'.

But what then *is* 'indigenous knowledge'? What accounts for its relatively recent emergence<sup>1</sup>, and what is its advocacy meant to achieve? I

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<sup>1</sup> Although the manifestation of what is taken to be indigenous knowledge could presumably be traced back roughly to the origins of humankind, the idea of indigenous knowledge is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has arguably gained conceptual and discursive currency only during the last 30-40 years. Especially in recent years it has been the subject of congresses, conferences, meetings, as well as countless papers,

will deal with the first of these questions a little later. Masolo lists several reasons for the ‘reemergence of interest in indigenous knowledge in recent years’ (emphasis mine). First, the effects of industrialisation ‘in the Western sphere or the global North’, namely ‘[o]zone depletion and environmental poisoning, ... have made once-scorned simpler ways of life and controlled scales of industrialisation more attractive for their stances towards biodiversity and their general friendliness to the environment, at least at the intellectual level’ (Masolo 2010: 25-26). Clearly (and here I concur with Masolo), Western industrialisation has led to, or have had as a significant goal, the subjugation of nature, and so far has been devastatingly efficient. The pursuit of nuclear energy, wholesale deforestation and destruction of flora and fauna, factory farming of nonhuman animals for human consumption, vivisection and genetic engineering are deplorable and – indeed – *irrational* (see Horsthemke 2010, ch. 3), as is the relentless preoccupation with and pursuit of ‘growth’. Second, with the end of the Cold War,

the politics of numbers in the scramble for alliances and geopolitical spheres of influence is a thing of the past, thus making the sustenance of the dependency of distant nations and peoples a far less attractive policy and a sacrifice for regimes and taxpayers in developed nations. There is neither political nor economic gain for such sacrifice. Consequently, the current focus of aid agencies ... is on helping the disadvantaged governments of economically and technologically disadvantaged nations establish self-reliant and internally sustainable programs (Masolo 2010: 26).

I am not altogether clear about the intended force of this argument: after all, aid provision has a substantial downside that is well-documented (see Kabou 1991, Seitz 2009). Nonetheless, there are additional factors that account for the (re?)emergence of interest in indigenous knowledge systems. With the rise of multiculturalism, the inferiorisation of indigenous peoples’ practices, skills and insights has, to a large extent, been unmasked as arrogant and of dubious ‘rationality’. There has also developed

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articles and reports.

a strong tendency to view current attempts by industrial and high-tech nations to (re)colonise or appropriate for commercial gain these practices, skills and insights as exploitative and contemptible.

With regard to the question what the focus on indigenous knowledge is hoped to achieve, there are several related ideas that appear again and again (see Semali & Kincheloe, eds. 1999 *passim*; Odora Hoppers, ed. 2002 *passim*; and De Sousa Santos, ed. 2007 *passim*): reclamation of cultural or traditional heritage; decolonisation of mind and thought; recognition and acknowledgement of self-determining development; protection against further colonisation, exploitation, appropriation and/ or commercialisation; legitimation or validation of indigenous practices and world-views; and condemnation of, or at least caution against, the subjugation of nature and general oppressiveness of non-indigenous rationality, science and technology.

To return to the initial question: what actually *is* ‘indigenous knowledge’? ‘Inspired by the claim that knowledge takes place in and reflects the social worlds of its creators in expression and use,’ according to Masolo, ‘formerly suppressed systems liberated themselves from foundationalist claims and monolithic canons and called for different, more rigorous, and comparative approaches to the epistemological enterprise in the latter part of the twentieth century’ (Masolo 2010: 18).

Like its cognates (local, native, original, old, or insider) and its antonyms or counterparts (migrant, alien, new, settler, or outsider) the term “indigenous” is used to define the origin of an item or person in relation to how their belonging to a place is to be temporally characterised, especially in comparison to other contenders in claiming belonging. ... The term “indigenous” has not always had positive connotations for those to whom it was intended to introduce and create awareness of distant worlds. ... Implications of diversity persist even as the idea of indigeneity acquires more positive connotations. As pluralism takes centre stage in contemporary thought and practical orientations in both the public and private realms, indigenous systems are not only encouraged to remain and show

more autonomy, they are also thought to have the capacity to sustain themselves (Masolo 2010: 21).

‘Indigenous knowledge’, then, is generally taken to cover local, traditional, non-Western beliefs, practices, customs and worldviews, and frequently also to refer to alternative, informal forms of knowledge. Rather perplexingly, while a lot has been said and continues to be said about the idea of indigeneity (again, see Semali & Kincheloe, eds. 1999 *passim*; Odora Hoppers, ed. 2002 *passim*; and De Sousa Santos, ed. 2007 *passim*), there have been very few writers or authors willing to furnish an explanation of their understanding or concept of ‘knowledge’. Although (or because?) the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘epistemology’/ ‘epistemological’ are used in liberal abundance, no account is given of the actual meaning/s of the terms. Thus, there is a general failure among theorists to appreciate and engage with the ramifications of these concepts. Instead, ‘indigenous knowledge’ is unquestioningly employed as an umbrella concept to cover practices, skills, customs, worldviews, perceptions, as well as theoretical and factual understandings. Happily, Masolo does not shy away from this philosophical challenge. In fact, he draws on two sources, the Yoruba definition of knowledge presented by Hallen and Sodipo, as well as Wiredu’s epistemological theory of ‘truth as opinion’. In what follows, however, I will attempt to show not only that neither account helps to render the idea of ‘indigenous knowledge’ plausible, but also that Masolo fails to bring these two conceptions into conversation with one another.

### ***Mò and gbàgbó: The Yoruba definition of knowledge***

In their book *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytical Experiments in African Philosophy* Hallen and Sodipo explore the contrast between ‘knowledge as justified true belief’<sup>2</sup> and the Yoruba concept of knowl-

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<sup>2</sup> The traditional understanding of propositional knowledge can be traced back to Socrates and Plato, whose dialogues *Meno* (99c-100a) and *Theaetetus* (200e-202d)

edge. Masolo provides the following sketch of Hallen and Sodipo’s account:

When an ordinary Yoruba speaker – one who is not an *onisegun* [an indigenous cultural expert] – says that she can “*gbàgbó*” (believe) rather than “*mò*” (know) that [*p*, on the basis of a well-placed source’s testimony], it is probable (and indeed is often the case) that she says so only because that is how any Yoruba speaker would be expected to correctly deliver that kind of judgement. ... [I]f pressed on why she only “believes” that [*p*, despite the well-positioned source asserting so] the Yoruba speaker may, upon the demands of the Yoruba language alone, correctly respond that she has no firsthand knowledge of the situation herself and so can only believe but not claim to “know” the state of the matter (Masolo 2010: 30).

This appears to be perfectly in keeping with the traditional (Platonic) definition of knowledge: the source’s testimony offers some degree of justification for the speaker’s belief, but it does not guarantee ‘knowledge’. But there is more to Hallen and Sodipo’s distinction:

According to the analysis, the Yoruba concept of *mò* (knowledge) exacts stringent conditions under which belief (*gbàgbó*) can qualify as or become knowledge (*mò*). It is not enough, as appears in the Anglo-American rendition of this epistemological problem, that one be justified in believing, for example, that *p* for one to know that *p*, even if *p* were to be true (Masolo 2010: 45).

Hallen and Sodipo observe that in Yoruba

*Gbàgbó* that may be verified is *gbàgbó* that may become *mò*.  
*Gbàgbó* that is not open to verification and must therefore be

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contain the essence of this definition. Traditionally, ‘knowledge’ has been defined as comprising three individually necessary and jointly sufficient components: belief (or opinion; this is its subjective component), truth (its objective component) and appropriate or suitable justification (which serves a bridging function between the subjective and objective).

evaluated on the basis of justification alone (*àlàyé, papò*, etc.) cannot become *mò* and consequently its *òótó* [truth] must remain indeterminate. The point of difference between the two systems that we find of greatest significance is the relative role of testimony or second-hand information. In the Yoruba system any information conveyed on the basis of testimony is, until verified, *ìgbàgbó*. In the English system [by contrast] a vast amount of information conveyed on the basis of testimony is, *without verification*, classified as “knowledge that” (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 81; quoted in Masolo 2010: 45; emphasis added).

Reliance on testimony and second-hand information arguably renders possible progress in the natural and social sciences.<sup>3</sup> Yet usually, unverified claims are not classified as propositional knowledge. Take the Nonqawuse case: historians entertain certain hypotheses, but they claim knowledge only of certain aspects of the story. Thus, it is taken to be a historical fact that her account of having been spoken to by her ancestors, and in the process receiving pertinent instructions as to how to free her people from the colonial yoke, led to the cattle-killing and crop-burning among the Gcaleka Xhosa in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, there is

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<sup>3</sup> There are two common types of testimony, oral and written. We normally assume that the oral testimony of others is true, unless we have some reason to believe that it is not. Believing others and accepting their claims, unless there is a reason not to, is an enormously time-saving strategy. Trying to find out everything for oneself would not only be a huge waste of time but would be irrational. With written testimony (e.g. newspapers, magazines, encyclopaedias, relevant books), similarly, we tend to accept claims as true, unless we find some reason not to, if a claim conflicts with something else we know. Most of the time, when we accept written testimony, we can learn countless truths we would have neither the time nor the leisure to observe or simply could not observe because the event is historically or geographically remote. Again, accepting written testimony is, generally, the rational thing to do. The medium of both oral and written testimony is language. This also relates to education. Both the teaching and the learning of a language depend for their success crucially on truthfulness and trust. If young children did or could not believe that certain words uttered by their parents and educators referred or corresponded to objects in the world they would be unable to acquire linguistic skills. Perhaps one could go so far as to say that truthfulness and trust are essential for making basic sense of the world.

insufficient evidence that she was on the pay-roll of the Eastern Cape settlers at the time, that the Eastern Cape government deliberately deceived her, that she suffered from delusions and hallucinations, that she was waging a personal vendetta against her people, etc.

Furthermore, the ‘English system’ is mindful of the problems surrounding verification. Either way, it is as yet unclear in what way/s the distinction between *gbàgbó* and *mò* is meant to contribute to establishing the plausibility of *indigenous* knowledge. Indeed, when Masolo lauds the Yoruba understanding of knowledge for requiring ‘first-person experiential (verifiable) testimony and not *mere justification*’ (Masolo 2010: 46; emphasis mine), ‘direct, first-hand experience’ (Masolo 2010: 47, 48), and when he acknowledges that the ‘*mò-gbàgbó* distinction does not privilege tradition or any other form of received information’ (Masolo 2010: 48), the same question arises: Where does this leave ‘indigenous knowledge’? ‘In fact’, he contends,

it is so sceptical of untested claims that it even robs science of its predictive strength. Above all, it makes a mockery of the English-language (analytical) definition of knowledge based on *mere justification of belief* (Masolo 2010: 48; emphasis added).

This is surely a red herring: I am not aware of any card-carrying representative of the analytical tradition subscribing to this ‘definition’ (see previous footnote).<sup>4</sup> More seriously, because the ‘Yoruba system draws a much smaller map for knowledge-claims’ (Masolo 2010: 46), the possibility of indigenous knowledge would be thereby reduced to (truthful reports of) direct, first-hand experience. In addition, such experience would have to be immediate, not remembered – since memory can and often does fail us, and falsify or exaggerate events. Finally, even direct, first-hand exper-

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<sup>4</sup> It might be contended that Masolo’s reference to ‘mere justification of belief’ is just shorthand for the ‘justified true belief’ account, especially in the light of his awareness of the truth condition (Masolo 2010: 30, 45). Yet, the inclusion of the word ‘mere’ certainly gives the impression that he is setting up a straw person here for easy demolition.

ritional knowledge-claims are potentially problematic. A problem that pertains to observation, albeit not to sensation, is that of fallibility. Yes, I can be mistaken about the actual *object* of my sense experience, but I cannot be mistaken about my sensation *as such*. It *just is* the way it appears to me. Unlike events of sensation, however, observations are frequently unreliable or deceptive (as in illusions or hallucinations), and also partial and subject to perceptual relativism. In other words, there is also the possibility of different interpretations of, or our vantage points affecting, what we observe. Indeed, we may focus on different aspects of a given observed event – which explains why the accounts of several eyewitnesses often diverge, if not contradict each other.

There are two additional points that need to be made about observations. First, we do claim to have knowledge about things that we might not be able to observe. The inside of a molecule cannot be seen with the naked eye, and yet we claim to know what is going on in there. Then there are places like the bottom of the ocean, deep toward to centre of the earth, or deep space, which we cannot observe directly because we cannot go there. We do, however, build instruments like microscopes, telescopes, and cameras to do the work for us and, on this basis we claim to have ‘seen’ places we normally are incapable of seeing. Second, much of what we observe occurs against the backdrop of some or other theory we have about what it is we are looking at. A geologist who goes underground to examine a vein of gold would not be able to distinguish the vein were it not for his prior training. His learned theory enables him to see much better than if he did not have theory at all. Similarly, an educator’s observations of her learners depend partly on her theories of, for example, learning and development.

Finally, the Yoruba rejection of received information as a source of knowledge (second-person testimony) may not only be mistaken but also in conflict with a cherished African traditional principle in education. I think John Hardwig is correct when he says:

Modern knowers cannot be independent and self-reliant, not even in their

own fields of specialisation. In most disciplines, those who do not trust cannot know; those who do not trust cannot have the best evidence for their beliefs (Hardwig 1991: 693-694).

The role of trust in knowledge, on this account, indicates a noteworthy communalist orientation. To denigrate the epistemic significance of trust, and of epistemological division of labour through reliance on other people's testimony, may well be in contradiction of African communalism.

I suggest, then, that a reduction of 'indigenous knowledge' to first-hand, direct, experiential knowledge-claims – that may, indeed, be mistaken! – strips the case for indigenous *knowledge* of much of its intended force. This leaves Masolo's claim (echoing Thomas Kuhn, Sandra Harding, Bruno Latour, and Paulus Gerdes<sup>5</sup>; Masolo 2010, 22, 23, 60) that *all* knowledge is local. On the subject of scientific knowledge in particular,

according to Sandra Harding, all sciences are local knowledge systems. ... Because all sciences are locally grounded, they are ethno-sciences. ... all knowledge claims are only points of view, some at the individual level (such as those who profess relativist<sup>6</sup> stands) and others (such as those that incorporate stern and open modes of inquiry) more embedded in culture<sup>7</sup> (Masolo 2010: 22, 23).

Again with Harding, Masolo argues that, 'despite the fact that good science is characterised by strong objectivity, inclusive rationality, and universal validity, the corpus of scientific knowledge remains an aspect of local knowledge' (Masolo 2010: 60). *If* that is so – which is very doubtful – then why insist on retaining the descriptor 'local' (or 'indigenous')?

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<sup>5</sup> Doubts about the credibility of these sources have been expressed in Horsthemke 2004a, Benson and Stangroom 2006: 50-55 and 55-59, and Horsthemke and Schäfer 2007, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> The preferable and more accurate term here would be 'subjectivist', rather than 'relativist'.

<sup>7</sup> *This* would be a (cultural) relativist stand.

This is as uninformative as to refer to the *Catholic* pope, or to *human* philosophers. Where does all this leave the notion of ‘indigenous knowledge’? I want to claim the following: If the important term here is ‘indigenous’, then it refers either to indigenous practices or skills (‘knowledge how’), or to indigenous belief(s). On the other hand, if it actually is meant to refer to ‘knowledge’ in the factual or propositional sense, then the idea of ‘indigenous’ knowledge simply fails to make sense. The term ‘indigenous’ then becomes redundant<sup>8</sup>: what we are dealing with here is knowledge as such. My assumption (shared by the Yoruba definition, it would appear) is that truth (*òtótó*) is ‘a significant component of knowledge’ (Masolo 2010: 47). It acts as the objective anchor of our more or less adequately justified beliefs. Or does it?

### **‘Truth as opinion’**

In his book *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Wiredu notes that the correspondence theory of truth<sup>9</sup> cannot without circularity be expressed in

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<sup>8</sup> One might point out, of course, that ‘indigenous’ ought to be understood as referring to geographical origin, or source, rather than the scope of validity. Thus, knowledge about the thirst- and appetite-suppressing properties of the *!khoba* cactus (*Hoodia gordinii*) originated with the San, before it became global (and commercially exploited) knowledge. This is uncontroversial and, indeed, plausible. My problem arises with the demarcation of ‘indigenous’ knowledge as ‘unique’ and ‘distinct’ (see Masolo 2010: 51) and with its purported viability as a ‘tool for transforming the world’ (Masolo 2010: 18).

<sup>9</sup> Without being able to elaborate on the matter, or to critique rival conceptions of truth (coherence, consensus, pragmatism, redundancy, etc.), I am suggesting here that the commonsense account of truth assumes that there is *at least some* correspondence between the statements I utter and the world as it exists, i.e. independently of me. The central element of correspondence theories of truth is that, other things being equal, the truth/ falsity of what is said has something to do with a reality that is *independent* of the statements made about it. I might legitimately for different purposes describe the world in many different ways. But for those descriptions and distinctions to stick, there must be features of the world that enable them to be made. One cannot get away

the Akan language. He

suggests that truth is an unattainable ideal both in the sense that it is something worth aiming for and in the sense that it is something we are ultimately incapable of realising. He argues that the solipsistic approach to the problem of truth as suggested in the significantly dominant aspect of the Western tradition, such as is encountered in the correspondence theory, makes it fundamentally indistinguishable from opinion. Truth, he asserts “is opinion<sup>10</sup> or point of view”, for someone always knows something from some point of view, regardless of the number of people who might find themselves sharing one point of view (Masolo 2010: 140).

It is difficult to see how Wiredu wants to avoid logical inconsistency when he advances these claims as having truth content. Masolo continues:

Every individual person has this special relationship to the world as an individual, on the one hand, and an essential relationship to others as the source of meaning-making, on the other. What we “know” of the world does not and cannot emerge from only one of these sides of our relation to the world. Rather, what we “know” of the world is a constant striving to reconcile both sides of our relation to the world, namely, reconciling what we (empirically) experience as a stream of physical stimuli with what we have learned these stimuli to be or to mean. This ... is the philosophical-anthropological condition of personhood that grounds the epistemological theory of “truth as opinion” (Masolo 2010: 160; see also 175ff.).

No – I would argue: what this indicates, rather, is that the vast majority of

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from reality – and from the truth/ falsity of statements that give an account of it.

<sup>10</sup> This is a point Wiredu made on more than one occasion during the ISAPS (International Society of African Philosophy and Studies) 15th Annual Conference was hosted in April 2007 by the Rhodes University Philosophy Department in Grahamstown, South Africa.

our beliefs arises from our situation as related, relational beings in communities of inquiry, as well the complexity of justification and the interaction of different sources or kinds of justification: sense-experience and observation, on the one hand, and memory, testimony, and deductive and non-deductive reasoning, on the other. Truth is not a convention, a matter of meaning-making between consenting adults. So, if Wiredu's 'position favours a dialogical sense of truth over the objectivist one' (Masolo 2010: 161), I suspect he may be quite wrong.<sup>11</sup>

Wiredu explicitly rejects relativism, which in his opinion is 'an absurd doctrine'. He says:

It is the insistence on the need for belief to be in accordance with the canons of rational investigation which distinguish my view from relativism. Truth is not relative to point of view. It is, in one sense, a point of view ... born out of rational inquiry, and the canons of rational inquiry have a universal application (Wiredu 1980: 176-177; quoted in Masolo 2010: 177).

Yet, I am not sure how Wiredu's position – equating, as it does, truth and belief – *can* avoid relativism, however much he rejects the doctrine's tendency to make 'truth arbitrary, whimsical, and ungrounded in serious gnostic endeavour' (Masolo 2010: 177).<sup>12</sup> 'Truth is a point of view'. Is this truth (if it is that) also a point of view? If so, why should it impress others with a different point of view? If not, then there exists at least one

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<sup>11</sup> Didier Kaphagawani commits a related error. When he explains that, in his home language Chewa, '(w)hat is true is what is seen ... or perceived by either an individual or a collection of individuals' (Kaphagawani 1998: 241), he clearly confuses truth and justification. As I have indicated above, observation and perception are sources of justification and knowledge. Given the possibility of observational error and perceptual relativity, they are not identical with truth as such. Even consensus among all individuals about what they perceive does not amount to truth, the way things really are.

<sup>12</sup> I am suggesting here that this is a problem for Wiredu more than it is for Masolo, who explicitly disavows relativism.

truth that is not a point of view. ‘It may be true for you, but it is not true for me’. Is this my truth? Or is it also your truth? If the former, why should it impress those who are of a different opinion? If the latter, this indicates that reconciliation is possible – yet, again at the expense of a doxastic basis of truth and in favour of universalism. Either way, the ‘truth-is-opinion’ theorist will be caught up in paradox, in a logical conundrum. At some point, he will want to claim that his statements about the doxastic nature of truth are, in fact, non-doxastically, universally true (that is, independently of belief or opinion or point of view) – which he cannot do consistently, given his perspectivalism. Wiredu’s position is all the more puzzling in that, elsewhere, he does appear to subscribe to an understanding of truth that avoids any reference to belief or opinion: *nea ete saa*, which is an Akan phrase for ‘that which is so’ (Wiredu 1998: 235). Either way, it remains doubtful whether Wiredu’s theory can do the requisite work for a defence of ‘indigenous knowledge’. Moreover, the Yoruba definition of knowledge and Wiredu’s relational position are not brought into conversation with one another, at least not explicitly, by Masolo.

Sometimes, ‘happily’, the author says,

when we have the opportunity to know the characteristics of other knowledge communities, we may venture to compare them with our own, meaning that there is little (if anything) that impenetrably closes one knowledge system from another. At the minimum, and barring any unwarranted contempt for or dismissal of the unfamiliar, they can be compared (Masolo 2010: 11-12).

The question might now be posed whether scepticism about the notion of ‘indigenous knowledge systems’ does not amount to ‘epistemic injustice’, is not a matter of inflicting epistemic harm. Or could this be seen as a form of ‘*warranted* dismissal’?

## ***The idea of epistemic injustice***

Having observed that ‘the really crucial problem for Third World intellectuals is that of being taken seriously’ (Masolo 2010: 25), Gayatri Spivak writes:

For me, the question “Who should speak?” is less crucial than “Who will listen?” ... The real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously (Spivak 1990: 59-60; quoted in Masolo 2010: 25).

One might argue that what Spivak is driving at here is the demand for epistemic justice.

‘Epistemic injustice’, argues Miranda Fricker, is a distinct kind of injustice. She distinguishes between two kinds, ‘testimonial injustice’ and ‘hermeneutical injustice’, each of which consists, ‘most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower’ (Fricker 2007: 1; see also 21).

Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (Fricker 2007: 1).

Central to her analysis is the notion of (social) ‘power’, which Fricker defines as ‘a socially situated capacity to control others’ actions’ (Fricker 2007: 4; see also p. 13). Power works ‘to create or preserve a given social order’, and is displayed in various forms of enablement, on the one hand, and disbelief, misinterpretation and silencing, on the other. It involves the conferral on certain individuals or groups, qua persons of that kind, ‘a credibility excess’ or ‘a credibility deficit’ (Fricker 2007: 21). The primary characterisation of testimonial injustice, according to Fricker, ‘re-

mains such that it is a matter of credibility deficit and not credibility excess' (Fricker 2007: 21). This is certainly plausible, although we can think of instances where credibility excess is disadvantageous: an overburdened teacher or lecturer being asked questions by his students that call for a more specialist training. Similarly, promoting someone to a position (e.g. through affirmative action) for which they are not equipped, simply to rectify past wrongs, may be argued to involve epistemic harm.

Fricker's interest resides specifically with 'identity power' and the harms it produces through the manifestation of 'identity prejudices'. The latter are responsible for denying credibility to, or withholding it from, certain persons on the basis of their being members of a certain 'social type' (Fricker 2007: 21). Thus, testimonial injustice involves rejecting the credibility of their knowledge claims, while hermeneutical injustice involves a general failure of marshalling the conceptual resources necessary for understanding and interpreting these knowledge claims. The result is that these people are hindered in their self-development and in their attainment of full human worth: they are 'prevented from becoming who they are' (Fricker 2007: 5). In white patriarchal societies, these 'epistemic humiliations' (Fricker 2007: 51)<sup>13</sup> carry the power to destroy a would-be (black or female) knower's confidence to engage in the trustful conversations (Fricker 2007: 52-3) that characterise well-functioning epistemic communities. As Fricker suggests, they can 'inhibit the very formation of self' (Fricker 2007: 55). Although they are experienced (and may be performed) individually, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice constitute not only individual harms: they originate within a social fabric of which the biases and prejudices that enliven and perpetuate them are a characteristic part. Contesting such injustices and harms, according to Fricker, requires 'collective social political change' (Fricker 2007: 8).

In order to bring about such change, what is required<sup>14</sup> at a testimonial

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<sup>13</sup> Fricker borrows the notion of epistemic humiliation from Simone de Beauvoir.

<sup>14</sup> A link might be forged here with Masolo's reference to 'a viable tool for transform-

level is ‘reflexive awareness of the likely presence of prejudice’, and this ‘anti-prejudicial virtue is the virtue of testimonial justice’ (Fricker 2007: 91-2). Testimonial justice, says Fricker, is ‘both ethical and intellectual in character, at once a virtue of truth and a virtue of justice’ (Fricker 2007: 124). Thus, apart from being able to rely on the competence and sincerity of speakers (Fricker 2007: 72), and apart from sensitivity (Fricker 2007: 72) and empathy (Fricker 2007: 79), ‘hearers need dispositions that lead them reliably to accept truths and to reject falsehoods’ (Fricker 2007: 115). However,

there is no guarantee that epistemic and ethical ends will harmonize. If some down-trodden schoolteacher is told in no uncertain terms by the unscrupulous head teacher that when the school inspector visits the classroom, he must ask the pupils a question and make sure that he picks from among the sea of raised hands someone who will come out with the right answer. This epistemic aim might be best served by a policy that is not remotely just. It might be best served, for instance by picking a pupil who, notoriously, always gets her big brother to text her the answers on her mobile (Fricker 2007: 126).

‘Hermeneutical justice, like testimonial justice, is a hybrid virtue’ (Fricker 2007: 174), says Fricker. What it is meant to counteract is hermeneutical injustice – which occurs when (members of certain) groups or communities lack the hermeneutical tools to make sense of their own social experience (Fricker 2007: 146). ‘For something to be an injustice, it must be harmful but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or because otherwise unfair’ (Fricker 2007: 151). When there is unequal ‘hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant areas(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are hermeneutically marginalised’ (Fricker 2007: 153). Fricker’s account, of course, raises the question whether there could be hermeneutical *self*-marginalisation. I am thinking in particular of Axelle Kabou’s own ‘in-

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ing the world’.

side' understanding in referring to ordinary African women and men as having refused development and modernisation (Kabou 1991; see especially Part 2).<sup>15</sup> Fricker appears to deny this:

Hermeneutical marginalisation is always socially coerced. If you simply opt out of full participation in hermeneutical processes as a matter of choice ..., then you do not count as hermeneutically marginalised – you've opted out, but you could have opted in. Hermeneutical marginalisation is always a form of powerlessness,

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<sup>15</sup> Kabou, in her much-maligned pamphlet 'Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement?' ('And if Africa refused development?'; Kabou 1991), blames not only power-crazy heads of state and the corrupt elites for the plight of the continent, but also ordinary people, each and every individual. According to Kabou, Africans still believe that the world owes them salvation of the continent, as belated compensation for past injustices, their victim- and beggar mentality being strengthened by the sentimental humanitarianism of naïve white aid workers. Africans should look in the mirror, in order to realise their own part in this misery. Yet, writes Kabou, they refuse to do this. It is invariably the others who are to blame, foreign companies, the unjust global system of trade, the World Bank, the debt and poverty trap -- not to mention the inherited burdens of colonialism. The black elites and the white helpers are united in their dogma that there exists a century-old plot by the white man against the black man, while they refuse to contemplate the more complex causes of this perpetual crisis. Many consider Kabou's claim, that 'Africa-this-wonderful-continent-that-was-in-perfect-harmony-before-the-invasion-of-the-colonisers' is an anti-colonialist myth and has nothing to do with reality, downright blasphemous. Certainly, her pamphlet is not without stereotyping, of 'the Africans' as such. She tends to neglect the external factors of this chronic crisis, like the deprivation syndrome that white rule has left behind in the collective psyche. She also forgets that Africa lacks the springboard for the huge leap from agrarian society to industrial society. Modernisation was forced onto a continent that was unable to support it, socio-structurally and culturally, while the existing entrepreneurship and infrastructure were systematically undermined and destroyed by the colonial 'masters' (Grill 2003: 115). There is no room for such historical subtleties in Kabou's general account. Nonetheless, no serious debate about the problems facing Africa can afford to ignore her fundamental thesis. She refers not only to the *failed* modernisation of postcolonial Africa but to modernisation that was also *refused*, Africans being the only people on earth who still think that others must take care of their development. Kabou does not simply intend to condemn her African contemporaries. She wants to rouse them into shaking off their 'unbearable mediocrity'. Indeed, the demand for self-criticism makes her argument compelling.

whether structural or one-off (Fricker 2009: 153).

Yes, one might respond, but one can be responsible for one's powerlessness, as in the case of Kabou's 'ordinary Africans'. It would seem to follow that hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical marginalisation are not identical, insofar as the latter can be seen to include self-marginalisation.

Given how prejudice affects various levels of credibility, and given that the critical interrogation of 'indigenous knowledge' has sometimes been part of a hegemonic discourse and constituted epistemic injustice, the question might now be raised whether my critique of this notion is not part of this discourse. Louise Antony suggests the adoption of 'epistemic affirmative action' by men as a 'working hypothesis that when a woman, or any member of a stereotyped group, says something anomalous, they should assume that it's they who do not understand, not that it is the woman that is nuts' (Antony 1995: 89; quoted in Fricker 2007: 171). By contrast, Fricker does not believe a policy of epistemic affirmative action across all subject matters to be justified: 'the best way to honour the compensatory idea is in the form of a capacity for indefinitely context-sensitive judgement – in the form ... of a virtue' (Fricker 2007: 171). At what point, then, can a white man judge a woman, or any member of a stereotyped group, to be 'nuts' – if ever? Does epistemic justice require me, as a matter of course, to reserve judgement, to keep 'an open mind as to credibility' (Fricker 2007: 172)? As I have indicated above, if 'credibility deficit' is a matter of epistemic injustice, then why should 'credibility excess' (giving previously 'epistemologically humiliated' people or groups lots of credibility) not also constitute epistemic harm? More fundamentally, surely there is a difference between criticising someone's view on the mere grounds that she is black, or a woman, and criticising the views held or expressed by someone, who happens to be black or a woman, on the grounds of faulty or fallacious reasoning. Nonsense is not culturally, racially or sexually specific. Indeed, although she gestures in the direction of a basic 'do no harm' principle (Fricker 2007: 85), Fricker herself insists that a "'vulgar" relativist' resistance to passing moral

judgment on other cultures ‘is incoherent’ (Fricker 2007: 106).

According to Fricker,

any epistemic subject will have a reason to get at the truth. This is not to underestimate the complex and often troubled nature of our relationship with truth. Human beings are obviously subject to all sorts of powerful motivations, and indeed reasons, for shielding themselves from painful truths through mechanisms of denial or repression. On the whole, however, one must see such mechanisms against a background of a more general *motivation to truth* ... (Fricker 2007: 102-3; emphasis added).

Bernard Williams identifies three collective epistemic needs: first, the need to possess sufficient truths (and not too many falsehoods) to facilitate survival; second, the need to participate in the practice of an epistemic community, where there exists a division of epistemological labour, i.e. where information is shared or pooled; and third, the need to promote dispositions in individuals that will stabilise relations of trust. The practical virtue of competence and the epistemic virtues of accuracy and sincerity spring directly from these fundamental epistemic needs. Williams expresses the hope that his ‘genealogical story’ will assist in making ‘sense of our most basic *commitments to truth and truthfulness*’ (Williams 2002: 19; emphasis added).

### ***‘Truth and reconciliation’***

According to Masolo,

Wiredu’s theory of truth gives the phrase “truth and reconciliation”, now central as a strategy and process for healing broken trusts and healing from public conflicts, an important epistemological grounding. Reconciling our different and often conflicting aims and aspirations is the path to a collectively acceptable and work-

ble world (Masolo 2010: 181).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up after the first democratic election in South Africa in order to bring to light and address the injustices and moral wrongs committed under apartheid – and indeed to ‘heal the divisions of the past’ and contribute towards establishing ‘a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental rights’ (see Horsthemke November 2004a). One of the principal contributions of the TRC was to turn *knowledge* – in other words, that which so many people already knew – into public *acknowledgement*, allowing the nation to acknowledge atrocity for what it is (*cf.* Villa-Vicencio 2003: 15). Asked to name the most significant achievements of the TRC in a national survey, the vast majority of South Africans, irrespective of race, referred to the disclosure of the *truth* about the past.

Let us pause to think about the present use of the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. There is arguably a reason why the TRC was not called ‘*Belief* and Reconciliation Commission’ or ‘*Consensus* and Reconciliation Commission’. There is a premium here not on personal perceptions (although these are also important), but on historical truth – on what actually took place/ happened/ occurred, independently of what people sincerely believed and perhaps even agreed on. I want to suggest that the use of the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ in the particular enterprise referred to here cannot be matters of personal opinion, that knowledge and truth are not dependent on a particular set of cultural relationships or social context. If it did not involve an understanding of truth as transcultural or universal (and as objectively anchoring knowledge), as reflecting what actually happened, that is, facts about South Africa’s past, setting up a commission like this would be pointless.

What, then, constitutes ‘a viable tool for transforming the world’ (Masolo 2010: 18)? Recognition, protection against exploitation, appropriation, counteracting wholesale subjugation of everything that is deemed subjugatable is best achieved not on the basis of appeals to the validity of ‘lo-

cal knowledge’ or ‘indigenous knowledge systems’<sup>16</sup>, but by locating the pleas for recognition, etc. in a rights-based framework (Horsthemke 2005; Horsthemke 2010). The latter has potential for the necessary educational, ethical and political clout to effect lasting changes. Insofar as human rights are anchored in as well as responsive to human agency, rights are essential for the protection of human differences. In essence, taking rights seriously implies taking individual, social and cultural identity seriously. Perhaps a first set of steps towards transformation (or what Fricker calls ‘collective social political change’; Fricker 2007: 8) is constituted by a process or project that has rights as its backbone – and reconciliation as its heart.

### ***Postscript***

The following is a pertinent excerpt from a play by Bertolt Brecht. Although this parable is ostensibly about reality, and our perception of it, it also serves as a fitting epitaph to the discussion of the problem of knowledge with which I began this paper.<sup>17</sup>

*The teacher:* Si Fu, name the central questions of philosophy!

*Si Fu:* Are things outside of us, for themselves, also without us, or are the

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<sup>16</sup> Without being able to go into detail (for more elaborate argument and illustration, see Horsthemke 2004b and Horsthemke 2006), I suggest here that, apart from its frequent proximity to questionable customs and traditions, and to relative lack of agency and autonomy, the idea of ‘indigenous’ or ‘local’ knowledge tends to have a (self-)marginalising effect. Despite its ostensible contribution to ‘independence from colonialism’, it is less empowering and has less transformative potential than is commonly assumed.

<sup>17</sup> In other words, the parable can also be taken to pose questions around the nature of knowledge, realism versus constructivism, and objectivity-versus-subjectivity of truth and truth-claims. The very reason why an answer has not been furnished actually constitutes the answer – and directs us away from subjectivism, relativism and constructivism.

things within us, for ourselves, not without us?

*The teacher:* Which opinion is the correct one?

*Si Fu:* No verdict has been reached yet.

*The teacher:* What was the latest tendency among the majority of our philosophers?

*Si Fu:* The things are outside of us, for themselves, also without us.

*The teacher:* Why did the question remain unsolved?

*Si Fu:* The conference that was supposed to yield the final verdict took place, as it has done for the past two hundred years, in the monastery Mi Sang, on the banks of the Yellow River. The question was: Is the Yellow River real, or does it exist only in people's heads? During the conference, however, there was a melting of snow in the mountains, and the Yellow River rose above its banks and swept away the monastery Mi Sang and all conference participants. The proof that the things are outside of us, for themselves, also without us, therefore, has not been furnished.<sup>18</sup> (Bertolt Brecht, *Turandot or The Conference of Whitewashers*; my translation.)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Der Lehrer:* Si Fu, nenne uns die Hauptfragen der Philosophie!

*Si Fu:* Sind die Dinge außer uns, für sich, auch ohne uns, oder sind die Dinge in uns, für uns, nicht ohne uns?

*Der Lehrer:* Welche Meinung ist die richtige?

*Si Fu:* Es ist keine Entscheidung gefallen.

*Der Lehrer:* Zu welcher Meinung neigte zuletzt die Mehrheit unserer Philosophen?

*Si Fu:* Die Dinge sind außer uns, für sich, auch ohne uns.

*Der Lehrer:* Warum blieb die Frage ungelöst?

*Si Fu:* Der Kongress, der die Entscheidung bringen sollte, fand, wie seit zweihundert Jahren, im Kloster Mi Sang statt, welches am Ufer des Gelben Flusses liegt. Die Frage hieß: Ist der Gelbe Fluss wirklich, oder existiert er nur in den Köpfen? Während des Kongresses aber gab es eine Schneeschmelze im Gebirge, und der Gelbe Fluss stieg über seine Ufer und schwemmte das Kloster Mi Sang mit allen Kongressteilnehmern weg. So ist der Beweis, dass die Dinge außer uns, für sich, auch ohne uns sind, noch nicht erbracht worden. (Bertolt Brecht, *Turandot oder Der Kongress der Weißwäscher*, Stücke, Band 14: 36)

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to all participants of the colloquium on the Philosophy of D.A. Masolo at which this piece was initially presented and especially to Thaddeus Metz for his incisive comments on earlier drafts of the present paper.

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# On Being an African<sup>33</sup>

by Abraham Olivier

*Abstract:* On Being an African. What is it like to be an African? This paper is an attempt to answer this question by taking Masolo's challenge to demonstrate the relational basis of subjectivity. I do not intend to develop a definition of "Africanity" as such. Rather I confine myself to a phenomenological description of the way sociality shapes subjectivity and my reflection on "Africanity" will mainly serve as a case in point. African philosophers concentrate on moral conceptions of personhood and have not articulated and defended with any thoroughness a social conception of selfhood as is done in this paper. I develop two major arguments. Firstly, I argue for the social basis of subjectivity in the sense of subjective experience. Accordingly, I show that and how far there is something like an African experience. Secondly, I argue for the social basis of subjectivity in the sense of selfhood. As a result I develop an answer to the question as to what it is like to be an African.

*Résumé:* Être un Africain. Qu'est-ce que c'est que d'être un Africain? Cet article est une tentative de répondre à cette question en prenant le défi de Masolo pour démontrer le fondement relationnel de la subjectivité. Je n'ai pas l'intention de développer une définition de 'l'Africanité' en tant que tel. Je me borne plutôt à une description phénoménologique de la façon dont la socialité forme la subjectivité et ma réflexion sur 'l'Africanité' servira principalement comme exemple. Les philosophes africains se concentrent sur des conceptions morales de la personnalité et n'ont pas formulé et défendue avec rigueur une conception sociale de l'ipséité comme je le fait dans cet article. Je développe deux arguments principaux. Tout d'abord, je défends l'idée de la base sociale de la subjectivité dans le sens de l'expérience subjective. En conséquence, je montre que et dans qu'elle mesure il y a quelque chose comme une expérience africaine. Deuxièmement, je défends l'idée de la base sociale de la subjectivité dans le sens de l'ipséité. En conséquence, je développe une réponse à la question de savoir ce que c'est que d'être un Africain.

*Keywords:* subjectivity, selfhood, sociality, African identity

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<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Thaddeus Metz for very helpful detailed critical comments on drafts of this paper, some of which express discussions of the paper at the recent Masolo workshop.

*Mots-clés*: subjectivité, ipséité, socialité, identité africaine

## **Introduction**

“How do African people think differently from other people and what are those differences? What do they stem from? Or do we differ at all?” As the title of his recent book indicates, these are some, if not the most central, of questions Masolo asks in *Self and Community in a Changing World*. His questions are challenging, not merely because they provoke politically, but because of the way they open up some “hard” philosophical problems. What is it like to be an African? Is there at all anything that it is like to be an African? If there is, must I go to the “forest” to become an African? Can I become an African at all? How does social experience affect our sense of selfhood and personhood? Do African minds differ from other minds?

Masolo’s book addresses some topics in African philosophy and aims to engage readers in various contemporary debates. I shall concentrate on what I take to be the most central of these topics: the enquiry into the relationship between subjectivity and sociality. Subjectivity, so I shall explain, refers both to “subjective experience” and “selfhood”. The challenging thesis of the book is that subjectivity has a relational basis, in other words, that the “self” is based on the changing contexts of the “community”.<sup>34</sup>

My aim is to explore this thesis from a phenomenological perspective. I

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<sup>34</sup> This thesis is reflected in various chapters. Chapter 1 revisits the ethnophilosophical debate on the way ethnicity shapes the “lenses of our thinking” (9). Chapter 2 compares Husserl’s and Hountondji’s views on the question as to how socio-ethnic contexts relate to the concept of subjectivity. Chapter 3 and 4 discuss Masolo’s adoption of Wiredu’s concept of the relational basis of subjectivity in the sense of personhood, which Chapter 5, on “juok”, expands on concretely. Chapter 6 finally compares this view of relational subjectivity to African and Western brands of communalism.

shall bring to the fore what I take to be Masolo's challenge, which is to demonstrate the relational basis of subjectivity. As an example I explore how far an "African" world of living shapes subjectivity. So I do not intend to develop a definition of "Africanity" as such. Rather I confine myself to a phenomenological description of the way sociality shapes subjectivity and my reflection on "Africanity" will mainly serve as case in point. To the best of my knowledge this has not been done before, at least not thoroughly, and I would like to try to fill the gap. Sections I and II start with a brief discussion of terms and methods, in particular, I introduce Hountondji's adoption of Husserl's phenomenological question concerning the sociality of subjectivity. Sections III to V address Masolo's challenge and argue for the social basis of subjectivity in the sense of subjective experience; in short, I shall show that there is something like an African experience. Sections VI to VII subsequently argue for the social basis of subjectivity in the sense of selfhood; I shall address the question as to what it is like to be an African, before concluding by addressing some objections in Section VIII.

## 1

The question as to how African people differ from other people pierces into the heart of problems, or after Chalmers, the "hard problem".<sup>35</sup> Is there anything that it is like to be an African? This question opens up a number of questions. The question is, first and foremost, in Nagel's classical terms, what does it mean to say, "there is something it is like to be African"?<sup>36</sup> Do Africans "experience" things differently? What should an "African experience" be like? Is there anything like "African subjectiv-

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<sup>35</sup> Chalmers (1996: 24ff). To recall, "easy problems" of consciousness refer to those concerning the explanation of various cognitive functions (discriminatory abilities, reportability of mental states, the focus of attention, the control of behavior) whilst the hard problem refers to phenomenal or subjective consciousness.

<sup>36</sup> Of course, I am referring to Nagel's (1997) essay, "What is it like to be a bat?".

ity”? How is what we experience related to *where* we experience it? What does this tell about consciousness or selfhood?

Before we dig into Masolo’s text it might be helpful to give a preliminary outline of some standard distinctions made between terms such as “consciousness”, “experience”, “subjectivity”, “intentionality”, “selfhood”, “personhood”, and “human nature” – although we immediately encounter the difficulty that it is part of the hard problem to deal with these distinctions.

“Human nature in particular is accorded great attention in African thought”, writes Masolo (2010: 151). There is a kind of minimum agreement among philosophers of all traditions that the hard problem of “human nature” is the explanation of the human mind. Scientific research seems to confirm our common-sense experience that, unlike our observable physical properties, we seem to have mental properties that evade empirical observation and explanation.<sup>37</sup> You won’t simply get what Africans or Chinese or Italians are like by watching their bodily appearances or even behavior. You have to, as it were, study their minds. What are minds? Most philosophers think that the hard problem of the human mind is the explanation of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Typically, philosophers of mind distinguish between subjective and intentional consciousness. Subjective consciousness is usually referred to as first personal experience, phenomenal consciousness, or qualia (the quality of experience). Subjective consciousness is often described in terms of what consciousness is like.<sup>39</sup> Intentional consciousness is generally defined in terms of what consciousness is about or directed toward.<sup>40</sup> We can also refer to subjective and intentional consciousness as subjectivity and intentionality. Typically

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<sup>37</sup> See Olivier 2011: 184.

<sup>38</sup> See the instructive essay of Güzeldere (1997: 1-67) entitled “The Many Faces of Consciousness: A Field Guide”.

<sup>39</sup> See Güzeldere (1997: 2, 22-23, 30) with reference to Chalmers (1996).

<sup>40</sup> Güzeldere (1997: 22-23), Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 109ff.).

subjectivity is associated with an internal domain of consciousness and intentionality with the external world to which consciousness is directed. The real hard problem is thought to be the explanation of the evasive inner sphere of subjectivity. Furthermore, some take “subjectivity” to be a broader term than “subjective consciousness” as far as it also pertains to “selfhood” or “personal identity”.<sup>41</sup> “Selfhood” is usually employed to refer to that which gives us a sense of the “self” or “mineness” or “identity” of our experience. “Selfhood” is mostly applied in connection with “personhood”. As Thaddeus Metz puts it in personal comments on this paper: “It is one thing to ask what essentially makes me who I am and another thing to ask how I (whatever I essentially might be) can develop into a *real* person or an individual...” The former is a metaphysical question of selfhood, the latter a moral or at least evaluative one of personhood. As indicated, I shall concentrate on selfhood rather than personhood.<sup>42</sup>

On the basis of this preliminary outline, we can say “subjectivity” refers to first person “subjective consciousness or experience” as well as “self” or “selfhood”. Although Masolo does not state this explicitly, he does seem to use the term “self” in terms of subjectivity in its twofold sense of subjective experience and selfhood. We can take this preliminary outline of the terms as a point of departure in exploring the meanings of these terms in more detail. The question thus is how our particular social settings, such as African communities, affect our subjective experience or sense of selfhood.

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<sup>41</sup> Güzeldere 1997: 36. This is also what the title of Zahavi’s (2005) book, “Subjectivity and Selfhood”, indicates.

<sup>42</sup> As I said, African philosophers concentrate on concepts of personhood rather than selfhood. See, for instance, Gbadegehin (2002); Gyekye (2002); Kaphagawani (2004); Menkiti (2004).

## 2

Masolo takes as his point of departure Hountondji's adoption of Husserl's view of phenomenology. The focus is on phenomenology qua study of the social origin of subjectivity. Husserl and Hountondji are both classics but in opposite senses and contexts – so it appears. Husserl is a Western classic for making strong the “life world” as the basis of consciousness and for that matter, all knowledge. The other, Hountondji, an African classic, is particularly a classic for calling a view such as Husserl's myth – so it seems. Hountondji (1983: 55ff) states in his book *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, that the myth of African philosophy is that its philosophy is founded in myth, that is, in life world experiences expressed in mythical forms (Hountondji 1983: 55ff.). Hountondji has indeed become a classic for challenging the views that advocate the ethnic underpinnings of philosophy.

Masolo thinks Hountondji is a classic, yet not for rejecting but rather for advocating the philosophical significance of ethnicity. My purpose is not to discuss his detailed defence of Hountondji. Suffices to say that Masolo argues that Hountondji is no adversary but rather an advocate of the “reconciliation of indigenous African orders of experience with the orders of philosophical knowledge”, and in this regard “he is one of the most insistent and the most recognized of contemporary African philosophers” (Masolo 2010: 52). In fact, so Masolo puts it, “Hountondji's writings strongly call for the return of the African subject” (61).

This is a strong claim. What is meant by the call for the return of the African subject? On his “path toward the definition of African subjectivity” (61), Hountondji explicitly takes Husserl to be an ally and not a rival. This brings us to a closer look at Husserl's approach to phenomenology.

In its technical sense Husserl views phenomenology as a method that consists in the (a) suspension of the myth of the given, i.e., the natural attitude that things are given and that we have to match our experience with what is given, (b) reduction (leading back or returning) to how

things are given to experience, and (c) intersubjective corroboration of the essential features (eidetic variation) of shared experience.<sup>43</sup> Because of its methodological focus on subjective experience, phenomenology is often wrongly confused with a subjective account of experience – also called introspectionism or phenomenism. Phenomenology, rather, attempts to maintain objectivity in its account of subjective experience. Typically, however, phenomenology emphasises a first or second personal approach to experience, which means it takes as a point of departure our first and second personal access to experience. Nevertheless, the aim is to arrive at objectivity and to do this by means of the intersubjective corroboration of the essential features of shared experience.

Hountondji clearly follows Husserl’s “pathway” into phenomenology. As Masolo quotes him: “This return to the subject does not however imply a retreat into subjectivity—on the contrary! The investigation of experience seeks to confirm the objectivity of essences, by identifying in experience itself an internal element of transcendence that obliges it to recognize its objective correlate.” The point is thus to “return” to the pre-reflective first person experiences and intuitions of the “life world”, if you want to, the everyday context and community we inhabit, and objectively identify structures common to various subjects.

Hence, if Hountondji calls for “the return of the African subject”, its phenomenological sense is a return to the particular, prereflective, social roots of African subjects as the starting point of a philosophical or scientific assessment of their subjectivity. Hountondji follows Husserl’s aim to “reduce”, that is, return our focus to the prereflective, social roots of subjectivity. For Husserl it is our life world experience, for Hountondji it is the indigenous community, in short African subjectivity.

However, so Hountondji warns in his *The Struggle for Meaning*, one cannot simply take a collective set of prereflective intuitions to be as such

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<sup>43</sup> See also Olivier (2011: 185). For this explanation I rely on Gallagher and Zahavi succinct definition of phenomenology in Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 23ff.)

a complete reflection of the roots of subjectivity. He accuses ethnophilosophy of such uncritical generalisation, of uncritically taking the chorus of an anonymous crowd for the voice of any individual. As a result you are, for instance, black due to your “ensemble of characteristics, of manners of thinking, of feeling, proper to the black race; belonging to the black race.” (Masolo 2010: 83). Conversely, if you are black, you think like all blacks – you are, to put it in Heidegger’s terms, like Masolo does, reduced to “being-black-in-the-world”.

But how exactly should we then understand the call for the return of the African subject? How should we, for that matter, understand adjacent ideas such as “black consciousness”, or “black is beautiful”? In short, what does the claim for the social basis of subjectivity exactly mean if the subject is not to be reduced to the chorus of the crowd?

Masolo deals with these questions in more depth in the following chapters of the book. The next four sections (III-V) bring to the fore what I take to be Masolo’s challenge to demonstrate the relational basis of subjectivity, in particular, subjective experience.

### 3

The return of the African subject – so there must be something that it is like to be an African. Africa should not simply be the cradle of mankind, but rather, Africa seems to be the birthplace of a subject of its own kind. But, how could one call for the return of the African subject without, as Hountondji warns, reducing subjectivity to the anonymous chorus of a crowd?

Masolo consults Wiredu’s view of human nature for an answer (142ff.), and I would like to discuss his answer from a phenomenological perspective. Here is a brief summary of Wiredu’s view. We can understand human nature fairly well by explaining the properties specific to the biological type to which humans belong. The human body has the ability

to respond in different ways to a variety of stimuli. Our major ability consists of our capacity to respond to each other by means of communication. “The capacity to process and respond to communicative stimuli is what is called mind” (140). This means: the mind is not entirely physical, it is only “partly” or “kind of” or “quasi” physical, and “borne into action by the communicative stimuli of others”. Masolo concludes that the physical constitution of humans is a necessary but *not sufficient* basis for explaining subjectivity. The meaning of experience, and of self, arises from within a social environment.

“Meanings just ain’t in the head”. And neither are minds. Masolo would agree with Putnam’s and McDowell’s witty précis of the externalist view of mind.<sup>44</sup> *Prima facie* I think also phenomenologists would concur. Externalism, so Gallagher and Zahavi (2008:122) point out, basically means to say: “...our experience depends upon factors that are external to the subject possessing the mental states in question.” Internalism states the opposite: the meaning of a subject’s experience is constituted by what is going on in its mind, or brain, rather than its environment (121).

Phenomenologists, however, work on dissolving the division rather than adopting either internalism or externalism. The quest to dissolve the division between “internal” and “external” goes back to Heidegger’s view that human being is “*Dasein*”, being here and now in the world. Hence, Heidegger’s well-known phrasing of human being as “being-in-the-world”. Heidegger characterizes human being (*Dasein*) as being primarily overt or open toward the world. For Heidegger, to our most basic state of mind belongs a tuning in to, understanding of and discourse with our environment. As such *Dasein* naturally belongs to the world. Heidegger famously states, in directing itself toward and in grasping something, *Dasein* does not first go outside of the inner sphere in which it is initially encapsulated, but rather, it is always already outside together with some being encountered in the world (Heidegger 1986: 62). Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>44</sup> See Gallagher and Zahavi 2008: 123.

(1962: 430) rounds it off: the world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject that is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects. To summarise, the phenomenological verdict is that as bodily subjects we are anchored in contexts which give meaning to our subjectivity. We are bodily subjects, and as bodily beings we are anchored in contexts, which on the rebound shape our subjectivity. To be means to be in a particular space which gives meaning to our being.

It is significant that Masolo points out that Wiredu defends the view that “there is no equivalent, in Akan, of the existential ‘to be’ or ‘is’ of English, and that there is no way of pretending in that medium to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space.” (Masolo 2010: 156) According to Wiredu, “in the Akan language to exist is to *wo ho*, which, in literal translation, means ‘to be at some place.’” in the Akan understanding, existence is always locative, in relation to something else. Consequently, the notion of the transcendental self in the philosophies of Descartes and Kant as an autonomous instance that bestows meaning upon experience regardless of the space they occur in, is hard for the Akan to comprehend and to express in their language.

“*Wo ho*” – to be is to be at some place. This is the place where meanings are. The idea of “*wo ho*” shows strong resemblance with the notion of *Dasein* – being here and now in the world. The way our experience is imbedded in our *Dasein* is beautifully explained by Merleau-Ponty’s view of the embodiment of experience. According to him, sensed qualities (colours, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile qualities) “radiate” around them a certain mode of existence, that is, the qualities shape the way I am in the world. As I contemplate the blue of the sky, I am not set against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it as an objective reality spread out in front of me. Instead, I abandon myself to it, my gaze resides in it, it becomes my world, it determines my mode of being (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 249). Merleau-Ponty phrases this intentional structure as follows:

“The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place” (248).<sup>45</sup>

My contention is, however, that one can take Masolo’s view further than Merleau-Ponty’s view, or for that matter than the mainstream of phenomenology and philosophy of mind allows going, *viz.*, one can claim that subjective experience is socially and in this sense externally based.

#### 4

Consider the Capgrass syndrome. Capgrass experiences a colour qualia inversion: his emotional response to colours has changed, his preference for red over green has been reversed as have all his other colour preferences. He finds the world disgusting this way.<sup>46</sup> Imagine that you wake up one morning and see a yellow ocean, red trees, a green sky. You make an espresso to pull you out of this nightmare, but the espresso is pink. On the top of it, the espresso has a soapy smell and seems to be thick like shampoo. Your children run upstairs to embrace you but they have the colour of green Martians and they don’t speak but squeak.

What goes wrong with Capgrass in this exaggerated depiction shows what goes right in all normal cases of sensory experience. In all normal cases, sensations – colours like sounds and smells – come with particular effects. Their effects depend on the objects they belong to and the context within which I have these sensations. Sensations affect me by drawing my attention to positions, situations, and objects, thereby filling in my experiences in different ways. The devastating effect of an inversion of

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<sup>45</sup> Note that the idea of embodied or situated experience has become a popular topic of research recently also among analytical philosophers and psychologists. To mention but three books: Fuchs, Sattel, Henningsen (2010), Robbins and Aydede (2009), Thompson (2007).

<sup>46</sup> See Dennett 2006: 95-96.

sensations demonstrates this clearly. This means that every sensation is characteristically intentional for it directs and ties me to objects and contexts in particular ways. I am not aware of a colour or a smell or taste without it occupying me in a certain way. I can imagine a patch of green or the taste of sweetness detached from an object or situation in an *ad hoc* sort of way, say in a thought experiment, but I cannot imagine returning from my experiment into a world of “flying qualia” detached from objects or situations. Otherwise Capgrass’ inversion of sensations would not have been such a nightmare. My claim thus is, in all normal cases, a sensation is always in some way identified with and characterized by its intentional effect.

The same applies, for instance, to pain experience. Masolo (2010: 154) states that “the sensations that we associate with the idea of pain or of pleasure belong to the body”. I venture to differ. A pain in my leg is not, as Masolo puts it, an idea that I learn to associate with a sensation in my leg, or as Michael Tye argues, a representation of a disturbance in my leg.<sup>47</sup> Rather, as the pain is intentionally bound to my leg, the pain is defined in terms of the leg that disturbs me, and therefore, the intentional effect of the pain is what the pain is all about. I don’t have a senseless pain sensation and then learn to make sense of it by perceiving it as a kind of pain. Rather the pain will have some kind of meaning also even when it is indefinite and if I do not yet know how to describe it.

Thus, I define subjective experience in terms of *intentional effects*.<sup>48</sup> I think that hereby I take a step into where “ways into phenomenology” (to use Heidegger’s phrase), and I daresay analytical philosophy of mind as well, typically bring to a halt.<sup>49</sup> Usually we speak of intentional con-

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<sup>47</sup> Tye 1996: 113.

<sup>48</sup> The term “effect” qua “affectedness” originates from Hume and Kant. See Olivier (2011: 189). “Effect” has an intentional and no causal meaning.

<sup>49</sup> Analytical philosophers of mind generally accept as a received view that qualia and intentionality can be viewed separately (Güzeldere 1997: 22). This view is criticized by philosophers such as John Searle, Richard Rorty, Michael Tye and Fred Dretske,

consciousness in terms of, to use Searle's phrase, a direction of fit: a subject is directed towards the world and the world is what his or her consciousness is about.<sup>50</sup> If we say that consciousness is defined by intentional effects, the direction of fit is inversed and it is the world that primarily directs consciousness. Then consciousness is essentially a result of our intentional alignment to our environment. This means that the world is seen as having a continuously formative and in this sense directive effect on our consciousness. I call this "conditional" (contextual) formation of consciousness *inversed intentionality*. This radicalises, or rather, inverts Merleau-Ponty's claim: the subject is the project of a world that the subject does not itself primordially project.<sup>51</sup> Whereas phenomenology typically takes subjectivity to be inherently intentional, the direction of fit is still subject-world oriented. The subject is still presupposed as the condition of experience. I turn this relation around by stating that experience is the effect and not condition of our alignment with the world.

This conception of inversed intentionality offers a way to explain why and how sociality can be seen as the basis of subjectivity. This brings me to the question whether there is something like an "African experience".

## 5

Masolo (2010: 241) recounts that, typically, in traditional African villages, before their initiation, children are trained to carry messages across villages to kin and friends of the family. Although it might appear simple,

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but in a different way than I am doing. My view draws on but also differs from the connection phenomenologists see between qualia and intentionality. For an overview of their views, see Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 107).

<sup>50</sup> Note Searle (2004: 167ff.) understands "direction of fit" on some point in another way.

<sup>51</sup> Again, Merleau-Ponty contends that the subject is a project of the world that the subject itself projects.

the act of sending children as messengers across villages has a very central meaning for their social development. Apart from training them to sharpen their ability to carefully listen, understand, remember, and precisely transmit verbal messages it gives them mental training by practicing remembering and delivering verbal messages. Also the children learn the virtues of obedience and service to others and to fit into the larger social system of the extended family and beyond. Later so he writes, children go through all kinds of processes before they get the rite of passage. One of them is initiation. Such rituals, are an important aspect of the rites of passage, they “‘create’ a person out of the untamed and unmolded body of a child” (242). To demonstrate the point, Masolo cites an Ogiek elder’s preparatory address to a young initiation candidate: “At the end of it (initiation) you will be transformed from somebody’s child who has become a person” (242).

Of course not all Africans undergo initiation or pass the “forest”. The practices are still widely sustained, also among modern Africans. But the point here is not to identify forms of what we might call typical African experiences. Rather, these accounts demonstrate the way “inversed intentionality” works, that is, the way our experiences are directed by the social conditions (positions and situations) we have in our “life world”. This means that different conditions of living create different forms of experience. My Xhosa students usually prefer Dwight Juda Ward’s African version of the last supper to Leonardo da Vinci’s original. Our experiences are accordingly shaped by our conditions of living in a manifold of ways.

But you might still like to ask: What does “Africa” or “African” mean exactly? In other words, what does “place” exactly mean for the “Africanness” of experience. To be sure, I take “place” to mean our “world of living”, that is, positions and situations in which we are socially involved. Of course, communities in Africa, like in the rest of the world, are not confined to local areas but are linked by language and culture. You can foster the Akan culture while living in Berlin. My purpose is not at all to delineate the exact boundaries of a place called Africa. I do not want to

offer any statutory or metaphysical or mystical account of what Africa might be. Rather I confine myself to a phenomenological description of the way place shapes our subjective experience – and identity – and Africa serves as an example like Europe or Asia or America could have. In fact, to refer to Africa as a “place” would be nonsensical, for there is too huge a hybrid of African “life worlds” to refer to such a place meaningfully.

I argued that as experience is conditioned by our life world, an African world of living will produce a particular African way to experience things. We can *know* what an African experience is like by studying the conditions of living which are affecting people. But this answers one part of the question as to what an African experience could be like. It is one thing to *know* what an African experience is like, it is yet another to *be* an African, for “*wo ho*” – to be is to be at some place. To be at some place means to be affected and formed by that place. It is, for instance, one thing to know that to some African cultures the forest is a rite of passage, and another to have gone through that forest. You might know that the period of seclusion in the forest “gives society the space and time to cultivate and groom the person in the etiquette that gives the person a rite of passage”, but if you were not there, you will not really understand Masolo’s contention that this etiquette “embodies the fundamentally altruistic impulse underlying social being” (Masolo 2010: 243). To be is, to put it in Heidegger’s terms, to open up to the world. This definition has a conversed side. A world can be closed to you. This happens naturally if you are not there, if you are not in that world. To be there means to be someone with a different experience. Finally, to be there means to be someone different. This brings me to the next section – to the relation between subjectivity in the sense of subjective experience and in the sense of selfhood.

If my experience is African, does this also make me become an African? What is the relationship between subjective experience and selfhood? In the following section I want to explore in more detail my contention that subjectivity, also in the sense of selfhood, is constituted by sociality.

Let me start with a very brief overview of some conceptions of selfhood. There is no widespread consensus about what it means to be a self.<sup>52</sup> There is, in fact, a lot of scepticism about the legitimacy of notions of the self. I shall defend the thesis that there is something that it is like to be a self. The most widespread classic view that there is a self is based on the classic conception of the self as identity pole. Kant is a major proponent of this view of the self as the subject to which any episode of experience refers back (200). The self is as such not experiential, but rather the unifying principle of our manifold experiences. There are two major current models, which offer alternative notions to the identity-pole model of the self – they are the following.

The first is the self as narrative construction. A very popular version of narrative notions of the self is offered by Charles Taylor (1989) in *Sources of the Self*. Basically, Taylor's idea is that the self is an achievement. It is not a given, not a living organism, but rather realised through a person's projects and actions. Eventually the self is constructed through a narrative of self-interpretations of these projects and actions. This view finds resemblance in Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological idea of the self as *leitmotiv* of our lives. As Ricoeur's book title, *Time and Narrative*, shows, the *leitmotiv* has a temporal order. Who am I is told by my life story, which links the beginning by birth with the end by death. In his version of the narrative self in *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre (1985), puts emphasise on its social order. Our narrative is embedded in larger

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<sup>52</sup> See Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 197ff.). I rely partly on their book for a helpful discussion of debates on the self.

historical and communal meaning-giving structures. This means, we are not the only authors of our lives. My story is caught up in the stories of others. This implies yet another dimension, that is, our belonging to cultural-linguistic settings whose aims and ideals to a great extent write the stories of our lives. The notion of narrative self can of course turn into a notion of a fictive self (202). In *Sweat Dreams*, among others, Daniel Dennett argues that we cannot prevent inventing ourselves; we are hard-wired to become language users, and once we are caught up in the web of language and begin spinning our own stories, we are not totally in control, but rather our tales tend to spin us.

In short, the narrative self is seen as an abstract centre of narrative gravity; it is where all the stories (of fiction or biography) of an individual meet up.

The second model is the self as experiential dimension. This notion of selfhood is supported by all major phenomenologists – Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Ironically, in their earlier works, both Husserl and Sartre supported self-scepticism, but later, both distanced themselves from it. For Husserl, in the *Ideas*, the ego of self is not given as material entity, but rather it is constituted in the process of experience as the subject of that experience. The self is the one that carries ownership of a particular experience as the “I” of the experience, but it is also the one that synthesises the flow of many different experiences into a history of experiences. So, there is no “second self”, but rather the “self in abstraction”, or rather synthesises in the process of experience. Heidegger’s view in *Being and Time* is that every experience is characterised by the fact that I am always somehow acquainted with myself. Being-in-the-world means a prereflective awareness of *my-being-in-the world*, of the mine-ness (*Jemeinigkeit*) of the world. Thus every form of consciousness is also self-consciousness (46). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, contends that subjective experience or consciousness is at bottom characterised by self-appearance or self-reality, which he terms ipseity: selfhood (from the Latin “ipse”). The “self” coincides with phenomenal or first-person consciousness – there is always a sense of mineness to any experi-

ence (203). Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, understands ipseity in terms of embodiment – as he famously states, “I am my body, I am a body-subject”. In other words, to experience means to be some-body that experiences and is in some way always aware of his or her being that body experiencing. In fact, the way objects affect us always also goes along with self-experience, of a self affecting itself by tuning itself into these objects.

Contrary to the narrative versions of the self, the experiential version, in particular phenomenology, does not take selfhood as precondition or product of consciousness, but as an integral part of it. One is prereflectively aware of one’s own experience, and this makes experience subjective in the first place. The self is not the same as experience, but the mineness that accompanies all experiences. A sense of self always goes along with one’s experience, one’s subjective consciousness coincides with one’s self-consciousness. Thus there is the assumption of a core self, some minimal form of self-*experience*, i.e., experience as subjective or first-person experience, to be essential for self-hood.

African philosophers, to my view, introduces a third kind of view – the notion of a communalist self. This view is not worked out in terms of selfhood, but personhood, that is, in moral terms. As I said, Masolo indicates a socially based concept of selfhood that I would like to bring to the fore. My own view differs and agrees with both the narrative and experiential view. Let me explain my own view and then compare it to the above views of selfhood.

## 7

We are in a position now to tackle the question as to how far the “Africanness” of my experience makes me become an African. In the following section I try to answer this question by showing why also subjectivity in the sense of selfhood is constituted by sociality.

My view takes George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* as a point of departure. But much as I appreciate Mead's view and views adjacent to Mead's position, I think we should go somewhat further.<sup>53</sup> In Mead's view, the precondition for human interaction is that one "I" acts upon another "I" by taking its position, consequently they interact with each other from each others' positions. Thus, a minimum conception of an "I" acting is presupposed. I do not presuppose any "I" as a precondition for but rather view the "I" as the product of interaction. What I am, I become first and foremost by virtue of societal positions, for instance, by inheriting the perspective of an African infant on the back of my parent, later carrying messages from one village to another, undergoing initiation, and going to the forest before I obtain the rite of passage to society. Furthermore, I gain experience from situations by being a village African infant, or messenger, undergoing initiation, bearing the forest, such that my experience is, ever so unwittingly, continuously formed and informed by the positions I take in such situations. I don't first decide to take and learn these positions, but rather, these positions demand to be taken and I learn to take them in terms of their demands. Finally, these positions and situations have different effects on me; they change me continuously, they form my experience such that I can eventually claim that experience to be my experience.

Subsequently, we can argue that positions subject me to forms of experience that I identify with and therefore make me become the *subject* of my experience. The positions that I occupy make me what I am; they originally give me a sense of *selfhood*, of the self or mineness or identity of my experience. One could thus say that subjectivity, both in the sense of "inner" first-person or subjective experience and selfhood, is based on "external" positions.

The ontological implication of this view is that my social experience con-

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<sup>53</sup> Note that Mead's theory of the interaction of I and Me is a radicalization of William James' theory of this relation (1890: 291ff.). See also Backtin's (1981) and Herman's (2003) versions of James' position.

tinually constitutes what I am. If my social world of living, call it life world, is an African context, then this life world will make me an African. If it is not, I can be no African. No matter how much I learn to love the African way of life, being a foreigner, I shall never be affected by the African life world in the way of inhabitants who have lived it. In Nagel's terms, if I live as a bat, I shall have different experiences, consequently I shall be a different being. Nagel's ascribes this difference to the physiognomy of the bat. I agree. Only, Africans are not bats but humans like all humans are, and physiognomic differences are not that decisive, as is rightly stressed by Hountondji and Masolo. But Africans differ from Chinese and Chinese from Americans by virtue of sociality. This means, if I would have been reared in an African community, I would have had different experiences, and by virtue of the intentional effects of these experiences, I would have developed another sense of selfhood. Conversely, if I have not been reared in an African community, I shall not become an African, no matter how hard I try.

A question that was raised whilst presenting this paper is to which extent one's African identity would change upon moving to another place. Again, I take "place" to mean our "world of living", that is, positions and situations in which we are socially involved. Two factors seem to determine the effect of changing places on identity most decisively. The first is education, the other integration. Consider, for instance, Turkish women who will not speak German after 30 years of living in Germany because they are not taking part in German society on any level. Their children will be bilingual soon, and will most likely prefer to speak German because it is the language of their school or tertiary education and later occupation. There is a difference in the effect of changing places in the case of the person that is not educated or integrated in her new place and her children who are. Many Turkish families have been forced to moving back to Germany. Their children often have a nightmare to cope because they will call Germany home and themselves German. Where we are educated and integrated shapes what we are, and if we change places any re-education or re-integration will radically change our identity. A Xhosa child adopted and reared in Germany will be much less an "African" than

a Bavarian child raised in a local community in an African country. You learn to become an “African” by virtue of the specific place in a local African community that you take, that is, by virtue of the positions or situations that you learn to adopt in such a community. In this sense there is no single Africa or African identity but a huge hybrid of the same.

Take the black German referred to above again. To refer to a black person walking the streets of Berlin as an African reduces Africanity to a phenotype, to the anonymous crowd, as Hounjondji calls it, and misses the phenomenology of the way a specific place, a local German community and the culture it is linked to, has constituted the person’s identity. Africa like Europe, or for that matter, South Africa like Germany, consist of numerous places. To refer to someone coming from the African continent as African *simpliciter* is nonsensical, because it gives a too general reference to his or her identity to make sense. Metaphysically posed political or ethical appeals to “African unity” should not be confused with a phenomenological description of African identity in its particularity. In sum, to refer to African identity refers to one’s belonging to a particular place in Africa and not to a detached metaphysical idea of Africa.

What about losing your “African” identity? Wiredu (2004) contends that Amo never completely lost his Akan identity even after decades of living in a German household and that his reading of Descartes clearly shows traces of Akan thinking. Not every African is an Amo. Who leaves home for long enough will go through another forest and might not quite return as the same person. Fanon commented on this with much wit in *Black Skin, White Masks*. It seems to be easier to lose than to learn, but the point remains the same: the way sociality shapes identity is particularly clear in the case of changing places. African identity – like any other social identity – cannot be based on detached unitary metaphysics, but rather is bound to the physics of place, of local social positions and situations, and a chance of place does have an effect on identity.

We can thus also say that selfhood is not in the first place an issue of the self-ascription of characteristics of a culture. I am borne in and educated

into a particular African culture or not, and if I do not directly resist such a culture, I will naturally assume the roles this culture will ascribe to myself. But I am free to fill the roles in my own way, I am free to, in Biko's words, "write what I like". In this sense, selfhood does allow the freedom of self-ascription. But self-ascription only follows on the positions a society has already ascribed to my-self. "Other-ascription" precedes "self-ascription".

This freedom of self-ascription does make it possible to adopt a foreign culture to some extent. If I did not go to the forest, I shall not be an African. I shall never pass the question, "Why do you act (or reason) like you never went to the forest?" But I can move to Africa, and try to go through the rites of passage – learn the language, assume social positions and engage in a local society. I can even try to go to the forest. My tongue will forever betray my self-ascription. But I am free to choose to see my-self as an African and try to live as an African.

## 8

I would like to draw to a close by considering two possible objections, which one can anticipate from proponents of narrative and experiential accounts of selfhood.

1. Take the narrative account first. You might object that Alisdair MacIntyre makes a similar point in *After Virtue* (cited by Masolo 227):

We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this or that clan, that tribe, this nation.

There is, however, a slight but decisive difference between MacIntyre's and my own view. MacIntyre like Mead still presupposes a "we", that is, an "I" that enters human society and needs to learn to manage its roles", whilst I take the "we" or "I" to be a product rather than precondition of society. I become what I am due to the intentional effect of the positions and situations which I inherit. Of course, narrative versions also take the self as the eventual product of life-stories, but only after assuming it as the beginning of these stories as well. Thus a minimal form of self is presupposed.

2. Consider another possible objection from the side of experiential notions of the self. If it is my contention that my social experience shapes the way I am, is this not simply another version of the experiential notion of the self, i.e., of the self as part of processes of experience? If the experiential notions take the self as owner of experiences, they presuppose a minimal concept of the self to take that ownership. This kind of assumed ownership is ever so subtly apparent in Husserl's "ego", Sartre's "ipseity", Heidegger's "Jemeinigkeit", as well as Merleau-Ponty's "body-subject". The same goes for recent phenomenologists such as Gallagher and Zahavi (205)<sup>54</sup>, who consider more complex forms of self development in social contexts. Despite their refined and insightful reflections, which I cannot discuss here, both assume what they call a *core self*, a sense of experiential mineness, as the necessary condition for the social development of selfhood. The decisive difference with my view is – similar to the difference with narrative versions – that I do not presuppose any minimal conception of self, but view the self as the product, or more exactly, intentional effect of social experience.

I take this conception of selfhood to be an answer to Masolo's challenge to demonstrate the social basis of selfhood. Again, African philosophers have not, to the best of my knowledge, articulated and defended with any thoroughness a social conception of selfhood as I have tried to do. In-

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<sup>54</sup> See also, for instance, Zahavi in Fuchs, T., Sattel, H., Henningsen, P (Eds.). 2010: 6-7, 19.

stead, as far as I can see the literature confines itself to the development of moral reflections on communitarian views of *personhood*. My attempt has been to fill this gap.

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So, are Africans different? Yes they are. There is something that it is like to be an African. Africans are different like Chinese, Americans, Germans and Arabians are different. They are different, because to be human means to be socially conditioned. In short, subjectivity is constituted by sociality. I agree with Masolo's thesis of the social basis of subjectivity and accepted what I take to be Masolo's challenge to render the social basis of subjectivity stronger than it is typically done in phenomenology or philosophy of mind. I did not go to the forest, thus I cannot be an African. To be an African human being, I need to be socially conditioned in the kind of local and cultural setting that we typically call "African". To be human means inevitably to belong to a particular community and culture. How I experience and what I become because of my experience will be directed by my context and culture. "Wo ho" – to be is to be at some place. It does not matter whether I am bilingual or bicultural, or a cosmopolitan trotter of the global village, I shall always inhabit and be affected by a local community and cultural context. I can go to Africa and live with as well as adopt the life style of a particular African community. But my tongue will forever betray me, and even if not, if I think I am completely African, the community will ever so subtly convey to me the contrary. They might not exclude me, but they will never completely include me – I have not been in their forest. Of course I cannot, as it were, be an African "human", but I can choose to see "myself" as an African. I am indeed free to choose to live as an African. This freedom of self-ascription sets me free to go through any forest and become any person I want to be. There is something that it is like to be an African that I cannot be. But there is something it is like to choose to be an African. That I can be.

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# Two ‘Normative’ Conceptions of Personhood

by Kevin Gary Behrens

*Abstract:* Two ‘Normative’ Conceptions of Personhood. The account of an African notion of personhood given by Dismas Masolo initially appears to share similar characteristics with the Western normative notion of personhood typically appealed to in bioethics. I argue that these two notions are in fact very distinct, and show how they differ. I consider whether either of these two conceptions of personhood is more valid than the other, concluding that neither is, and that retaining both, whilst clearly distinguishing between them, can only enrich our moral philosophical reasoning and ethical discourse.

*Résumé:* Deux Conceptions ‘Normatives’ de la Personnalité. Le compte d’une notion africaine de la personnalité donnée par Dismas Masolo apparaît d’abord de partager des caractéristiques similaires à la notion normative occidentale de la personnalité à laquelle la bioéthique fait appel. Je démontre que ces deux notions sont en effet très distinctes, et montre en quoi elles diffèrent. Je considère si l’une des deux conceptions de la personnalité est plus valable que l’autre, et concluent qu’aucune n’est, et que les retenir, tout en distinguant clairement entre eux, ne peut qu’enrichir notre raisonnement philosophique morale et discours éthique.

*Key words:* personhood, bioethics, African conception of personhood, moral status, normative ethics, abortion.

*Mots-clés:* personnalité, bioéthique, conception africaine de la personnalité, statut moral, éthique normative, l’avortement

## **Introduction**

Making a distinction between biological membership of the human species and personhood is not unique to African thought, at least not in ethical (and particularly, bioethical) discourse. The question of what exactly constitutes personhood as something distinct from merely being a mem-

ber of the species *homo sapiens* has been central to many important philosophical debates in the fields of bioethics, animal ethics and environmental ethics, for instance. Thus the claim that ‘...[b]eing a person and being a human being are not the same thing’ (Masolo 2010: 154) ought not to sound that strange or unfamiliar to philosophers. Even the idea that we are ‘...born humans but become persons’ (Masolo 2010: 13) has a familiar ring. As far back as 1972, Joseph Fletcher argued for a number of necessary criteria to establish personhood: criteria that excluded not just fetuses, but even infants – arguably for the first few years of their lives – from personhood (Macklin 1983: 38). Peter Singer has also denied that new-born human babies are persons: ‘Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons’ (Singer 1979: 122). For these theorists, the capabilities or characteristics that they claim are necessary to establish personhood, are not possessed by human infants. They too suggest that babies are not persons, and will only become persons at a later point in their development: they may be born as humans, but they will need to develop into personhood.

If both Western bioethicists and some African philosophers make a distinction between being a mere human biologically and ‘personhood’ as something that is attained by humans after some process of maturation, why should we think that there is anything particularly distinctive about the notion of personhood in African thought? Yet, D.A. Masolo apparently agrees with Kwasi Wiredu that an African notion of personhood ‘...makes it the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory’ (Masolo 2010: 135). Two full chapters of *Self and Community in a Changing World* are dedicated to characterising this African notion, which is indicative of the central place personhood is taken to fill in African philosophy. Masolo asserts that there is an African conception of personhood that is not only distinct from Western notions, but is also foundational and characteristic of African philosophical thought. He and Wiredu are not alone in making such claims. Similar assertions are made by other African theorists, such as Godfrey Tangwa (2000), Panteleon Iroegbu (n.d.) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984).

Thus, despite the apparent parallels between the African and the Western bioethical notions of personhood, African theorists insist that they are distinct from each other in very important ways. In this article, I seek to clarify this distinction. I argue that, despite the fact that both African philosophers and Western theorists make a distinction between merely being human and being persons, the respective conceptions of personhood itself are very different from each other. What personhood is taken to mean in African thought is nothing like what it is understood to be by Western bioethicists. A failure to recognise the fundamental distinction between these two conceptions of personhood could lead to serious and even dangerous confusion, and result in Africans and Westerners talking past one another.

In seeking to clarify this distinction, in the following section, I firstly distinguish both of these normative conceptions of personhood from some of the other ways in which the notion of personhood is used in everyday language and philosophy. In section 3, I give an account of the Western normative notion of personhood, as employed primarily by bioethicists. In section 4, I characterise an African normative conception of personhood, and distinguish it from the bioethical notion. Finally, in section 5, I consider whether either of these two normative conceptions of personhood is more valid than the other, ultimately arguing that they are both important and make a valuable contribution to our ethical discourse and moral reasoning.

### ***Two 'normative' conceptions of personhood***

The term 'personhood' is used in many different ways, both in our everyday use of language and in philosophy. In ordinary conversation, personhood is often taken to mean something akin to individual identity: one might say that a strong attack on one's character is perceived as an affront to one's very personhood. Employed in this way, one's 'personhood' is synonymous with one's 'person', and is related to one's sense of oneself

as a unique individual. By contrast, personhood is also often taken as an attribute that distinguishes human persons from other beings, such as animals. Here the focus is on a class of beings (persons) who share a set of characteristics that distinguish them from other classes of beings.

A similar distinction is found in how personhood is used philosophically in the West. Sometimes it denotes the development of the self or individual identity, and in other cases it is also employed to distinguish a class of persons from other beings. These two notions can also be conflated: for instance, it can be argued that what distinguishes persons from other beings is that they are capable of conceiving themselves as having a unique self or personal identity. Personhood has variously been treated as a metaphysical, ontological or normative notion in Western philosophy.

Turning to African notions of personhood, in everyday African thought a basic distinction is made between persons and animals and other beings. Yet, there is little in African accounts of personhood that correlates with the Western notion of individual personal identity or selfhood. Given the strong emphasis on communitarian thinking in Africa, this is perhaps unsurprising. Personhood is nonetheless also used in different senses by African theorists, too. Polycarp Ikuenobe distinguishes between what he calls a 'descriptive metaphysical' and a 'normative' philosophical conception of personhood:

A metaphysical account of personhood may seek to analyse the essential ontological make-up of a person, examining, for instance, whether he or she is essentially material or immaterial, or whether he or she has one or two essential natures. Analyses of the nature of the mind and body, and the relationship between them, are efforts to give metaphysical accounts of personhood... However, it is the normative and not the metaphysical idea of personhood that is germane to African communal traditions, as personhood is a status earned by meeting certain community standards, including the ability to take on prescribed responsibilities that are believed to define personhood. (Ikuenobe 2006: n.p.).

Ikuenobe's analysis is insightful. He characterises what he regards as the

more ‘germane’ conception of personhood in African thought as being normative in nature. The Western conception of personhood that I am interested in this article might similarly be described as normative. Both are essentially moral philosophical notions. My project in this paper is limited to a comparison of two normative notions of personhood: the Western conception commonly appealed to in bioethical discourse, and the African notion described by Ikuenobe as being ‘...germane to African communal traditions’ and by Masolo as being ‘...the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory’ (Masolo 2010: 135).

I have already pointed out some similarities between these two normative conceptions of personhood, but, what essentially distinguishes both from other notions is that they are normative in nature, and are employed as moral philosophical constructs. In both cases the term ‘personhood’ is used to denote some morally relevant status attributed to those who might be identified as persons. What I will show in what follows is these two normative conceptions of personhood are completely distinct, and that they should not be conflated or confused with each other.

### ***The Western bioethical normative conception of personhood***

I begin by giving an account of the Western notion of personhood in order to be able to distinguish it from the African view. The conception of personhood prevalent in the Western bioethics literature, in particular, is related to the notion of moral status or standing. Persons are thought to have a special moral status that entails that we ought to treat them differently from non-persons. Tristram Engelhardt explains that on this approach to personhood, *special* status belongs to persons, not to mere humans. ‘Morally competent humans have a central moral standing not possessed by human fetuses or even young children... It is persons who are the constituents of the secular moral community’ (Engelhardt 1996: 135). Ruth Maklin, in a survey of the bioethics literature, claims:

Almost all writings in this vein are set within a particular context in

bioethics in which a determination of personhood is perceived as necessary for resolving vexing moral problems... The main contexts are those surrounding the beginning and end of life; abortion and withholding or terminating life support in a range of cases involving neurological damage, dementing illness and comatose states (Macklin 1983: 36-7).

This Western bioethical notion of personhood thus conceives of entities as being either persons or non-persons. Persons are those who possess the necessary capabilities or properties to be identified as such; and moral agents have a different set of obligations towards persons. Typically, for instance, taking the life of a person is regarded as a more serious wrong than taking the life of a non-person.<sup>55</sup>

What exactly the defining differences are between persons and non-persons is, of course, what the debate centres around. Some theorists set the bar for personhood very high, requiring self-consciousness (Tooley 1976), consciousness, sentience, reasoning, self-directed activity, communication and / or self-awareness (Warren 1975). Joseph Fletcher, one of the first bioethicists to argue for a distinction between biological humanity and personhood, identifies a large number of distinguishing criteria for personhood, including a sense of time and of a past and future, relationality, curiosity, concern for others and neocortical functioning (Macklin 1983:47). Others set a far lower standard, with John Noonan claiming that being conceived by human parents is all that is required for

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<sup>55</sup> This is not to suggest that that some Western theorists do not conceive of personhood as something that admits of degrees. So, for instance, it might be claimed that a fetus is less of a person than a two year old baby, who in turn is less of a person than a normal adult, who might be said to be a full person. Even where this is the case, though, a distinction is still drawn between the moral duties owed to 'full persons' and those owed to 'lesser persons'. Full persons have more moral claims on us than lesser persons. Here the significant moral distinction is between 'full persons' and 'lesser persons', rather than 'persons' and 'non-persons', but the distinction still works to grant a different kind of moral status to those clearly in the one category rather than the other.

a being to be a person (Macklin 1983:41). On this end of the spectrum, it is even argued that there is no need to make any distinction between being biologically human and being a person. It is not necessary for me to cover the full range of diverse views on what constitutes personhood in this literature, nor to examine their ethical implications. What is important is to highlight that this Western bioethical conception of personhood is meant to do the work of differentiating between two kinds of moral patients, towards whom our moral duties are different: persons and non-persons, or alternatively, 'full persons' and 'lesser persons'. It is a notion related to the moral standing of other entities and to what we owe them morally.

### ***The African normative conception of personhood***

The African normative conception of personhood described by Masolo is an entirely different thing. It also distinguishes between persons and mere biological human beings, but on completely different grounds. It is significant that the Masolo/Wiredu account not only represents a distinct conception of personhood, it also identifies this notion as being so fundamental to African philosophical thought that it could be said to be the key to what is different about African philosophy: one great distinguishing feature of African thought (Masolo 210: 138). This is a strong claim and, as such, it warrants careful attention. It is not as though we are dealing here just with some conception one will find in African philosophy, this is a conception that is said to play a fundamental, defining role in African thought. On the basis of this strong claim, it is clearly important to identify how this notion of personhood differs from that of Western bioethics. I now turn to trying to delineate this difference.

The key to this distinction, as I understand it, lies in the claim that 'the project of becoming a person is always incomplete' (Masolo 2010: 13). So, herein lies the rub: whatever an African notion of personhood entails, it is not an attribute something either has or does not have. This notion

does not seek to draw a distinguishing line between persons and non-persons. If no-one ever fully attains personhood, as those who hold this position seem to suggest, then personhood is not something an entity either possesses or does not, and full personhood is an ideal towards which one strives rather than a status that can be obtained. It is not simply a matter of distinguishing persons from non-persons; it is a matter of how much of a person one is.

Another important clue as to the meaning of personhood in African thought is provided by Masolo, when he describes the process of becoming a person in terms of a developing competency acquired through associating with others with whom we share a mutual dependency:

This process of depending on others for the tools that enable us to associate with them on a growing scale of competence is the process that makes us into persons. In other words, we become persons through acquiring and participating in the socially generated knowledge of norms and actions we learn to live by in order to impose humaneness on our humaneness (Masolo 2010: 155).

Thus, the process of becoming a person is one in which the quality of humaneness is added to our basic humanity, as we gradually acquire competency as moral agents. Since humaneness is commonly understood as exhibiting kindness, mercifulness and compassion, Masolo's account suggests that personhood, in African thought, is probably best understood in terms of acquiring virtue. This is supported by Ifeanyi Menkiti who also describes acquiring personhood in African thought as a process (Menkiti 1984: 173). He claims that personhood is an attribute each individual should strive to develop maximally; something more like a goal we should seek to attain than a status we either possess or do not possess:

...the African view reaches ... for what might be described as a maximal definition of the person. As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation

and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term (Menkiti 1984: 173).

Menkiti's association of the term 'excellencies' with personhood also implies that the becoming a person is essentially related to developing virtue. Thus, the African conception of personhood could be thought to propose a theory of ethics that brings to mind what Western philosophy calls 'perfectionism': Persons should seek to develop a good or virtuous nature in order to become true or fully moral persons. Thaddeus Metz explains this conception of a person by likening it to the Yiddish notion of a 'mensch', a person of high moral character, basically, a good person (Metz 2007).

By now it ought to be clear that the Western bioethical normative conception of personhood and the African notion are completely distinct. Another way of expressing this distinction is to consider the object of the focus of the term 'personhood'. In Western thought, personhood is concerned with the status of moral *patients*, whereas the African approach focuses on the character of a person as a moral *agent*. Tangwa rejects the Western emphasis on '...criteria for personhood that would clearly segregate those entities worthy of moral consideration from those without or with less moral worth' (Tangwa 2000: 40) in favour of a view of personhood that establishes

...human persons as moral agents; carrying the whole weight of moral obligations, responsibilities and duties on their shoulders... [T]he morality of an action or procedure is to be determined from the standpoint of the agent rather than that of the patient (the recipient of action)... What the attributes of self-consciousness, rationality, and freedom of choice do... is load the heavy burden of moral liability, culpability, and responsibility on the shoulders of their possessor. Human persons are not morally *special*, they are morally *liable*. (Tangwa 2000: 40).

Menkiti makes a similar distinction when he describes the Western view of the person as a ‘minimal definition’ that focuses on establishing the status of persons as moral patients, to be contrasted with a ‘maximal definition’ of the person according to which personhood is essentially a measure of the virtue of the moral agent (Menkiti 1984: 73).

Clarifying this distinction is important in order to ensure that Western and African philosophers do not end up talking at cross-purposes. An African claim that an individual’s personhood is diminished should not be taken to imply that such an individual has diminished status as a moral patient, and can be treated with less moral consideration. That a new-born human baby is thought not to have developed much by way of personhood would not, on the African definition, provide any grounds for attributing it less moral worth as an object of our moral concern. Tangwa expresses this clearly:

...the difference between, say, a mentally retarded individual or an infant and a fully self-conscious, mature, rational, and free individual do not entail, in the African perception, that such a being falls outside the ‘inner sanctum of secular morality’ and can or should be treated with less moral consideration. (Tangwa 2000: 42).

The important distinction between these two normative notions of personhood is that in the Western tradition it is essentially understood in terms of the moral status of patients, whereas it relates to the degree of virtue of moral agents in the African tradition.

### ***Is either of these notions of personhood more valid than the other?***

Having made the distinction between these two normative notions of personhood clear, I now consider whether there are reasons for thinking that either notion is more valid than the other, and whether either should be rejected in favour of the other. I begin by considering whether the African

notion of personhood should be preferred over the Western bioethical notion. At least one African philosopher, Tangwa, asserts that the Western bioethical notion of personhood is erroneous, at least in terms of the conclusions it comes to in ascribing different moral status to some humans than to others. He claims that the African conception of personhood, which focusses on the person as moral agent, rather than moral patient ‘...seems to accord better with our ordinary moral intuitions and sensibilities and is thus more appropriate for non-discriminatory morality in general’ (Tangwa 2000: 43). He expresses his main thesis thus:

The central thought I want to advance is that the Western conception of a human person, as a category or subset of human being, is appropriate only for the ascription of moral responsibility, liability, and culpability rather than for the ascription of moral worth, desert, eligibility, or acceptability into the moral community made up, as it necessarily is, of both moral agents and patients (2000: 42-3).

This represents no less than an outright rejection of the Western bioethical conception of personhood, certainly as it has hitherto been put to use in moral philosophy. This is a strong challenge which is surely deserving of a hearing and a response.

Tangwa’s proposal that it is only appropriate to identify a sub-set of human beings as persons, when persons are understood as those capable of moral agency, and personhood is not at the same time taken to confer different moral standing on those who qualify as persons, would have the effect of making the bioethical conception of personhood far less contentious. Indeed, he rejects it exactly because he finds some its conclusions and implications morally objectionable. He clearly disapproves of non-therapeutic abortion and organ transplantation (Tangwa 200: 41) and claims:

Intuitively, from the point of view of the common sensibilities and practices of human beings in most societies the world over, it would appear that a human infant or a mentally or physically handicapped human being deserves if anything greater moral consideration than a paradigmatic *per-*

*son* as [defined by Western bioethicists] (Tangwa 2000: 40).

I am unconvinced that such a broad intuitive consensus, in fact, exists. Perhaps Tangwa means to appeal to a moral intuition that the especially vulnerable or powerless ought to be given special protection. This should not so much be understood as their being deserving of greater moral consideration, as their being deserving of different moral consideration, the kind of moral consideration that recognises the special needs of the vulnerable as morally significant. But, to support the idea that we should give special consideration to the needs of the vulnerable does not, by way of example, depend on a claim that a severely mentally handicapped vulnerable human being has the same moral status as a human being who is capable of rational thought, moral agency, and self-consciousness. Indeed, the argument that we ought to treat such a handicapped human being differently, perhaps with greater compassion, could be strengthened by the recognition that such a being's moral status is different.

It is possible that the use of phrases such as 'lesser moral status' and 'full personhood' by some bioethicists has damaged the credibility of this position: such phrases suggest a quantitative hierarchical ordering of moral status, presumably with persons at the apex. This might be taken to suggest that persons are morally more important than other beings. I think it is unfortunate that some bioethicists have used language suggesting that moral status is a quantitative rather than a qualitative notion. If all that a distinction between persons or 'full persons' and other beings is meant to do is explain why our moral obligations towards such categories of beings is qualitatively different, then the distinction is less problematic. It seems obvious to me that there are good reasons for thinking that a human fetus of 4 weeks has a different moral status to that of a normally functioning human adult. This does not, on its own, justify non-therapeutic abortion, but it does explain why we ordinarily regard the deliberate killing of an adult human as murder, while we are less inclined to describe abortion as murder.

Be that as it may, there are compelling grounds for retaining the bio-

ethical notion of personhood. It is a useful theoretical construct that supports some of our basic moral intuitions without having to rely on obviously speciesist considerations. We do ordinarily think that autonomous, rational, self-conscious beings, capable of moral agency (roughly what bioethicists often denote as persons) require different moral treatment than beings without these attributes. That is why most of us would think we ought to save the life of an adult human being before that, of say, a dog, presuming we could only save one or the other. It is morally more attractive to justify this on the grounds of the specific attributes of persons, than on the speciesist grounds that those with human DNA require special treatment merely because they belong to the human species. Furthermore, where we are placed in the difficult position of having to decide whether to continue with a pregnancy, knowing that the child to be born will never have any of the attributes of personhood, or of whether to remove a person in a persistent vegetative state from life-support, this distinction is exceptionally significant and helpful. The Western bioethical notion of personhood enriches our ethical discourse, helps clarify some difficult ethical issues, is preferable to speciesist conceptions, and should therefore be retained.

I am unaware of any theorist who has directly challenged the validity of the African normative notion of personhood, *per se*. This might be attributable to the fact that this conception is not widely known outside of African philosophical circles. It is nonetheless reasonable to consider whether or not this notion has merit. Certainly, this notion of personhood does not lead to highly contentious moral conclusions in quite the same way that the bioethical notion does. If it is to be challenged, then it is likely that it would be questioned mainly because of its unfamiliarity or strangeness, at least to Western thinkers. However, suitably explained, there does not seem to be anything intrinsically unsound about conceiving of personhood as a measure of the moral virtue of the agent. Clearly, this use of the term 'personhood' is distinct from the Western bioethical notion, as I have already argued. But, this should not be taken as grounds for rejecting it. Indeed, this notion of personhood is theoretically attractive in its own right. In turning the focus from the status of moral patients

to the moral stature of the agent, it draws attention to our moral obligations and responsibilities, especially with regard to our relationships with others.

I think that both of these notions of personhood have their merits, and retaining both can only enrich and deepen our ethical discourse. Neither is better or more valuable than other. Clearly, there is the danger that unless the distinctions between these two notions are clearly understood, confusion would be inevitable. But, it is possible to clarify the distinction, as I have attempted to do in this article. And, on the basis of such clarification, Western and African ethicists ought to be able to engage with one another in a way which can only be of benefit to moral philosophy.

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# Personhood: Social Approval or a Unique Identity?

by Mpho Tshivhase

*Abstract:* Personhood: Social Approval or a Unique Identity? In this article, I assess the African view of personhood and hence am interested in evaluating the role that moral norms and social expectations play in the process of cultivating personhood. I draw the conclusion about the African view of personhood that it is too focused on the other and thus not compatible with human excellences associated with individual uniqueness. I illustrate my claim by critically engaging with the way D.A. Masolo articulates and defends the African view of personhood.

*Résumé:* Personnalité: Approbation Sociale ou Identité Unique? Dans cet article, j'évalue la perspective africaine de la personnalité. Je suis donc intéressé à évaluer le rôle que les normes morales et les attentes sociales jouent dans le processus de cultiver la personnalité. La conclusion que je tire à propos de la perspective africaine de la personnalité est qu'elle est trop centrée sur l'autrui et qu'elle n'est donc pas compatible avec les excellences humaines associées à l'unicité individuelle. J'illustre mon argument en engageant de manière critique la façon dont D.A. Masolo articule et défend la perspective africaine de la personnalité.

*Keywords:* Personhood, human excellence, self, community, autonomy, authenticity, uniqueness

*Mots-clés:* Personnalité, excellence humaine, le soi, communauté, autonomie, authenticité, unicité

## **Introduction**

A popular understanding of personhood appeals to five criteria to delineate what a person is. A person is, first and foremost, distinct from a thing. Heidegger's notion of Dasein's Being-in-the-world is viewed as one way of distinguishing persons from mere objects (Hall 1992: 88). Another

way of outlining the distinction involves characterizing a person as an individual whose existence is not limited to her biological make-up. In other words, a person is not just a human being (Masolo 2010). Persons are also, in the Kantian sense, valuable as ends in themselves and not simply means to an end. Another feature of personhood involves a person's claim to legal rights and duties. Finally, persons are embedded in societies within which they have functions and roles to play (Hall 1992: 88). The African view of personhood is not directly related to most of the criteria mentioned above, at least not in the view as championed by Kwasi Wiredu (1992: 199-200), whose views are also articulated and defended by Masolo in his book *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010). Masolo, being a proponent of the African view of personhood, endorses personhood that is communalistic and morally loaded. Viewed in this way, personhood is realized when one conducts her life in a way that is morally virtuous and, so, humanly excellent.

In this article, I am mostly concerned to assess the African view of personhood and hence am also interested in evaluating the role morality plays in the process of cultivating personhood. I want to use this article to draw a conclusion about the African view of personhood, namely, that it is too focused on the other and thus not compatible with values associated with individual uniqueness. I will illustrate my claim by looking at the way that Masolo articulates and defends the African view.

I will proceed as follows: in the first section I will contextualize Masolo's view on personhood. I will use the second section to discuss what I understand to be one major way that Masolo conceives of personhood, the 'morality model', and illustrate my objection by appealing to the value of authenticity. In the third section, I will explain another model of personhood that Masolo discusses, which I have dubbed 'the expectations model', and will criticise it for limiting one's autonomy. In the final section, I will recommend uniqueness as a model of personhood that avoids and explains the problems faced by Masolo's morality and expectations models. The conception of uniqueness I have in mind is grounded in the values of authenticity and autonomy. I want to show that a theory of per-

sonhood that prioritizes personal interests while also encouraging moral discipline is more worthy of pursuit than the African view, which prioritizes only a community's interests. In short, I will argue against the African view of personhood, at least as articulated by Masolo, and will advocate uniqueness as an alternative model of human excellence that redresses the imbalance between community's interests and personal interests.

### ***An African view of personhood***

Masolo approaches personhood by analysing some African languages or certain words in them. In doing so, he hopes, in part, to make better sense of the relation between personhood and society in characteristic African cultures. His opinion is that people have an awareness of their status as human beings, but for them to cultivate their awareness into that of personhood they must be part of a community, as personhood is a socially developed way of being. This point of view relies on the perspective that we are born humans who can develop to become persons, where that process of becoming a person is always incomplete and includes the possibility of one failing at it (Masolo 2010; Menkiti 2004: 326). As I will show in this section, Masolo's African view of personhood stands in direct distinction from the Western view, which singles out one particular feature of an individual, such as the capacity for intelligence, to use as the defining feature of personhood (Menkiti 1984: 171).

There is a notable distinction that should be kept in mind when thinking about Masolo's discussion on personhood. This distinction is between the nature of personhood itself and the means to acquiring it. Masolo does not make this distinction clear. However, I think the models used to address personhood as an end in itself and the means to personhood are different, even though they might overlap in some respects. In order to make my point with clarity, I have separated the two questions regarding personhood, i.e., 'what is personhood?' and 'how does one acquire person-

hood?'. Defining personhood itself, according to Masolo, is a matter of adhering to moral principles which are dominated by a concern for the well-being of others or conforming to community's expectations, while acquiring personhood involves being part of a community and participating in socializing processes. Masolo often weaves the meaning of personhood and the means to personhood together, but I think that they each have an independent logic and so I will discuss them separately. It is the question of what personhood is that interests me in this paper, and so I will pay attention only to the plausible characterizations of it.

With regard to the nature of personhood, Masolo supports a typically African view instead of the Western view as characterized by Kant. Kant's view, as Masolo interprets it, defines personhood by appealing to an individual's rationality and perceives persons as atomistic entities with mechanistic minds (Masolo 2010: 139; Menkiti 2004: 326). Furthermore, Kant depicts the relation of a person to the world as autonomous and disinterested (Masolo 2010: 158). In short, a person is a rational subject of understanding. Masolo supports Wiredu's African view because

[w]hile Kant starts with human nature as phenomenologically complete in its (metaphysical) constitution at least in the domain of understanding, Wiredu seeks to establish the view that such defining characteristics of being human are not endowed in humans by a force that exists outside an already existing environment of the deliberate actions of other humans, namely the socializing processes out of which the actualization of human capacities emerges (Masolo 2010: 138).

In other words, Kant thinks what makes humans genuinely human lies in their rational psychology, while Wiredu and many other sub-Saharan thinkers maintain that it lies in the activities that take place within a community; "...personhood is a conception of an individual who through mature reflection and steady motivation is able to carve out a reasonably ample livelihood for self, 'family' and a potentially wide group of kin dependants, besides making substantial contributions to the well-being of

society at large” (Wiredu 1992: 200). In African thought, personhood is a communal process.

African conceptions of personhood cite group solidarity as a central feature of a traditional society (Menkiti 2004: 324). Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, central figures in the African debate on personhood, argue differently about the extent of the community’s power in the definition of a person. Menkiti argues that the community wholly defines personhood (Menkiti 1984: 171). Menkiti’s view is characterized by John Mbiti’s “I am because we; and since we are, therefore I am”, which Menkiti accepts as the “cardinal point in understanding the African view of man (Mbiti 1969: 108-109). Gyekye criticizes Menkiti for giving in to the “...temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person and thus obfuscating our understanding of the real nature of the person” (Gyekye 1992: 106). With the aim to collapse the tension between the self and community, Gyekye develops a more flexible view, the moderate or restricted communitarian view, which accommodates communal and autonomous individual values and practices (Gyekye 1992: 106-113, 115-116, 120-121). African thought presents different conceptions of personhood, but most theorists are in agreement that personhood is largely if not exclusively a communal matter (Kaphagawani 2006: 332, 337-338).

The implications that arise from the African view defy, according to Masolo, the boundaries of metaphysics and epistemology and, to a large extent, ethics in the restrictive Kantian sense which illustrates the autonomous status of a person as the measure of an individual’s grasp of reality grounded in her rational capacity to deliberate on moral and political ends (Masolo 2010: 13, 141, 158-159). This defiance is, more specifically, indicative of a normative approach to understanding persons that is favoured by Masolo. The African view of personhood characterizes persons as products of their community where their personhood comes through learning and participating in certain societal norms, roughly either adhering to the communally beneficial moral guiding principles or conforming to the society’s expectations (Masolo 2010: 155). It is this

communally oriented definition of personhood that Masolo finds attractive and revealing.

I am going to argue against this African view of personhood, which is descriptive and evaluative; it describes the criteria central to what personhood is and it evaluates the acceptable moral attitude and conduct that an individual should display in the interest of the community's welfare. I will start my discussion of the African view of what personhood is by looking at what I call the 'morality model', one of two major ways that Masolo can be read as conceiving of personhood from a sub-Saharan perspective. I will discuss Masolo's characterization of morality which, when coupled with a demonstration of compassion, he believes to be the fundamental element of human excellence that is characteristic of a desirable personhood. I will illustrate that such human excellence does not sufficiently include the realization of a personal self and neglects an individual's inner being. My view is that moral virtues are not always personally fulfilling, especially when they move an individual to suppress his own interests.

### ***The Morality model of personhood***

The moral principle that should ideally guide an individual is aimed at improving and maintaining the welfare of her community, in Masolo's view. Herein an individual's conduct should not only avoid harming others, but should also help others to advance their wellbeing. Masolo's moral guiding principle states that "at all times in our conduct we ought to manifest concern for the interests of others" (Masolo 2010: 172). That is to say, when one makes decisions or behaves in a certain way, she must always do so in a way that improves the welfare of others instead of hindering it. One must never act to ensure merely individual interests, as this would be selfish in a way that does not reflect a desirable condition of the moral relationship between a person and a community. Personhood, then, involves a kind of human excellence that is characterized by the morally

virtuous conduct that one displays within her community when interacting with other people. Masolo promotes the morality model of personhood in order to reveal appropriate principles that should ideally govern the way that individuals treat others.

The appropriate moral principle for personhood is usefully illustrated by the kind of attitude one should avoid. The attitude that Masolo finds unattractive for personhood is called ‘juok’ in the Luo language of Eastern Africa. Juok is the antisocial attitude which can be demonstrated by behaviour that is intentionally aimed at harming others. Juok is also a quality that invokes moral blame (Masolo 2010: 200). “Juok is the darkening and unrestrained capacity to commit evil” so that anyone who is charged of juok is regarded a well-reasoning but evil agent who acts with an immoral motive (Masolo 2010: 202-204). Juok is a deviation from desirable social standing as it does not build proper relations with others (Masolo 2010: 205). Such a deviant individual is called a ‘*jajuok*’ (*ibid*).

A *jajuok* is someone who practices *juok* or has *juok* qualities. A *jajuok* is a loner who does not care much about moral integrity (Masolo 2010: 207). The character of a *jajuok* is secretive and opposes the virtues of mutual sympathy. As such, a *jajuok* is rejected and often shamed by society. To become a person, humans must refrain from practicing *juok*; to cultivate human excellence they must adopt an attitude that encourages mutual dependency and sharing with others, as this is the moral means to creating, reproducing and holding the community together (Masolo 2010: 217). Morality is presented here as standards of humanly excellent conduct that make up criteria for the survival and wellbeing of others (Masolo 2010: 172). Moral principles are said to develop when people comprehend the needs of others as equal to their own (*ibid*). Moral principles are meant to guide us “from a false sense of autonomy and a fixation on the self to the realization of mutual dependency on others” (*ibid*). Such a fixation on the self is deemed undesirable and is aligned with the behaviour of a ‘*jajuok*’. So, in order to cultivate human excellence, or personhood, in the African tradition, individuals must set aside their personal interests and a sense of self-governance, and replace these with mu-

tual dependency and sharing. In this way, they avoid the immoral behaviour of a *jajuok* and thus not only refrain from harming others, but also go out of their way to help them.

Masolo is right to assert that individuals should focus on improving their moral character. It is generally accepted that morality involves at least not doing harm to others. I have no issue with the moral prevention of harm to others. What I have an issue with is the idea that, to be real persons, we must place the concern for the well-being of others *at all times* before our own. Masolo's idea of morality is exclusively focused on the other, and so it presents a tension between personal and communal interests. Morality, here, is dominated by the concern for the interests of others and, in so doing, it neglects the personal self – as I will argue below. I, like Susan Wolf (1982: 424), think there is something undesirable about the pursuit of moral excellence when it dominates a person in a manner that requires a lack of or denial of the existence of an identifiable personal self.

We often understand the personal self to have some passions or interests and an appreciation for certain talents and skills and other activities that may lack moral motivations (Wolf 1982: 422). One could pursue a doctoral degree in Linguistics, or have a keen passion for collecting rare and expensive artworks, and derive fulfilment from pursuing such interests. Such interests are not immoral and they do not harm anyone, but they also do not necessarily add anything to another's life. Nonetheless, entertaining these personal interests can invoke guilt in an individual whose life is dominated by the concern for others. Such an individual would opt to suppress these personal interests in order to cultivate moral virtues necessary for Masolo's conception of personhood. Masolo's view does not concern itself with the kind of life that is led in an individual's interest but with the interests that would be desirable for an individual to adopt for the good of society. Personhood, then, is a matter of living a life that is good for others, the underlying assumption being that only people who are committed to the welfare of others live fulfilled lives that are admirable.

On the contrary, I think that often a life exclusively committed to improving the welfare of others with a lack of personal interests can be unusually empty and thus unattractive (Wolf 1982: 421). Consider the case of Mother Teresa. She lived a life of the kind of moral saint discussed by Susan Wolf. Mother Teresa lived a morally virtuous life but professed to feel agony and loneliness even though she lived and did good for the community (Van Biema 2007). She lived a life that resembled Wolf's 'rational moral saint' (1982: 424) who knowingly sacrifices her own interests for possible fear of damnation or at least guilt. Mother Teresa probably paid less attention to herself and her own welfare to avoid the risk of overriding her concerns for moral virtues. She was loyal to her moral duties towards others, yet she felt that her life was empty. The emptiness of her life makes a case for the view that what we admire about an individual is not merely her moral virtuosity and how we benefit from it; in addition, we admire an individual's personal excellences which resonate with her personal goals in addition to her sense of self. We often deem real people to include those who are less than morally perfect but have managed to achieve personal excellence, like the art connoisseur and the Linguistics major, with an acceptable level of morality (Wolf 1982: 423). My point is we should, sometimes, aim for personal excellence regardless of whether it improves other people's welfare or not.

A second but related objection to moral perfection as exhaustive of the best human life is that moral conduct and an agent's attitude are not always aligned, so that if we promote conduct over attitude we create inauthentic moralists, like Mother Teresa. Masolo asserts that morality is a matter of our virtuous conduct and it necessarily regulates our self-interested nature (Masolo 2010: 172). It is only when we act in a manner that illustrates evidence of our moral virtuosity that we can be regarded as having achieved human excellence. However, at times our actions and attitudes can clash. One could have developed an attitude disinclined to helping others. This person may have difficulty mastering compassion in the way Masolo asserts we should. For instance, such an individual may find it difficult to sacrifice his time to do charity work but hides this disinterest by doing charity work anyway – perhaps to maintain a good repu-

tation. In so doing, he does his bit to advance the lives of others, which, in Masolo's view, is good, although it could be bad in another, say, for driving people to develop socially approved public personas that are appropriate and private jajuok personas that are inappropriate. Although it is more harmful to herself than others, the clash between Mother Teresa's public and private personas is evident in her confession regarding her smile being "a mask...a cloak that covers everything" (Van Biema 2007: 2). A development and maintenance of personas is a clear indicator of inauthentic human excellence – something which Masolo's personhood seems not to take into consideration as it champions moral conduct that improves the welfare of others as, alone, that which matters.

In response, Masolo may say that Mother Teresa misunderstood the proper purpose and application of relational interdependency and the right way to cultivate moral personhood. When he speaks of prioritizing the welfare of community, perhaps he does not mean that one should, in literally every action, sacrifice one's wellbeing in order to ensure that of others. If anything, he may encourage Mother Teresa to find meaning in her life first before helping others, as an empty person cannot be maximally helpful to the society in the long run. He could reasonably argue that she could have done more for others over the long haul if she had led a personally meaningful life. If she had found meaning in her life before helping others, there would have been no development of a persona. A meaningful life seems to resolve both issues of neglect of personal excellence and of inauthenticity when invariably acting with moral aims. In sum, Masolo can argue that, in misunderstanding the workings of relational interdependency, Mother Teresa could not have developed her personhood all that well. In essence, we are better equipped to treat others morally and do more to help improve their lives when we first take care of ourselves, as we do when we find ourselves in a crashing plane; we first put an oxygen mask on ourselves in order to save the next person, such as our child.

Is a meaningful life, then, a precondition for helping others? I doubt that this is true. Extended loyalty to communal interests is detrimental to and

limits personal interests and the potential to pursue personal goods. It is implausible to think that Mother Teresa could have done more for others, if she had done more for herself first, since she had already gone beyond the call of duty in her compassionate deeds for others. The point I am making is that Mother Teresa seems to lack some personal goods and that these goods probably would not benefit the community.

Furthermore, to encourage people to pursue personal goals, but only for the sake of improving the lives of others, still points to the primacy of the community. I maintain that there are personal goods that are worthy of pursuit in themselves and not for others as I illustrated earlier with the Linguistics degree student and the art connoisseur. The solution to Mother Teresa's case does not lie in what she has to do for herself before she serves the community; it is a matter of what Mother Teresa should do in order to become whom she should be. Her becoming necessarily involves her ability to cultivate personal excellences that merit pursuit for their own sake. An ability to do this would minimize her need to develop personas to appear a saint in public while she is in turmoil. This process would not be about taking care of oneself so as to care for others; it would be about taking care of oneself for the good of oneself. What matters most would be her wellbeing in and of itself, and not for the community. The point is that meaning in life is not merely a means to helping others, but it is part of what it means to be conscious of the things that matter to oneself in the process of cultivating human excellence.

I believe that one should not always sacrifice one's personal self in the process of pursuing moral excellence. When moral virtues do little for an individual's well-being to an extent where an individual sacrifices her personal interests and starts to look more like a slave to society than an independent individual among other individuals, we have to concede that morality is not always of benefit to the inner self. Morality would be better suited for personhood if it was restructured to form only part of an individual's self-understanding instead of being a rite of passage to personhood wherein the individual could be mistaken for a mere means to society's welfare.

What I have done above is argue that morality is more beneficial to the community than it necessarily is to the person, and that a life lived in service of the interests of others is not as admirable as Masolo conceives of it. Part of this involved showing that human excellence is not always grounded in moral perfection. I referred to the two cases of Mother Teresa and the inauthentic moralist to illustrate my point. What is similar about these cases is that they are all motivated by moral intentions and perform moral actions, at least as Masolo construes them, yet they lack an identifiable personal self and integrity, constituents of being a genuine person.

### ***The eExpectations model of personhood***

So far I have explained Masolo's view of personhood, and have singled out morality as one of the models that he uses to articulate its nature. He views personhood as human excellence that is comprised of commitment to the welfare of others. I criticised the morality model for being unconcerned with interests good for the person and exclusively concerned with interests that are good for others. I illustrated that morality on its own is probably the wrong model for personhood, as it does not permit individuals to pursue personal forms of excellence, except insofar as they conduce to benefiting other people. I referred to Mother Teresa's case to dismiss the assumption that only morally virtuous people live admirable lives. I also argued that a life that is primarily concerned with the interests of others is not always authentic. In this section, I will turn my attention to the expectations model of personhood that I also find in Masolo's discussion of what personhood essentially is.<sup>56</sup> This model endorses conformity to society's expectations when cultivating personhood.

Fundamentally, I think that morality and abiding by expectations are not

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<sup>56</sup>When I discussed the 'expectations model' in conversation with Prof Masolo, he rejected it, but I find that it nonetheless is a natural way to read his text.

necessarily compatible, and, hence, I make the distinction between the two models. Although Masolo does not make this distinction, the logic of abiding by expectations and that of adopting moral excellence are not the same. One can be moral without conforming to expectations, like a homosexual human rights activist in a conservative society, and one can conform to expectations without being moral, like a funeral respected parlour owner who illegally sells body parts on a very willing black market. The two models are not necessarily consistent with each other, and even when put together I maintain that they do not really illustrate what a person is. The morality model encourages a life of service to the interests of others to an extent that threatens one's authenticity. The expectations model, in contrast, when followed hinders one's autonomy, and I will use this section to illustrate this point.

The expectations model of personhood is the view that personhood is constituted by fulfilling society's expectations of whom one should become. The society has norms regarding the kinds of persons humans should become and these involve a display of a positive public image that one may identify or be identified with. A positive public image is one that abides by the community's expectations. The person that the society expects one to be is determined by qualities, roles and capacities that the society can endow one with. The qualities, roles and capacities are meant to "enable a person to be known to be...the person he is supposed to be" (Masolo 2010:207). Becoming the person that the society expects one to be involves "adjusting one's conduct in accordance with known or assumed expectations of other members within any relational circuit" (Masolo 2010: 206). The expectations model is based on a framework where one's conduct is judged according to the evaluations by other members of the community to which one belongs. Masolo believes that the key to a society requires "people to recognize their place in the social network and to abide by the expectations that hold the network together" (Masolo 2010: 217). The person whom one is supposed to be is one who abides by the community's expectations, which typically function to keep the community united (Masolo 2010: 217). What the community often expects from its members is moral behaviour, but, as noted above, not all

expectations need have moral content. Communal unity grounded in moral or otherwise expected behaviour is the fundamental value of a community which is apparently, for Masolo, meant to justify the expectations that people should abide by.

The objections raised to the morality model are also relevant to the expectations model, i.e., the problems of neglect and inauthenticity. The model neglects the personal self and one's personal goals because people should abide by the expectations of others. The problem of inauthenticity comes up in situations where one has to abide by the society's expectations even if one does not necessarily agree with or endorse the rules and norms that one is expected to adhere to. Viewed in this way, the expectations model encourages people to live, not according to one's chosen mode of existence, but in accordance with the way other people believe you should conduct your life.

There is an additional problem that applies to the expectations model, which is the problem of autonomy. I think that adhering to the expectations model would tend to encourage individuals to suspend their autonomous judgement. People lend their subjectivity to collective beliefs and activities when they conform to the norms of the society. I find that the idea of conformity is an unattractive view of how to live, as one aspires to live a life that is not based on autonomous consideration of what is good for one's life, but rather fulfilling roles that are expected by one's community, in order to fulfill the principle of social unity. When a person lives according to a community's expectations, his subjectivity or first-personal concern and autonomy become limited. In abiding by the community's expectations, one restricts oneself and does not develop one's own autonomy since one simply does what others expect. A person lacking in autonomy is much like an emotionally abused woman who knows she is in a bad relationship but is still afraid to leave her partner, so much so that she constantly challenges herself to become the woman he expects her to be irrespective of the fact that he does not appreciate or respect her. Such an individual has no sense of self-governance. She is an example of what people should not aspire to become.

Masolo could, in response, argue that autonomy is a false sense of freedom that is not conducive to the principle of mutual dependency. Autonomy cannot be part of the structure of communal life which is governed by the norms of society that organise individuals in positions that are good for members of the society or keep the society united. Masolo could further argue that people who abide by expectations do not see themselves separate from the society within which their lives are embedded, which is a desirable trait. He could even invoke John Mbiti's well-known dictum – "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969: 108-109) to argue that unity cannot stem solely from autonomous conduct and that conforming to society's norms is part of what it really means to belong to a society. When one abides by society's expectations, one gains acceptance and so becomes part of something more meaningful than individual self-governance. Social unity could be seen as a value, and the ability to enhance as a value that enhances the meaning of an individual's life. Masolo could also argue that brutish behaviour, of the abusive sort, is a result of prizing individual autonomy. The kind of liberty that Masolo would endorse is the kind that is consistent only with creating a community, i.e., by uniting the people. His view of autonomy could be understood in terms of a freedom to act for the sake of social togetherness. This, as Robert Birt puts it, is a communal or social freedom, not a property that individuals possess on their own (Birt 2002: 87-88, 94-95).

However, I maintain that understanding freedom as the ability to act for others is not enough. The battered woman case cannot be solved by saying that freedom is an 'other' focused ethic, a mere ability to do what others would like us to do. We can hope that her husband, at some later point, will understand and exercise his freedom as Masolo conceives of it, but this does little to help the woman out of her situation. The woman has internalized the abuse and to point out that her freedom is externally derived – that someone else has to be free enough to act for her sake does not help her, nor does it truly unite her with her community, especially if she lives in a patriarchal community that expects her to be a good woman and to look only to her husband for love and protection. My point is that

the African view of freedom is not enough; there are other desirable forms of autonomy that would be neglected by the expectations model.

Furthermore, I think that self-governance does not presuppose isolation, and that an attractive kind of social unity is possible among autonomous individuals. A person is inescapably embedded in a community and can even join another community, say, through marriage, or even one that is entered into by choice. I think it is the capacity to choose for oneself that is limited by abiding to expectations. Autonomy affords one the space to choose what matters to one and such a choice can be made without necessarily exhibiting disregard for societal norms. A society whose norms and expectations are designed to be exempt from scrutiny does not encourage people to make sense of the world in their own way. A person should be able to exercise her self-governance in questioning the legitimacy and authority of societal expectations. People should understand cultivation of autonomy as a project that is not to be undertaken at the expense of the individual's sociability or with a disregard for the value of one's community, but as a project that should be undertaken in constant interrogation of the norms that are supposed to govern one's life, while nonetheless adhering to certain moral constraints. I think an individual can live autonomously with others.

In the next section I will present the uniqueness model of personhood and show how it avoids the pitfalls of the morality and expectations models. I will illustrate that where Masolo's models hinder authenticity and autonomy to benefit the society or to keep it united, the uniqueness model uses authenticity and autonomy to ground a kind of personhood that does not neglect an identifiable personal self and at the same time restrains individuals from treating others with harmful intent.

### ***The uniqueness model of personhood***

To this point I have discussed what personhood is by means of analysing Masolo's morality and expectations models, both of which place great

emphasis on the interests of the other. The main criticism I raised was that they both neglect the personal self by championing a life lived in servitude of the community and thus both models fail to recognise a person as an end in himself. I have indicated my dissatisfaction with Masolo's communitarian view of personhood and so I now use this section to suggest an agent-centred view of personhood. I think that Masolo's personhood theory has neglected this inner self by assuming that it will benefit from treating others well and by charging merely personal interests as immoral. I am interested in rescuing the inner self from obscurity in Masolo's campaign to do what is good for the society, and I think a uniqueness model of personhood is a good alternative to Masolo's morally loaded conception of personhood.

In my view, Masolo's models do a better job of explaining elements that ensure the wellbeing of a community as opposed to the wellbeing of a person. The society's wellbeing does not presuppose the person's wellbeing, at least not in its entirety. In the African view, personhood is a means by which a society secures the welfare of others. This means that a person is not viewed as an agent with intrinsic value. To be classified as an agent means that there are things that matter to you as a person; there are things in this world that have significance for an agent (Taylor 1985: 99) and a community's wellbeing need not be one of those things, at least not primarily so. A reading of Masolo gives one the impression that personal concern is undesirable as it neglects the community's well-being, and that the admirable life is solely one that is dominated by a concern for the interests of others, whether moral rules or social norms. I have argued above that such a life lacks autonomy and authenticity and that if we shift the primary focus from community to person we will find that a person's interests can have personal as well as social benefits. Uniqueness as a model of personhood does a better job of capturing the excellence of the self and community as it makes it possible for an individual to recognize and be recognized as an end and not a mere means to an end. I think such recognition is possible when one adopts a unique lifestyle, namely, one that is both authentic and autonomous.

A life is usually deemed authentic when it is led from the inside (Kymlicka 1988: 183). An authentic person is true to herself and accounts for her existence internally (Baugh 1988: 478-479; Cohen 1993: 114-115; Tshivhase 2010: 29-34). In other words, authenticity involves the self-understanding of the self in question. Authenticity implies discovering, developing and being faithful to one's true self, with a refusal to live according to an externally prescribed life plan to ensure that one achieves happiness and fulfillment (Reisert 2000: 307). In contrast with Masolo, an authentic life would not be dominated by the prescribed ideal of moral perfection or social conformity as a precondition for fostering personhood. Uniqueness, as I conceive it, is partly a matter of authentic self-awareness. It is this kind of self-awareness that is conducive to the exploration and realization of an identifiable personal self.

However, an authentic personal self is not good enough for oneself, if one lacks autonomous conduct. It is possible for one to be authentic in a way that lacks autonomy. One could rightfully claim to be an authentic member of a thieving gang wherein membership is terminated only by death. This could be genuinely chosen from one's inner self, but it would display an undesirable mode of life lacking autonomy since the gang member would be trapped unless he is willing to lose his life. One can surely not claim that such a life is good, for needs to be able to make alternative choices. I think autonomy is necessary for one to be in a position to choose well to ensure that one's authentic values are realized.

Autonomy, understood as a capacity to govern oneself, is one's ability to rule oneself free of dictation (Taylor 2005: 602). When understood as partially constituted by autonomy, uniqueness prevents that which is external to the self from becoming its source. In this way a person is able to see himself as an entity that is both socially embedded and independent from the society. One lives amongst others but can and should understand oneself apart from others. The point is that autonomy enables the individual seeking uniqueness to conduct one's authentic vision free of dictation from social circumstances.

My intuition is that authenticity and autonomy actively enable an attractive kind of uniqueness as they could allow each person to be the kind of person who is true to, and governs himself with an acceptable level of accountability for one's conduct. One apparent problem is that authenticity and autonomy do not ensure that we always live in accordance with moral integrity. We can perhaps grant a serial killer some human excellence by virtue of being unique, but he would surely be missing some substantial degree of personhood, as murder is an unjust act that impairs the wellbeing of others. Uniqueness of this kind would be very immoral and thus undesirable on the whole. It appears that, in this case, uniqueness does not give a complete account of personhood. What it does, however, is present an element that the African view does not have. For an individual to be appropriately identified as a person of human excellence, a balanced combination of authenticity, autonomy and something like Masolo's conception of morality is necessary. In other words, a well-rounded personhood involves personal and communal consideration.

A society that allows each individual a space to experiment with her self-understanding need not risk losing the communitarian side of human excellence. If anything, such a community produces persons who understand what it means to be an individual among other individuals who deserve to be treated with respect and kindness and are equally responsible for treating others with the same considerations. Doing virtuous deeds for others authentically and autonomously, or at the very least alongside such behaviour, seems more conducive to the development of a social network as opposed to people doing only morally good deeds and merely out of obligation and the hope of obtaining personhood. I am championing a life dominated by a well-rounded concern for one's welfare in a sense that is neither selfish nor selfless.

My main point is personal uniqueness is worth pursuing as a principle that, although internally constructed and constituted by authenticity and autonomy, does not and should not isolate a person from her community; nor should it prevent cognitive and moral development. Personhood should not be defined solely by what a person should do for others. Per-

sonhood is a phenomenon of living a genuinely human way of life and should not be a mere matter of unifying a community. Unifying a community is a duty that one can choose to perform but it should not come before, or at the great expense of, developing one's self-understanding and one's interests. A community cannot be united, at least not in the right way, by people who do not know who they are. I think a community benefits fairly when its people are aware of who they are and what it is they can and should do to improve the very social network they depend on for their own development and self-interpretations. However, such a social good, as I have explained, would not exhaust the rationale for uniqueness. Interaction between individual and community should exist, where the community does not pressure individuals to conform to expectations that deny a person a well-rounded life.

## ***Conclusion***

In this article, I have dealt with the question of what personhood essentially is. I articulated Masolo's African view of personhood, which is communalistic and morally loaded. According to Masolo and sub-Saharan ethicists in general such as Kwasi Wiredu and Ifeanyi Menkiti, personhood involves adopting moral virtues or abiding by society's expectations. Masolo endorses human excellence as leading a life dominated by the interests of others. I criticised his view for neglecting one's inner self and argued that such a life is often empty and not admirable. I illustrated that such a life is not personally beneficial and can create a community that is 'united' by people who do not know or like themselves. In the end I have recommended the uniqueness model as an alternative that, although agent-centred, need not isolate one from community or promote immorality, but can endorse the idea of social and personal development. The main point is this: personhood is not merely what we can do to improve the lives of others, but a self-understanding that should ideally be authentic, autonomous and moral, all of which, as African philosophers such as Masolo rightly emphasize, cannot be successfully real-

ized outside a community.

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# Two Conceptions of African Ethics

by Thaddeus Metz

*Abstract:* Two Conceptions of African Ethics. I focus on D. A. Masolo's discussion of morality as characteristically understood by African philosophers. My goals are both historical and substantive. First, with regard to history, I argue that Masolo's analysis of sub-Saharan morality suggests two major ways that the field has construed it, depending on which value is taken to be basic. According to one view, the ultimate aim of a moral agent should be to improve people's quality of life, which she can reliably do by entering into community with other persons, while the other view is that community should instead be valued for its own sake, with the enhancement of welfare being morally relevant only insofar as it is part of that. I claim that Masolo does not indicate a clear awareness of how these two perspectives differ and is not explicit about how they relate to one another. After pointing out that Masolo is not alone in these respects, I, second, draw what is meant to be a definitive, clear distinction between the two ethical philosophies, and then provide strong reason to prefer the community-based conception of sub-Saharan ethics to the welfare-based one.

*Résumé:* Deux Notions d'Éthiques Africaine. Je me concentre sur la discussion de la morale de D A Masolo comme elle est typiquement comprise par les philosophes Africains. Mes objectifs sont à la fois historiques et substantiels. Tout d'abord, en ce qui concerne l'histoire, je démontre que l'analyse de la morale subsaharienne de Masolo suggère deux manières principales dont le champ d'étude l'a interprété, en fonction de la valeur qui est considérée comme fondamental. Selon une vue, le but ultime d'un agent moral devrait être d'améliorer la qualité de vie des gens, ce qu'elle peut faire de manière fiable en entrant en communauté avec d'autres personnes, alors que l'autre point de vue est que la communauté devrait plutôt être appréciée pour elle-même, avec l'amélioration du bien-être étant moralement pertinente que dans la mesure où elle fait partie de cela. Je démontre que Masolo n'indique pas la façon dont ces deux points de vue diffèrent et ne dit pas explicitement comment ils se rapportent l'un à l'autre. Après avoir rappelé que Masolo n'est pas le seul à ces égards, j'établis ensuite ce qui est censé être une distinction claire et définitive entre les deux philosophies éthiques, et donne de fortes raisons de préférer la conception communautaire de l'éthique subsahariennes à celle du bien-être.

*Key words:* African ethics, communitarianism, moral theory, partiality, sub-Saharan morality, welfare

*Mots-clés:* éthique Africaine, communautarisme, théorie morale, partialité, moralité

## **1. Introduction**

D.A. Masolo is an elder in the African philosophical community, a wise historian of the field who has provided vital guidance to it. His latest book, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010),<sup>57</sup> discusses a wide array of topics and authors, ranging from Paulin Hountondji on indigenous knowledge to Kwasi Wiredu on the nature of mind to Leopold Senghor on socialism. It can be read not merely as providing an overview of major contemporary philosophies grounded in sub-Saharan traditional worldviews, as the author intends, but also, where Masolo is sympathetic to those he is expounding, as a communitarian philosophical anthropology, an account of what it means to be a human being with essential reference to her as part of a community.

In this article, I focus on Masolo's discussion of morality as characteristically understood by African philosophers. My goals are both historical and substantive, meaning that I use reflection on Masolo's book as an occasion to shed light not only on the nature of recent debates about African ethics, but also on African ethics itself.

With regard to history, I argue that Masolo's discussion of sub-Saharan morality suggests at least two major ways that the field has construed it, depending on which value is taken to be basic and which ones are deemed derivative. According to one perspective, the ultimate aim of a moral agent should be to improve people's quality of life, which she can reliably do by supporting community in certain ways, while the other view is that community should instead be valued for its own sake, with the enhancement of welfare being morally relevant only insofar as it is part of that. I claim that Masolo does not indicate a clear awareness of

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<sup>57</sup> All page references in the text refer to this book.

how these two perspectives differ and is not explicit about how they relate to one another. After pointing out that Masolo is not alone in these respects, as others in the field also appear to advance conflicting accounts of the values fundamental to African morality, I draw what is meant to be a definitive, clear distinction between the two major ethical philosophies.

Next, I provide what I deem to be conclusive reason to prefer the community-based conception of sub-Saharan ethics to the welfare-based one. I argue principally on grounds of philosophical plausibility, but also suggest that the community-based theory is more characteristically African than is the welfare-based one, despite the fact that some of the most influential African moral theorists, including Kwame Gyekye and John Bewaji, have expressed adherence to the latter.

I begin by providing an overview of the way Masolo approaches moral issues in *Self and Community in a Changing World*, namely, by articulating ways that African thinkers have construed the nature of personhood in search of a non-relativist ethic (sec. 2). After that, I demonstrate that Masolo's discussion points to two competing theoretical ways to understand morality in light of sub-Saharan values, one that takes community to be the basic value and the other that takes welfare to be (sec. 3). I investigate the logic of each approach, and also critically respond to the suggestion that both goods, and not merely one of them, should be deemed fundamental. Next, I argue in favour of a theory based solely on the value of communal relationships, contending that it captures uncontroversial elements of morality that not merely Africans, but also people more globally, tend to hold (sec. 4). I conclude by indicating some additional philosophical approaches to sub-Saharan morality that Masolo does not take up in depth but that would need to be in order to provide something like the final word on the most defensible conception of African ethics (sec. 5).

## 2. *Morality à la Masolo*

Personhood is of course the conceptual category through which it is natural to enter into discussion of African thought about ethics. As is well-known, personhood, as understood among many black traditional peoples below the Sahara, is a value-laden concept, and one that admits of degrees. That is, one can be more or less of a person, where the more one is a person, the better. More specifically, to have personhood, or to exhibit *ubuntu* (humanness) as it is famously known among Nguni speakers in southern Africa, is to be virtuous, to be an excellent human being.

### 2.1. *Ends v. means*

Supposing one wants to develop one's personhood, so construed, it is natural to pose the question of how to acquire it. Notice, though, that this question is vague, admitting of two senses that it is important to distinguish. On the one hand, one might be asking about what one or one's society could do in order to make personhood likely to be realized. This is a question about the *means* by which one could become a person, i.e., what would enable it or cause it. Here, Masolo discusses the views of Kwasi Wiredu, among others, who point out that, in order to become virtuous, human beings must be socialized in certain ways, and above all must engage in communication with one another, particularly about in/appropriate behaviour (e.g., 2010: 173). Such claims, I submit, are not controversial; who would, or reasonably could, deny that an infant left to his own devices on a deserted island would, after any number of years, be more animal and selfish than genuinely human or morally upright?

The truly contested issue occasioned by asking how to acquire personhood is what the essential nature of personhood is. What constitutes a genuinely human way of life? Which attitudes and actions are virtuous and why? What should be one's final end? These questions, which I take to be more or less equivalent for the field, are the ones philosophers are most interested in answering.

Before analyzing the answers that Masolo addresses, I first point out that too often the language in his text blurs the distinction between the means by which one can obtain personhood and the nature of personhood itself. He, with a large thrust of the field, clearly believes there is a close relationship between being part of a certain kind of society and being a person, but the nature of the relationship too often is not characterized precisely. Sometimes Masolo uses *logical* distinctions to express the sort of relationship involved, which unfortunately gloss whether it is one of means or ends. For example, he says that ‘if a person were to be isolated from society and be deprived of communication with other humans from birth they would be confined to a “solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish” and no doubt also very short life’ (2010: 265). Pointing out that isolation is a sufficient condition for a bad life does not tell the reader whether social interaction is a means by which to live well or whether it is to live well in itself, our proper end.

Other times Masolo uses *modal* language to express the relationship between society and personhood, which is equally vague. Consider the claims: ‘The intervention of society is, in this sense, a necessary requirement for our growth and development’ (2010: 163) and ‘(A) world where everyone is left to their own fate cannot be a world of happy people’ (2010: 246). Again, noting that self-realization would be impossible without social interaction does not indicate in what respect, viz., whether the latter is a necessary tool to bring self-realization about or is the content of self-realization as such.

Still other phrases, which are well understood as expressing a relationship of *supervenience* of personhood on society, are also ambiguous. Consider the claims that ‘interdependence is what breeds the ideal human condition’ (2010: 246), that ‘attainment of human needs and interests is best served in union with others’ (2010: 245), and that ‘humans who are deprived...of the ability to communicate are deprived of something fundamental to their nature, namely, full participation in the world of persons’ (2010: 165). Again, these statements beg the question of whether interdependence, union and communication are instrumental for bringing about

human flourishing or whether they constitute it.

Masolo is not alone in speaking in ways that seem to me to be ambiguous between a relationship of means and one of ends; recall the phrases ubiquitous among African philosophers that the community is ‘prior to’ the individual (see Senghor quoted in Masolo 2010: 231) or that the individual ‘depends on’ the community for her development (Masolo 2010: 174, 218, 226). My current purpose is to use Masolo’s text as an occasion to urge the field to be careful when discussing the precise nature of the relationship between social interaction and personhood.

## *2.2. Relativism v universalism*

Despite the vague turns of phrase, Masolo is of course aware of the conceptual distinction between means and ends that I am drawing, and he provides revealing discussions about the latter. What I find of particular importance in Masolo’s analysis of the nature of personhood is that he draws on African thought about it, while denying that such thought is applicable only to Africans. Masolo is emphatic about eschewing relativism (2010: 24, 106, 121, 130, 174, 180), which implies that he is in search of an ethic that applies to human beings generally, regardless of where they live or the culture in which they have been reared. In focusing on, and indeed favouring, sub-Saharan thought about ethics, he believes that African thinkers tend to have some insight into objective moral matters that others, particularly those from Western cultures such as Immanuel Kant, do not. That is a bold and intriguing perspective, one that differs from the much more dominant tendency of those who explore indigenous worldviews to suggest that the local is apt for locals and the foreign is apt for foreigners.

There are some phrases in Masolo’s book that readers might think are indicative of moral relativism, but I suggest they are best read otherwise. For example, Masolo often contends that personhood is closely related to: incorporating ‘the values deemed by society to be worth pursuing as goals’ (2010: 96); functioning ‘in the service of socioculturally imposed

ends' (2010: 154); adjusting 'one's conduct in accordance with known or assumed expectations of other members within any relational circuit' (2010: 206); and protecting 'the customary ways through adherence to them' (2010: 243). Since norms and customs differ from society to society, it appears from these quotations that Masolo is committed to a relativistic view of personhood.

There are two reasons to think, in fact, that these phrases are consistent with Masolo's rejection of moral relativism. First, at several points, he is speaking about means, and not ends, pointing out that the way one develops virtue is through a socialization process that involves, among other things, learning how one's society functions and adapting to that society (probably 2010: 154-155, 205-206, 241). The basic idea is that children must become members of society *in the first place*, before they can take the next step and learn how to become *good* members. For instance, at one point Masolo is explicit about the '(communitarian) system of mutual dependence that adherence to custom produces' (2010: 263); conformity, here, is apparently deemed to be a means by which (in combination with other things, no doubt) community as a final end will be produced.

However, there are other places where it appears that Masolo is not making a point about means, but rather about ends, to the effect that a person is one who fulfils society's expectations (see esp. 2010: 96, 218-219, 243). I submit that, second, on a number of these occasions Masolo is presuming that what the community values will be what is of value to the community. Speaking of conformity to a community's norms, then, is often shorthand for reference to living in ways that that would benefit society, which is ultimately what matters (see esp. 2010: 96-97). And one does find, on occasion, Masolo qualifying which social expectations count, for instance, 'reasonable' ones (2010: 244).

Having established, then, that Masolo is seeking a universally applicable ethic that is informed largely by sub-Saharan values, I now turn to his characterizations of it. Sometimes he construes the nature of personhood in piecemeal terms, providing lists of specific virtues that a real person

exhibits (2010: 171, 208, 218, 239-240, 251). Among other excellences, Masolo mentions being wise, being polite, exhibiting generosity, being loving, being a leader, working hard, and considering oneself to be bound up with one's fellows.

Of more interest to me are those occasions when Masolo goes beyond giving the reader a grab-bag of human goods, and instead discusses them from a theoretical perspective. At times Masolo aims to sum up what all virtues have in common, to provide a unified account of what makes something a human excellence. The claim that I will make in the next section is that Masolo discusses two theories of personhood that are not clearly distinguished, but should be.

### **3. *Welfare v. community***

There are passages in Masolo's book indicating that personhood is constituted by, and not merely caused by, certain relationships with other human beings. The relevant relationships for Masolo and the African tradition more generally are communal ones, which he sometimes sums up as 'cohesion' (2010: 240). According to what I call a 'community-based' conception of personhood, one lives a genuinely human way of life just insofar as one enters into or prizes community with others. This theory 'posits the existence of others as an essential part of the very structure of the self' (2010: 249), such that realizing one's true nature is nothing over and above living communally.

Strong evidence that Masolo discusses such a view, if not also adheres to it, comes in a passage where he is looking for the fundamental moral value that would best explain interests in conditions such as promoting socialism, engaging in palaver, reconciling after conflict and living in a society in which people are routinely and deeply concerned about one another's well-being. Speaking in particular of the latter, Masolo says that

its value lies in the general or common conditions of relations that

results from it, not just in this specific example but in all other cases and examples of good neighborliness....sociomoral states that every child is taught and that every right-thinking person is called upon to consider implementing as the objective of his or everyday conduct.....A life of cohesion, or positive integration with others, becomes a goal, one that people design modalities for achieving. Let us call this goal communalism, or, as other people have called it, communitarianism. In light of this goal, the virtues listed above also become desirable (2010: 240).

This is the clearest passage in Masolo's book expressing the theoretical view that communal relationship is what should be valued as an *end*, i.e., as constitutive of personhood, and not merely as a means to it (see also 2010: 194, 218, 263).<sup>58</sup> Cohesion is the apparent 'master value' that unites the particular excellences of generosity, a sense of belonging, hard work and the like; these traits make one a better person just insofar as they are expressive of, or conducive to, community. Vices, in contrast, are traits that tend to divide people, and particularly to promote conflict or discord between them.

As clear as the passage is, there are others in Masolo's book that suggest a different theory about fundamental moral value. For example, at one point, Masolo says that 'no aspect of culture, however noble, is an end unto itself', such that a way of life should be given up if it fails to improve people's quality of life (2010: 122). And at other points, Masolo suggests that the value of cohesion is derivative and instrumental, lying in the effectiveness by which it makes people feel safe. Here, he says that

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<sup>58</sup> For another clear adherent to a community-based perspective, see the work of Desmond Tutu, who at one point says of African views of ethics, 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague' (1999: 35). Consider as well Peter Kasenene's remark that 'in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship' (1998: 21). See, too, the moral anthropological work of Silberbauer (1991: 20) and Verhoef and Michel (1997: 397).

‘individual and group security is fostered through a network of social relations ruled by a strong sense of unity and caring’ (2010: 216), and that ‘well-being is complete when (apart from material prosperity) people feel that they are in an atmosphere of positive relations with other members of society or neighborhood’ (2010: 250). These passages strongly suggest what I call a ‘welfare-based’ conception of personhood, according to which one is more of a person, the more one acts to improve others’ quality of life--something one can often do by *means* of entering into community.

Such a theoretical perspective is particularly salient in Masolo’s book when he approvingly discusses Kwasi Wiredu’s account of morality (2010: 172-174, 206, 265-266).<sup>59</sup> For Wiredu, good character and right acts are a function of sympathetic impartiality, in which one gives the well-being others equal consideration consequent to imagining what it would be like to be them. Although this smacks of utilitarianism, Wiredu is well-known for maintaining that such a morality is instead best captured by the Golden Rule, the principle according to which you ought to treat others as you would like to be treated if you were in their position. Masolo does not indicate a clear preference for the Golden Rule, but does suggest that moral principles are nothing other than ‘criteria for survival and well-being’ (2010: 172), and can be summed up by the prescription to create ‘humane conditions that, at least, enhance the community’s ability to reduce unhappiness and suffering’ (2010: 250; see also 124, 155, 210, 244). By this welfare-based account of personhood, what makes a behaviour or character trait a virtue is that it reliably improves people’s quality of life, where a vice in contrast is an action or attitude that tends to fail to do so or, indeed, makes others worse off.

The ideals of welfare and community are not completely unrelated; for Masolo, as for most African theorists of communitarianism, communal

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<sup>59</sup> Other influential African moral theorists who take well-being to be the basic value include Kwame Gyekye (1997: 50; 2010) and John Bewaji (2004).

relationships include ones of mutual aid.<sup>60</sup> However, there are at least three crucial respects in which community is not reducible to a relationship in which people are ‘always concerned about the well-being of other people around them’ (2010: 238).

First, the theories ground different fundamental explanations of why one ought to help others and would enhance one’s personhood by doing so. The welfare-based theory says that one should share one’s wealth, time, labour and so on at bottom because doing so is likely to make others’ lives go better. In contrast, the community-based theory prescribes helping others ultimately because doing so would be part of what it is to enter into community with them, or perhaps to foster communal relationships among them.

Second, a natural understanding of the moral value of community is partial, at least to some degree. That is, prizing community implies caring for the well-being of one’s own family and society more than that of others (‘family first’, ‘charity begins at home’), which contrasts notably with Wiredu’s morality of sympathetic impartiality. There is nothing in the Golden Rule indicating that one should provide greater weight to those related to oneself, when it comes to fellow-feeling and beneficent action consequent to it.

Third, and most starkly, community as understood by Masolo, and by the sub-Saharan tradition more broadly, includes relationships that have no essential reference to beneficence, mutual aid, etc. For instance, Masolo discusses relationships in which people identify with, or share a way of life with, one another, which are a matter of, on the one hand, experiencing a sense of togetherness (2010: 232, 240), and, on the other, having common customs, traditions, culture and the like (2010: 225, 226, 234, 244). Although such relationships *might* have the effect of improving people’s well-being, they do not essentially include it.

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<sup>60</sup> For an analysis of the concept of community as it functions in African moral thinking, see Metz (2007).

Masolo is not the only one analyzing African thought about morality whom I have found to be unclear about which values are fundamental and which are not. For example, I believe that Wiredu's corpus includes such ambiguity. On the one hand, as we have seen, Wiredu believes that, from a sub-Saharan perspective, morality is captured by the principle of sympathetic impartiality, particularly as expressed in the Golden Rule. However, when Wiredu famously defends a consensus-based form of democracy, he does so in large part by appeal to the idea that such a polity would produce harmony and reduce divisiveness in society (1996: 172-190).<sup>61</sup> Here, then, are two values: well-being and harmony; which one is fundamental? Similarly, Polycarp Ikuenobe in a fairly recent book-length treatment of African morality is vague about whether welfare or community is ultimately what matters from a sub-Saharan standpoint. One finds some passages indicating that African ethics essentially prescribes engaging in caring relationships or maintaining harmonious ones (2006: 6, 65, 114, 128, 138), and other ones saying that the promotion of human well-being is key (2006: 80, 103-104, 111, 119, 123, 127).

Now, I have been supposing that it makes most sense to presume that only one value, either community or welfare, is fundamental to morality, but what about the possibility that both are?<sup>62</sup> Perhaps cohesion and well-being should be pursued as separate ends that are to be prized for their own sake, and maybe they are often mutually supportive means with regard to one another. On this reading of Masolo's text, there is no contradiction as to which value is fundamental; rather they belong together side by side, as aims that are often compatible.

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<sup>61</sup> In other parts of his work, Wiredu points out that his people, the Akan, believe that human beings have a dignity in virtue of being children of God, a superlative worth that demands respect (1992). That is a third, apparently distinct, value, something that I address briefly in the conclusion.

<sup>62</sup> Something that Masolo has suggested at a workshop on The Philosophy of D. A. Masolo sponsored by the Philosophy Department at the University of Johannesburg 24-25 March 2012.

Such a pluralist reading of the foundations of African morality might well be the most charitable way to read Masolo's text. However, I am in the first instance interested in pursuing a monistic interpretation of sub-Saharan ethics, mainly since one can know that more than one basic end must be posited only upon first having posited a single one and having found it inadequate. The project of systematically differentiating basic ends and considering which one, if any, would suffice to ground an attractive sub-Saharan moral philosophy is still in its infancy and is something toward which I aim to contribute. Therefore, in the rest of this article, I suppose not only that community and welfare are distinct ends, but also that it is worth enquiring as to whether one of them, on its own, is more plausible than the other and is a reasonable contender for grounding morality generally.

Another reason for being careful about the differences between welfare and community as fundamental aims is that, as I discuss in the next section, sometimes they prescribe divergent decisions. In this section I have sought to demonstrate that Masolo's discussion of sub-Saharan moral thought includes two logically distinct conceptions that he, along with others in the field, does not differentiate. The differences between the two accounts of personhood should become all the more clear in what follows, where I argue that a community-based account of personhood is able to account for widely held moral judgments that a welfare-based one cannot. I will demonstrate that the logics of the two views have different implications for how to behave, some of which are more philosophically plausible than others.

#### ***4. For a communitarian conception of personhood***

In this section I advance two general considerations that to my mind provide adequate reason to reject the welfare-based conception of personhood, as characterized in Masolo's work, in comparison to the community-based one. The arguments are not intended to demonstrate

that the latter is most justified relative to all competitors, only in relation to a morality that takes human well-being to be the sole basic value.<sup>63</sup>

#### *4.1. The Relevance of Past Decisions*

The first major argument for the community-based conception of personhood is that it, unlike the welfare-based one, can account for the moral relevance of decisions people have taken. Many of us, whether working in the African tradition or otherwise, have intuitions that sometimes the way we should treat someone in the present is to a large degree a function of how that person voluntarily acted in the past. Here are three examples, relating to punishment, self-defence and rationing.

Nearly all of us believe that it is grave injustice to punish someone known to be innocent of any wrongdoing. As is common to point out in the literature critical of utilitarianism, there can be situations in which meting out a penalty to an innocent person would be most conducive to the greater good, but in which doing so would be impermissible. The best explanation of why it would be immoral to punish an innocent includes the fact that the person is innocent, i.e., did not do anything wrong in the past.

A welfarist morality has difficulty accounting for that judgment. Utilitarianism famously implies that past actions are morally irrelevant in themselves; all that in principle matters, from this perspective, is whether what one does now will maximally benefit society in the future. Suppose one is a sheriff in a position to frame an innocent person, where such an action would alone prevent a marginally greater degree of harm to society. According to the principle of sympathetic impartiality, one should give everyone's interests equal weight, which would, like utilitarianism, appear to

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<sup>63</sup> I acknowledge that a more rights-oriented ethic, according to which the innocent have an equal claim to well-being, promises to avoid some of the objections I raise below. For an instance of such a view in the Anglo-American literature, see the work of Richard Arneson (e.g., 1989).

entail that one ought to punish the innocent person, since doing so, *ex hypothesi*, would satisfy the most interests. Or if one elects to apply the Golden Rule in this case, notice that the outcome is indeterminate: when placing oneself in the shoes of the innocent individual, one sees that one would not want to be punished, and when placing oneself in the shoes of those who would be harmed in the absence of such punishment, one sees that one would want punishment to be inflicted so as to prevent the harm. The Golden Rule therefore provides no guidance about which course of action to take.

Turn, now, to issues of self- and other-defence, which are widely accepted among African societies in response to colonialism and perceived witchcraft, to mention just two salient examples. It is uncontroversial to hold that if someone is unjustly attacking an innocent person, that innocent (or a third party) may rightly use force for the purpose of warding off the threat. The rough principle operative in such cases is that burdens may be imposed on aggressors in order to prevent aggression toward those who are not aggressing.

However, a welfare-based conception of personhood cannot easily account for such a principle. Suppose a group of four men are trying to kill one innocent woman, merely because she belongs to a different ethnic group. It is incontrovertible that the woman (or, say, a police officer) may shoot the men, if necessary and sufficient to save her life. But that intuition cannot be accommodated by the Golden Rule, which would require her to put herself in the shoes of her aggressors and ask herself whether she would want to be shot. Since she would not, she would be wrong to shoot them. Similar remarks go for a more consequentialist interpretation of sympathetic impartiality; weighing up all the equal interests in living well, the lives of four outweigh the life of one.

For a third and final example, consider the fact that nearly all of us believe that, in cases of scarcity, where one cannot distribute life-saving resources to all those who need them, it would be proper to save those who are not responsible for the fact of needing to be saved. For instance,

suppose that a wife has become HIV positive because her husband cheated on her behind her back and did not use protection when doing so. And suppose that you, who have a single regimen of antiretroviral treatment, must choose which of them to save. You have strong reason to give the treatment to the wife and not the husband, and to do so because he is responsible for the fact that she needs the treatment and she is not.

But, again, a welfare-based ethic cannot accommodate that judgment. If you employ the Golden Rule, you discover that you cannot decide whom to save, since you would like to receive the treatment if you were in the position of the wife or in that of the husband. And a broader orientation toward well-being also appears to be indeterminate, supposing the consequences of saving one or the other would be the same. However, I submit that the past actions of the husband provide some, very weighty consideration to save his wife, and not him, in the case where you cannot save both.

A community-based ethic, at least when interpreted in a certain way, can account for the relevance of past actions in determining how one ought to treat people in the present.<sup>64</sup> Suppose one holds the view that one ought to treat people with respect in virtue of their capacity for community, or that one is more of a person, the more one honours (not maximizes) communal relationships. It follows from this sort of principle that one may act in an anti-social way toward those who are being anti-social, if necessary to stop or compensate for their anti-social behaviour. It need not be degrading of a person's capacity for community to treat him in an anti-social manner, when doing so is necessary to prevent or correct for a comparable anti-sociality on his part, for respecting another's capacity for community can require basing one's interaction with him on the way he has exercised it. Or, alternately put, it does not fail to honour the value of community to act in a divisive manner when doing so is necessary to prevent or make up for divisiveness.

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<sup>64</sup> The present analysis is drawn from Metz (2011, 2012a).

Such an analysis can account for the above intuitions about why it is unjust to punish the innocent but need not be unjust to punish the guilty, why it can be right to use force against aggressors, and why it would be suitable not to save those who are responsible for needing to be saved, when doing so would come at the expense of those who are not so responsible. It would be unjust to punish the innocent, since they have not behaved in an anti-social manner and punishing them would therefore fail to honour (their capacity for) communal relationships. It can be right to use force against aggressors in order to protect the innocent, since being divisive toward those being divisive does not disrespect the value of community. And, finally, it would be right to ration life-saving treatment away from those whose anti-sociality is the cause of their need for it, when doing so would prevent the victims of their anti-sociality from dying.

#### *4.2. Non-harmful wrongdoing*

So far, I have argued that viewing personhood entirely as a matter of doing what one can to improve others' quality of life, can hardly account for the moral relevance of past actions at a principled level; in contrast, as I have also argued, a community-based conception of virtue can do so with relative ease. Now I argue that there is a second class of actions that the welfare-based view cannot easily accommodate, namely, those in which one agent does something to another, albeit without her knowledge that anything has changed. In many of these kinds of cases, it is plausible to maintain that the other's well-being is not reduced, but that the action is wrong or a vice nonetheless.

For a first example, consider the case of a spouse who systematically cheats on you behind your back, and is so careful and conniving that you have virtually no chance of finding out. Or think about a team of medical researchers who observe intimate behaviour of yours, such as bathing, without telling you they are doing so and for what purpose. Or imagine a situation in which people insult you behind your back—perhaps literally in the form of deftly pinning a derogatory sign on the back of your shirt

and then removing it before you have a chance to discover it. Or suppose that I break into your house in order to sleep in your bed, listen to your stereo and bathe in your tub while you are away at work, taking care to ensure that things are organized so that you can never know I was there. I presume that readers, whether working in African or Western traditions, believe that these actions are wrong, at least to some substantial degree.

In all four cases, there is no apparent reduction of well-being on the part of the one acted upon, and not even the realistic threat of such, given the way the hypothetical scenarios are framed. When one applies the Golden Rule, the actions appear permissible. After all, if I put myself in your shoes and imagine what it would be like to be you, I do not come away feeling bad. Masolo or Wiredu might reply that I would feel bad upon sympathizing with you in the situation in which you were aware of what I propose to do. However, the damning response to them, I think, is that what I am proposing to do to you includes *not* making you so aware.

Similar remarks apply, I submit, to any other interpretation of sympathetic impartiality. To sympathize with someone is roughly to experience a negative emotion such as sorrow toward another's unhappiness consequent to empathizing with it, where empathy is a matter of imagining what it is like to be the other person. When I imagine what it is like to be you upon breaking into your house and using your things while you are away and unaware of what I am up to, there is no unhappiness on your part with which to sympathize. It follows, then, that I do no wrong and exhibit no vice, on a welfare-based conception of morality.<sup>65</sup> However, in this case, and the others above, there would in fact be action incompatible with personhood.

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<sup>65</sup> One might propose a different conception of well-being, according to which one is objectively worse off if treated in these ways, something that Pedro Tabensky has suggested to me in conversation. However, such a conception does not square with a principle of sympathetic impartiality, to which Wiredu adheres, and it strikes me mashing together distinctions that are better kept apart, namely, the disvalue of harm done to an individual, on the one hand, and, say, that of disrespectful treatment of a person, on the other.

The community-based conception of personhood can do much better on this score. As discussed above, part of what is involved in a communal relationship is engaging in mutual aid, acting so as to improve others' quality of life, but another part is sharing a way of life, where this includes experiencing a sense of togetherness and participating in common activities. It is these latter values that would be flouted by the present actions. To genuinely *share* a way of life with others requires transparency about the way one is interacting with them. To relate to others without their informed consent is to treat the value of community, or those individuals capable of it, with disrespect and hence is incompatible with developing one's personhood.

In this section, I have provided two major arguments against a welfare-based conception of personhood and in favour of a community-based one. With Masolo, I am interested in articulating a conception of ethics that is both African and plausible. I submit that, on both grounds, community is to be favoured over welfare, supposing one is interested in formulating and evaluating a moral theory grounded on a single basic value.

## **5. Conclusion**

D.A. Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* is a magisterial, sympathetic overview of themes in contemporary African philosophy, occasioning reflection on several key facets of characteristic sub-Saharan thought about morality. I have argued that a close reading of the text indicates two different conceptions of human excellence that neither Masolo nor many in the field have adequately recognized are distinct, or at least are worth analyzing as having separate logics. According to one theory, an individual develops personhood or lives a genuinely human way of life solely to the extent that his attitudes and actions improve others' quality of life, while according to the other, he does so just insofar as he honours communal relationships, which include mutual aid but are not exhausted by it and also include sharing a way of life with others. I have worked to

show that these two perspectives have different implications about how we ought to live. Finally, I have argued that the implications of the community-based account are more plausible, and hence that it is more worthy of belief than the welfare-based one.

I conclude by noting that welfare and community do not exhaust either Masolo's discussion of African ethics, or the literature on it more generally. There are additional categories that appear to be good candidates for basic values that merit exploration in other work. For example, at one point Masolo mentions the idea that human beings have a dignity (2010: 124; see also 119, 237-238). To have a dignity is roughly for an individual to have a superlative final value that is independent of usefulness to others or social recognition. Human dignity is a moral concept that is apparently not reducible to well-being and that might well be distinct from community, too, and it is one that is well known for being believed by many traditional African cultures (e.g., Gyekye 1997: 63-64; Deng 2004). For another example, Masolo touches only briefly on the vitalist tradition in African ethics, according to which attitudes and actions ought to promote life-force, either in oneself or among one's fellows (2010: 13, 234-235). Here is another promising candidate for a fundamental good, apparently distinct from welfare and community, that has its own logic and has been explored and developed by theorists such as N. K. Dzobo (1992), Bénézet Bujo (1997), Laurenti Magesa (1997) and myself (Metz 2012a, 2012b). In defending a community-based conception of personhood relative to the welfare-based one discussed in Masolo's book, I have not shown that the former is the most African and the most plausible; that would require engaging with additional major strands of ethical thought that one finds below the Sahara.

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# Exorcising the Communitarian Ghost: D.A. Masolo's Contribution

by Bernard Matolino

*Abstract:* Exorcising the Communitarian Ghost: D.A. Masolo's Contribution. It is not an exaggeration to claim that traditional and modern African philosophy's bedrock is communitarian in make. The evidence for this is to be found in the frequent use of communitarianism either as support for a particular philosophical thesis or its frequent defence as an authentic mode of African thought and existence. In its assorted forms it has been adumbrated and defended in varied philosophical genres ranging from ethics to metaphysics and political philosophy to identity. However, there has been substantial disagreement on both its nature, in pristine traditional African society, and how it ought to be understood and applied in modern African societies. Firstly, what is the authentic representation of communitarianism and how is its dominance to be interpreted in African thought? Secondly, the issue will revolve around finding an appropriately sensitive communitarian mode of expression that takes modernity into account. In this paper I seek to offer some reasons as to why D.A. Masolo's interpretation of communitarianism is more defensible, in respect of these two considerations, than any other classical communitarian approach.

*Résumé:* Exorciser le Fantôme Communautaire : La Contribution de D.A. Masolo. Ce n'est pas une exagération de dire que la philosophie africaine traditionnelle et moderne est, dans sa constitution, communautaire. La preuve de cela se trouve dans l'utilisation fréquente du communautarisme en tant que support pour une thèse philosophique particulière ou dans sa défense fréquente comme un mode authentique de la pensée et de l'existence africaine. Elle a été esquissée dans des formes variées et défendue dans des genres multiples philosophique allant de l'éthique à la métaphysique et de la philosophie politique à l'identité. Cependant, il y a eu un désaccord substantiel à la fois sur sa nature dans la société traditionnelle africaine primitive et sur la façon dont elle doit être comprise et appliquée dans les sociétés africaines modernes. Tout d'abord, qu'elle est la représentation authentique du communautarisme et comment doit être interprétée sa position dominante dans la pensée africaine? Deuxièmement, la question se posera s'il est possible de trouver un mode d'expression communautaire qui soit sensible de façon appropriée et qui prend en compte la modernité. Dans cet article, je cherche à offrir quelques raisons pour

lesquelles l'interprétation du communautarisme de D.A. Masolo est plus défendable à l'égard de ces deux considérations que toute autre approche communautaire classique.

*Key words:* Masolo, communitarianism, social and political philosophy, African metaphysics

*Mots-clés:* Masolo, communautarisme, philosophie sociale et politique, métaphysique africaine

## ***Introduction***

Communitarianism has been punted widely as the basis of African ontology or African reality. Expressed in different modes and for different purposes; it has been used as justification for the adoption of certain polities, it has been claimed as the authentic ethic, and it has been claimed to be the ultimate basis of personhood in African thought. Although the articulation of communitarianism in its respective manifestations has not been universal, this lack of universality has been explained as necessitated by the local condition. However, there have been serious contestations about the core interpretation of communitarianism; particularly the ontological priority of the community vis-a-vis individual rights. What this debate has largely shown are the unwavering allegiances between what Kwame Gyekye has identified as radical and moderate communitarianism. In essence, lines have been drawn between those who advocate a moderate interpretation of communitarianism and those who support its radical form.

While such a debate has merit, its major drawback is that it fails to take the communitarian debate to a level where it can be said that African communitarianism is responsive to the modern realities that are now chiefly characteristic of African societies. But more seriously, on the philosophical level, this debate seems unable to extricate African philosophy and consequently communitarianism from the essentialist rendering of African thought. It is primarily for this reason that the first part of my title is conceived. It indicates my own impatience with the continued ontologising of communitarianism in African philosophy. My own philosophi-

cal commitment seeks to exorcise the ghost of essentialising communitarianism from African philosophy.

As for the second part of the essay, I read Masolo to be involved in the project of exorcising the ghost of essentialism. It could be the case that Masolo does not conceive his work in the same manner as I do, and it could be the case that he could possibly not agree with my proposed project. However, my interpretation of his work leads me to think that he is at least involved in an attempt to re-state communitarianism in ways that do not seek to essentialise it as the sole ontological basis of African thought. He also appears to be engaged in attempts to cast communitarianism in ways that are sensitive to either Africa's quest to modernise or to the fact of modernisation. The significance of the modernising element, in the communitarian discourse, is borne out of the ever constant background tensions between tradition and modernity. At times, modernity has been blamed for the decadence that attends to many facets of African societies and, at times, tradition has been blamed for some backward views and practices that plague the continent. Finding a balance between these two competing influences has presented a daunting challenge to the project of developing African philosophy. While some thinkers are content with articulating positions that seek to glorify Africa's past and may even seek to find ways of returning Africa to that glorious past, other thinkers have sought to deal with the reality of present day Africa albeit with a reference to the influences of the past. In the latter camp, the most striking attempt comes from Kwame Nkrumah's development of his theory of consciencism (1964: 95). These varied attempts have enjoyed limited success. Part of the main reason why these attempts have registered modest success has to do mainly with the manner in which they base all their philosophical discourse on the claimed fundamental nature and influence of communitarianism in African thought. Where such an assumption is made it would then entail arguments that seek to defend communitarianism or at least seek to align with the core tenets of communitarianism.

On my conception, this proclivity is to be identified as the problem of

essentialism. In this paper I seek to argue that Masolo's interpretation of communitarianism avoids the philosophical problem of essentialism. I should caution at this early stage of my paper that my intention is not to dismiss the entire project of communitarianism. My real worry and attempt to exorcise the communitarian ghost has to do with its ready acceptance as the ontology of African thought. I am persuaded that such an acceptance has impoverished both African thought in itself and how it is perceived.

At the outset I wish to state a proviso of the limits of my consideration and the motivation for it. The communitarianism I wish to consider in this paper is mainly one that has been divided by Gyekye into two camps which he has identified as radical and moderate communitarianism. Following Gyekye, if we take radical communitarianism to be chiefly supported by Placide Tempels (1959: 66-67), John Mbiti (1970: 141) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984: 171-173) – we could call it a classical account of communitarianism. If we take Gyekye's (1997: 49) critique of Menkiti as a pointer to philosophical errors in the classical account as well as his argument for moderate communitarianism as an attempt at improving the classical account, then we could identify this entire debate as a classical debate on communitarianism. We could even call the philosophical commitments gleaned from these positions as classical African communitarianism. The term classical African communitarianism is simply taken to refer to those works by figures that are considered to be pioneers in the field of African philosophy/communitarianism. Hence this paper does not seek to be a tour de force on the whole scope of African communitarianism. My motivation for this limit is twofold; firstly, the classical account of communitarianism has so much to offer in terms of its potential to be developed into a viable philosophy and ethic that is of Sub-Saharan indigenes. Gyekye admits as much when he points that while Menkiti's position is riddled with errors and incoherencies it nevertheless adumbrates an interesting notion of personhood that is couched in moral reference. Secondly, I am of the view that the classical account is still in need of further philosophical investigation to either eliminate or minimise the philosophical incoherencies that bedevil it. It is for this reason that I consider

D.A. Masolo's work to be a continuation of ongoing attempts to re-adumbrate the classical account in ways that are not so patently incoherent. My proclivity to compare Masolo's work to Gyekye's, and subsequently argue in favour of Masolo is based on the fact that both are among the most influential and pioneering figures of modern day African philosophy. They also both offer extensive arguments for communitarianism albeit with subtle but important differences. It is for the importance of the implications of these differences that I seek to argue that Masolo's account is preferable to all accounts in the classical camp – the camp of influential pioneers.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section I sketch out the problem of communitarian essentialism as a philosophical concern. I also outline other debates around the nature of communitarianism. In particular I seek to show how the debate on the distinction between moderate and radical communitarianism is somewhat stagnant. In the second section I seek to present Masolo's construal of communitarianism. In the third and final section I offer some arguments in support of Masolo's version of communitarianism.

### ***The problems of essentialism***

The problem of essentialism as I conceive it here refers to the philosophical position that views communitarianism as the determinant of African ontology. This is typically exemplified in the works of Placide Tempels, John Mbiti and Ifeanyi Menkiti. These thinkers, though relying on different terminology and strategies, invariably ascribe all African ontology or 'essence' to communitarianism. This philosophical commitment, in turn, buttresses the economic and socio-political theories and practices of African socialism popularised by Leopold Sedar Senghor, Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah.

Although Masolo claims that Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor were not philosophers but doubled as political leaders and theorists – it is interest-

ing to note how their ideas on the communitarian basis of their socialism, is given ample credence by some African philosophers. If we briefly and crudely state the main claims of the nationalists to be an argument for socialism based on the idea of communitarianism, which in turn informs the African personality – the nature of persons; how they are conceived as a metaphysical category and how they are expected to conduct themselves as a result of that ontology, we might be tempted to review these three thinkers' non-philosophical status. The reason for this is to be found in the existence of a considerable body of work that has been developed by philosophers who offer a communitarian notion of being that easily supports the socialist interpretation developed by the nationalists.

Gail Presbey (2002: 58) argues that the proponents of this position were mainly driven by the need to be seen as defenders of an authentic African view. However, this position has not gone without detractors. For example, Didier Njirayamanda Kaphagawani argues that this view conflates ontological issues with epistemological issues. On the other hand, Kwame Gyekye has argued against this extreme interpretation of the core meaning of communitarianism.

The real problem of the communitarian thesis is that it extends itself in ways that appear harmless and true yet its subtle implication is quite significant. In its appearance as a harmless and true explanation of African life, it appears to be a mere explanation of the ways that Africans live, or an account of how Africans perceive reality. Its dominance all over the continent and the fact that many ethnic groups identify and share in its major claims makes it the ultimate truth of African life. Such a harmless and truthful exposition of a people's way of life, must as a matter of necessity, give a full picture of who these people are and what their experience of reality is. Or better, what these people are and what factors shape their experience of reality. In this manner it becomes the authoritative point of reference in not only defining the African but also defining the things that shape the African. If this brief description is true, it is easy to see how the community is either ontologised or referred to approvingly by various thinkers. Either way, it is seen as such a fundamental category

in African thought. While this may appear to be harmless and true I suggest that the case is far from being this simple.

For a start, the main claims of classical communitarianism are of an ethnophilosophical nature. The major problem is that these claims do not only affirm a traditionalistic outlook of life but actually affirm the uncritical part of African philosophy. Ranging from rehashes of communitarianism, to developing theories inspired by communitarianism or seeking to return to communitarianism, or seeking to show its authentic nature, or essentialising it to the African condition appears to be serving witches brew as Wiredu (1980: 46) calls it.

But at a philosophical level classical communitarianism, like ethnophilosophy, its major proponent and exponent, reduces African thinking to a group activity that is both static and unanalytical. This charge proceeds from what I see to be classical communitarianism's main concern – finding the African difference and seeking to retrieve its core claims to guide present African ontology. To essentialise African reality as communitarian ignores two crucial albeit basic facts namely: one; social life and other reality attached to the communal experiences of the individuals and the subsequent interactions arising thereof are conventions of the time, and, two; the reality of Africans both philosophical and communal are in a constant state of transformation.

In response to this claim the friend of classical communitarianism could marshal two possible rejoinders: In the first he could argue that not only is change possible but actual. Hence, he could argue, though change has occurred it has done so within the broader essentialist communitarian framework. Or, alternatively, the essentialist could argue that any change that has not been communitarian in nature is not truly African – but inspired by external forces such as Islam, Christianity or the Western influence.

My response to the first claim is that the essentialist is being disingenuous. If he claims that change happens within a broader communitarian framework – then her communitarian account must also change to reflect

the reality of that change. But since she fails to adjust her essentialism to this broad communitarianism, it means she does not accept the authenticity of that broad communitarianism. Further, it could be argued against the essentialist that there are changes that have occurred in Africa that are not consistent with the essentialist or classical communitarian view. The example I have in mind has to do with the basic organisation of communal structures and the resultant notion of self. I suggest that if we look at the way in which some African communities have come to be structured – those structures are no longer consistent with the essentialist view of ‘community’. While essentialists view the African notion of community as essentially constituted by individuals who share a deep connection and commitment to the same good, such that individuated interests are seen as concomitant to communal interests, it is doubtful that all (or even most) African communities are constituted in this manner. The essentialist view is that the individual’s fate is not restricted to the individual but is constitutively extended to affect the entire community hence automatically soliciting shared sympathy or joy from other members of the society (depending on what the individual’s station is). This effectively means that the individual sees himself as essentially constituted by the community. As Menkiti argues, the community is a perduring and stubborn reality of the individual’s own conception of self. This view of the self is informed by the communal structure that is said to make no distinction between individual reality and communal reality. And yet essentialists take it to be the case that the communitarian view is the authentic African metaphysics of the self.

I simply wish to point that certain changes in some African communities have rendered this view obsolete. For some communities it is no longer the case that they are constituted by individuals who share a common communal good or who conceive their own notion of self as seriously constituted by the community. The reason for this is to be found in the fact that most parts of Africa are fairly modernised and are governed by rules and structures that do not retain the strictures of classical communitarianism. Take any large African city such as Johannesburg, Dakar, Nairobi, Accra or Abuja, and many others like them; the many Africans who

live and work in these cities do have a sense of community – but it is hardly a revelation to state that their sense of community is much weaker than the classical and essentialist account. Yet all these Africans who live in suburbia and exude sophistication, wealth, education and social prestige – all attained through individual merit and thrift – cannot be said to be less African than any other African.

To this, the essentialist, may predictably object by pointing out that modernity is responsible either for the erosion of the African spirit (read community having priority over the individual or the individual's sense of self being constituted by the community) or has completely destroyed the natural habitat of many Africans by Westernising many through force or persuasion. Put in other words the objection is that these large cities are becoming more like Western European cities or North American cities – thus creating individualistic tendencies among Africans.

I do not think that this suggestion is entirely true. While there has been a degree of Westernisation among many Africans two crucial factors count against the essentialist's latest point. First, though African cities are said to be modern and probably modelled on Western cities – they still retain a certain inimitable African flavour – so to say. There is just something African about Johannesburg, Dakar, Nairobi, Accra and Abuja. Something about these cities makes them African – it could be the many Africans who live in these cities or the African cultures that permeate the whole function and nature of these cities. There is something about these cities that, despite their modernity, do not quite make them the equivalents of Helsinki, London, Paris, Berlin, New York and Lisbon. One can still talk of the existence of an African culture and even community when referring to large African cities without fear of contradiction. As Masolo's book title suggests the African self and his community are indeed in a changing world.

With regard to the second essentialist objection that change that has occurred that is not communitarian is not African, the essentialist could, predictably again, argue that since all reality is communally embedded,

any change that does not affirm the metaphysical reality of the community in any or all matters is against the basic philosophical notion of being African. My response to this objection will be limited to pointing out the disingenuous nature of the objection itself or the disingenuous manner in which the essentialists present African reality as monolithic. I just wish to point out one example of this disingenuousness. Classical communitarians mostly claim that the only concept of person on the continent is communitarian. Yet according to Kaphagawani (1998: 167) there are three (shadow, communitarian, force) and according to Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006: 51) there are two (descriptivist and communalist). While it is true that there is such a concept as a communitarian concept of personhood – one needs to keep in mind that it is not the only authentic African concept of persons and secondly, that the communitarian concept itself is not universally agreed on. To my mind, the most pressing philosophical problem pertains to how classical communitarianism, having been marshalled as ontology or the key African system, is actually conflated with other philosophical categories. If we look carefully at the work that communitarianism is supposed to cover, we find that it is an ethic, ontology, theory of personhood, political philosophy, social philosophy, interpersonal relational account, a determinant of personal achievement and failure as well as a psychology. By any account this is stretching the function of a theory and this can only make the theory thin or overused. My argument does not seek to deny that communitarianism has a role to play in African philosophy. I am willing to acknowledge that if communitarianism is conceived as a social or ethical theory, or both, and strictly limited to these considerations – then communitarianism might be able to show its authentic value. What I am strictly opposed to are attempts at essentialising it as if it were the beginning and end of the determinant of African philosophy.

### ***Masolo's communitarianism***

In this section I seek to present Masolo's position on communitarianism.

Masolo approaches his discussion of communitarianism by comparing two forms of communitarianism – the Western mode and the African mode. He traces the seeds of Western communitarianism to Germany's rediscovery which was propelled by Hegel. This rediscovery was aimed at resisting French influence through a retrieval of a mystical sense of being German, which in turn led to the awakening of German history and a desire to penetrate and understand its past (Masolo 2010: 223). Masolo's articulation of the German development of Heidelberg Roman-tik is very similar to the development of the communitarian school in African scholarship. The most striking similarity is that both schools are manifested immediately after a period seen as having been responsible for the destruction of the essential spirit of the nation. In Germany it was a reaction against French dominance, and in Africa it was a reaction against erstwhile colonial dominance. The second similarity has to do with how the restoration of the spirit is seen as a necessary and sufficient operative condition for the successful and smooth functioning of society. If that spirit is restored all other things fall into their respective categories with natural ease. If that is not the case then legislation must be moulded in such a manner that it seeks to give effect to the retrieved spirit.

According to Masolo, Hegel conceives of the state in three senses as the legislative, the civil (characterised as the mass arrangements that individuals make with one another), and, as the sum of all ethical values. It is in the last category that Hegel claims the individual to be able to flourish. Hence he considers that category to be the most important of all senses of the state. Masolo reads Hegel to be an advocate of subjective freedom as he condemns oppressive states that do not allow the individual to flourish. According to Masolo, since Hegel's time a thin layer of communitarianism has survived, in the West, up to this day. Masolo claims that Charles Taylor has directly continued with this Hegelian thought that the individual attains her freedom within a larger whole. In Germany itself, Jurgen Habermas argues for the importance of communication as leading to consensus which leads to the acceptance of values and subsequently the formation of culture. Other important communitarians are Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Alasdair MacIntyre and John Kekes – who are all united

in their rejection of individualism (ibid: 225). Thus, in Masolo's view, the German notion of the individual is conceived as an anti-thesis to the French view which is dissolutionist and atomistic. The German view sees the self-fulfillment of the individual as happening within society.

Turning to the second type of communitarianism, Masolo identifies pioneers of African communitarian thought as Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor. He argues that unlike their Western counterparts these leaders were not philosophers. In support of their communitarianism they could cite specific traditional African societies that existed at a certain time. Inspired by the need to develop a system that was both in opposition to Western colonial doctrines as well socialist doctrines; these leaders developed African socialism. Allowance for both the terminology and the direction that the particular brand of socialism was going to take was determined by the local conditions of each nation.

I endorse Masolo's rejection of Nyerere and Senghor's view that African socialism as an attitude of the mind. Masolo does not see this attitude as wired in African minds. Rather, he argues, instinct drives people to act in ways that pursue self-interest. But they recognise that such actions do not augur well for survival as interests are likely to conflict. Masolo argues that in the view of this it is not enough to just tell people to act good, he makes the example of a colony of ants that all work together and to the benefit of all. Their acts are, however, not seen as good. What then makes an act good, Masolo asks? According to Masolo, for Nyerere what made the act good was the rational choice meaning "a separate value made the principle good and that 'acting with regard to others' welfare' depended upon the realisation of the worth of this other value. In other words, there must be something else that, being greater in value, would be brought about or preserved when we act as required by the principle he called 'African Socialism'" (ibid: 236). Masolo argues that the real question is what would it benefit people if all acted in ways that sought to beneficiate the other. "In another sense, we may also ask whether there is anything to be gained by establishing a social atmosphere where people are at peace with each other because of actions of actual mutual dependence but also,

and more importantly, as a matter of principle” (ibid: 238). I take Masolo’s point to be that it is not good to be communitarian in itself but there is a need to go beyond communitarianism to secure a good in which communitarianism could be said to be in service of. Thus he claims that:

Communitarianism is the political view or ethic that developmental and participatory rather than liberal democracy is the most effective means for checking and containing aberrant policy and polity. It is developmental because its major concern is to forge avenues for the recognition of new rights, and it is participatory because in order to win such recognition, it depends not only on rational argumentation but also on collective political action as an inseparable means of pressing for these new rights, which, in turn, are collectively shared with others. Communitarianism, then, is the collectivist vision then of a polity in its struggle for moral and other group goals (ibid: 245).

From this Masolo argues that the obligations, imposed on the individual, including economic obligations to help others, proceed from the consideration that one is connected to others by belonging to a community. This sense of belonging informs the individual’s moral outlook. Such a communitarian moral outlook does not proceed from some metaphysical force as envisaged by nationalists, theologians and other philosophers who support the extreme version of communitarianism. He succinctly puts the matter as follows:

The recognition of common belonging should draw anyone toward the ethical principles that everyone is expected to take part in making it possible to realise the basic ideals of life. These aspirations do not flow out of Africans with a natural or metaphysical force. They are taught, and on different occasions people are reminded about the higher values of relational living (ibid: 249).

Further, Masolo argues that unlike the early versions of communitarianism, that did not see any place for individual rights in their political schemes, his version differs significantly in this respect as it takes individual rights as inalienable within the communitarian scheme. He writes:

I believe differently. I believe that communitarianism has its value yet places burdens on individuals and that these burdens, if properly defined, do not oppress the individual as much as is often believed. But the values and expectations of the communitarian ethic can be misunderstood or even abused, just as the liberties of the individual under liberalism have been. I believe that because it calls for everyone to honour mutual and reciprocal responsibilities toward others, communitarianism is based on an inevitable fact of human life: that to exist within a social space--to occupy a point or to be an individual within a social space--is to differ, to be different (ibid: 249-250).

I find the foregoing assessment sober and refreshing as the manner in which it interprets the nature of communitarianism frees African philosophy from the ghostly grip of the former. In the section below I seek to give reasons why Masolo's account is the most persuasive rendition of communitarianism.

### ***Reasons for accepting Masolo's version***

In this concluding section, I wish to offer some reasons why I think Masolo's interpretation of communitarianism is the version that must be accepted as most persuasive. There are many versions of communitarianism that differ on certain fine detail such as whether individual rights are recognised or not, the weight given to those rights if they are recognised, the role of the community in the individual's identity, the political and social organisation therefrom and the metaphysical status of communitarianism in African thought. While some of these differences can be dismissed as enthusiastic articulations of nationalists and theologians, as Masolo does, it must not be taken to mean that there are no philosophers who are sympathetic to this extreme interpretation of communitarianism.

Keeping in line with this philosophical debate I seek to provide reasons that I consider to be of a philosophical nature – or at least reasons that have currency in philosophical debates – showing why Masolo's version

is correct. There are two levels at which we could consider an interpretation of communitarianism being correct. On the first level we could refer to any instance of communitarian interpretation and presentation as either correct or wrong depending on how it either closely or distantly resembles the facts of social life in traditional communities. The second level occurs when we look at whether a particular communitarian account's claims follow. In other words, an account is made true by its coherence, non-contradictoriness and how it remains faithful to other philosophical requirements that make an argument valid and convincing. This does not mean that my support of Masolo is based on a desire to eliminate differences; my aim is to show which account makes more sense compared to other accounts. The sense I look for here is good old philosophical sense. I suggest that there are at least three reasons to accept Masolo's account.

The first reason is that Masolo's account is true. While philosophers may not always have the benefit of engaging in either anthropological or historical investigations to verify which communitarian claim is correct, certain arguments made in support of either this or that interpretation can easily be shown to be false. Philosophers make propositions, and a proposition can either be true or false. It is possible that the true or false state of a proposition can be made intentionally or unwittingly. In either respect, it does not count for much since the motive of the philosopher is not at stake. What is at stake is the content and claim of the proposition. In our case of communitarianism, we can look at two propositions that are in contrast made by, I believe, two decent philosophers. Menkiti claims that in traditional society there was no room for the recognition of individual rights. Gyekye, on the other hand, claims that traditional societies did recognise individual rights. Masolo shares the latter view. What we have are two contrasting statements, and they cannot both be correct. One is wrong and the other is right. How then do we work out which one is most likely to be correct?

I suggest that the matter may be solved by looking at two crucial issues. Firstly we look at the nature of humanity and secondly we look at the nature of societies that do not allow for individual rights to be recognised.

Regarding our first consideration, I think Masolo's view on humanity is correct. As shown above, Masolo argues that to be human means to be different, every instance of being human means being different. This view is correct and where humans co-exist that difference will come to the fore and each human, or at least most humans, will seek to live out a life that bears testimony to that difference. In order to live out that difference the individual's right to be – who she conceives herself to be – has to either exist or be brought into existence. Put in other terms no society can ignore the regime of individual rights because the nature of being human and being an individual demands that such rights be created and be respected. Hence we can conclude in this regard that all communities including traditional communitarian African societies have to reckon with the issue of rights.

The second issue will have to do with an investigation into the nature (i.e. social and political organisation) of societies that do not recognise individual rights – or in Menkiti's terminology give individual rights secondary importance. In my view, such societies are essentially characterised by a tendency to openly agitate against such individual rights. It is their official programme to persecute those who are seen as either advocates or practitioners of a different doctrine – individual rights. The persecution is of such a serious nature that it leads to the loss of life of those who are seen as opposed to the regime of disregarding rights. Such a regime will essentially be conceived as dictatorial and oppressive. Any cursory investigation reveals that this is not the case with the structures and organisation of traditional societies. The investigation I have in mind to prove that traditional societies were free and not against individual rights is not an anthropological or historical investigation. I have in mind philosophical texts that adumbrate on the philosophical analysis of the structures of traditional societies. Advocates of consensual democracy, who are philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Joe Teffo and Edward Wamala, argue for the adoption of this political programme by analysing the social and political organisation of the same societies that extreme communitarians analyse. In this respect it is important to note that Wiredu (1996: 187) distances his project from one party state advocacy of the nationalists that

was claimed to be based on traditional political outlook. Although consensual politics aimed at arriving at a consensual position that would be shared and recognised by everyone – it did not do so by suppressing dissent and hounding difference. Rather it sought to arrive at that consensus, according to Wiredu, through logical persuasion. This shows that the analysis and the reality of traditional society must tip towards an interpretation of communitarianism that respects individual rights unequivocally as Masolo's account does.

It might be objected that descriptions of what societies were do not translate into what they valued; in other words statements of how societies were organised and what they claimed to value does not mean that they lived up to these values. My response to this worry is that all societies have ideals and values that they aspire to. A combination of factors may work to militate against the attainment or translation of those values into practice. But, philosophically, it is important to note that, according to this account, the African polity was committed to these values as opposed to the proclamations of socialists and extreme communitarians.

The second reason why we should accept Masolo's version as correct is that it is simple, clear and it avoids unnecessary confusion. We could here refer to Gilbert Ryle's (1973: 18) notion of the category mistake. I do not intend going into details arguing what the category mistake could be and how it obtains with other versions of communitarianism except perhaps to point out that the essentialising of communitarianism has stretched communitarianism to categories that can only be seen as erroneous. This is where Masolo's account enjoys significant advantage over other communitarian interpretations. In the first instance he uses philosophical categories in the ordinary manner in which they are ordinarily understood by philosophers. In other words he desists from the temptation of finding the African difference to include a different usage of categories such as metaphysics and ontology. Secondly he correctly identifies what counts as social and political philosophy to be disparate, for example, from issues of personhood. Such a move makes his interpretation not only simple but it also becomes an interpretation that is unencumbered by

incoherencies. The other accounts of communitarianism are unnecessarily thickened by the burden of having to be everything that is African philosophy, and subsequently, having to account for everything that passes as African philosophy. This should not be taken to mean that Masolo's account is reductionist. On the contrary, Masolo's account is simple and clear. Its simple articulation and clarity is found in his succinct statement that communitarianism is a social and political philosophy that interprets social and political life differently from liberalism. This makes his articulation correct as it simply seeks to articulate what communitarianism is and what it amounts to when conceived as a social and political theory.

The third and final reason is that Masolo's account is presented in a persuasive manner. In other words it does not rely on the authoritative traditional interpretations of reality. Neither does it seek to present itself as a specifically African decree that is metaphysically bound to the reality of African people. In his tracing of the development of Western communitarianism, Masolo succeeds in showing that there are certain crucial similarities in the development of Western communitarian thought and the development of African communitarianism. Both are conceived as an affirmation of a spirit and history of a formerly disenfranchised people. Both reject the spirit imposed through foreign influence. The merit of this comparison is that it begins to show that there is nothing either unique or essential about the African communitarian position, except what Masolo points out – that the nationalists could point out their traditional societies as having practised the communitarian lifestyle they were relying on to reinvigorate African socialism. The importance of this move is that it shows that Africans have theoretical counterparts in the West. Whereas it had been the ordinary belief, among nationalists and their supporting scholars, that all Western thought was individualistic and liberal, Masolo now shows that this is not the case. There are other Westerners, philosophers for that, who are also drawn to the communitarian interpretation of political and social life. This removal, of the ontological nature of communal reality from the socio-political philosophical articulation of communitarianism, makes Masolo's position one that is refreshingly argued for. His communitarian politics is no longer presented, as its predecessors

had done, as a matter of constitutive reality – but a rational choice that seeks to affirm something more than merely acting communitarian. Masolo’s account is no longer one that seeks to claim that the ancestors lived as communitarians or African reality has to be restored. On the contrary it advocates communitarianism as a social and political philosophy. For these reasons I am persuaded that Masolo’s communitarianism is the most acceptable version thus far.

It could be argued that my presentation of Masolo’s position does not do better than Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism or, alternatively, that I have presented a caricature of communitarianism that must not be taken seriously. I wish to start by addressing the second concern. If the objection is to be understood charitably, it will be developed along these lines: The sort of communitarianism as advocated by Tempels, Mbiti and Menkiti no longer retains the kind of dominance that it had in years gone by. There are other recent interpretations of African communitarianism that are fairly less radical or more progressive or even moderate in comparison to what I have termed classical communitarianism. It may then be argued that I should engage Masolo’s argument in the light of these latest developments. To this objection I wish to point out that the radical interpretation as articulated by Menkiti is still supported by certain highly respected philosophers of our time. In particular, I have in mind Kwasi Wiredu’s approval of Menkiti’s articulation of the radical interpretation of the communitarian concept of person as the correct African view (Wiredu 1996: 221). In an endnote, numbered 37, Wiredu notes that there have been various debates in African philosophy on the interpretation of the normative account of personhood. Among the persons he cites is Menkiti and he points the reader to the critique that Gyekye has made against Menkiti’s radical position. However he writes: “My own exposition is in basic agreement with Menkiti’s” (ibid). It could be easy to dismiss Wiredu’s agreement with Menkiti as his own philosophical position, an unenlightened one at that, but I am afraid we cannot do that. This is particularly so if we take into account that Wiredu is fully aware of Gyekye’s devastating critique of Menkiti and his restatement of the communitarian notion of person based on the Akan – which both Wiredu

and Gyekye are. What this means is that Wiredu and Gyekye both have a different understanding of the Akan communitarian notion of personhood. Wiredu interprets it as radical and Gyekye interprets it as moderate. This means that, effectively, the things said against Menkiti by Gyekye, for Wiredu are also true for the Akans. For that reason the classical radical/essentialist view is very much alive. That this account is very much alive is also amply shown by Menkiti's (2004) article, wherein he not only seeks to defend his account as the correct interpretation of African communitarianism but also seeks to develop its normative basis in his explication of the use of "it" as a moral source of personhood. In that article he gives a far much detailed explanation of how "it" operates in order to amplify the suggestion he had made 20 years earlier<sup>66</sup>. So I suggest the classical account has to be seen in that light and has to be addressed in accord with these developments.

As to the first concern that Masolo's account and my support of him do not do better than Gyekye's communitarianism, I wish to point out that there are certain arguments made by Gyekye in the process of explaining his moderate communitarianism that make his account not different from Menkiti's. For my extensive discussion of this point refer to my previous work (Matolino 2009: 168-169) where I argue that Gyekye's account of rights is equivalent to Menkiti's own views of the secondary status of individual rights.

Further, Gyekye's claim that acts such as homosexuality is permissible if done in private is most disingenuous. If we take whatever he is referring to by homosexual acts to refer to the actual sexual act or encounter – the actual copulation – of two or more people of the same sex, then his account is open to serious questions. We must note here that Gyekye limits the acceptability of homosexuality if it is kept away from the public eye. In other words, such people must refrain from making their orientation

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<sup>66</sup> In my earlier work I have offered an extensive criticism against Menkiti's usage of 'it' to an 'it' as a signifier of the best communitarian interpretation of personhood, see (Matolino 2011: 23-37).

public just in case they offend societal values of peace, stability and harmony. But this is where Gyekye's problem lies: his communitarian account does not allow homosexual people to be open and free about their orientation for doing so is violating the social code. He calls on them to hide that orientation in their private spaces and become homosexual in those private spaces – read copulation – and once they are done they must be what society expects them to be. But this position is hypocritical; to call homosexuals to do their thing in private is akin to calling on heterosexuals to do their thing in private. The vast majority of people of any sexual orientation go to a great effort to have sex in private. Heterosexuals do not exploit the fact that heterosexual copulation is approved, to engage in wild or meek public engagements in sexual acts. Most heterosexual people, except perverts, do not enjoy being watched having sex and do not appreciate being confronted with public sex by other heterosexuals. Yet public displays of affection between heterosexuals, open and known relationships, marriage and the protection of their union under law are guaranteed. Why? Because heterosexual relations are not taken to be a threat to social peace, stability and harmony. They are not offensive to the public's sense of morality and Gyekye's communitarianism is prepared to abridge that which is offensive to the public's sense of right. The irony of all this is that homosexuals are persecuted in Africa and Gyekye helpfully proposes that they should keep their orientation behind closed and locked doors. Is that a right at all when so much is at stake about the rights and equality of same sex couples?

This difficulty (of balancing social and individual rights) could perhaps explain Menkiti and Wiredu's advocacy for radical communitarianism. But I suggest that this need not be the advocacy we should accept as Masolo has succeeded in not only stating communitarianism as a non-essential feature of being African but has most importantly given an erudite treatment of what the notion of self entails, and what the regime of rights in African thought is vis-a-vis the reality of the community in a changing world. Effectively, Masolo, unlike Menkiti, Wiredu and Gyekye, is free from the haunting presence of the communitarian ghost.

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# The Case for Communitarianism: A Reply to Critics

by Dismas A. Masolo<sup>67</sup>

*Abstract.* This essay originated from a workshop organized and hosted by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 2012. The focus of the workshop was to provide a platform for critical philosophical discussions of my book, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. The forum provided me with an invaluable opportunity to listen to different readings of the book. I gained greatly from the Johannesburg discussions, and I am immensely grateful to the philosophy department at the University of Johannesburg, especially gratitude to Professor Thaddeus Metz, the department chair and convener, for his generosity in hosting the workshop. I am indebted to all the participants at the workshop for sharing their thoughts. Seeking to respond to the incisive criticism levelled at my work during the Johannesburg meeting and in the present collection, I will re-iterate my position by stating the case for communitarianism, under the following headings: Cheerleading for the individual; The communitarian view; The self as local and universal: The management of knowledge; Self and moral values; Personhood and agency; Of ends and means; and finally: Mind, self, and society

*Key words:* agency, communitarian, individual, knowledge, local, Metz (Thaddeus), mind, moral values;, personhood, self, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (Masolo), society, universal

This essay originated from a workshop organized and hosted by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 2012. The focus of the workshop was to provide a platform for

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<sup>67</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the insistent intercession of Wim van Binsbergen, thanks to whose efforts the present 'reply to critics' could be produced at all, and be appended to this special issue in time.

critical philosophical discussions of my book, *Self and Community in a Changing World*<sup>68</sup>. The forum provided me with an invaluable opportunity to listen to different readings of the book. As I say in the book itself, besides an author's self reading, there is perhaps no one reading of a text by others, as literary critics reminded us in years past when they coined the expression "death of the author". Hans-Georg Gadamer, the German hermeneutician, argued that human understanding was subject to what he called "the historically effected consciousness", claiming by this that humans interpret texts based upon what the specific cultures they are embedded in give them as the lens through which they look at the world around them. Without necessarily implying that every readership of any text is always somehow skewed, the differences that emerge between a reader's rendering and the author's own "object" engender critical debates that can do at least two things: they can expand the author's scope or they can elicit greater clarity in the author's articulation of her/his project. I gained from the Johannesburg discussions in both ways, and I am immensely grateful to the philosophy department at the University of Johannesburg, especially gratitude to Professor Thaddeus Metz, the department chair and convener, for his generosity in hosting the workshop. I am indebted to all the participants at the workshop for sharing their thoughts.

I have not tried in this essay to respond to all the issues raised in the critical essays in this issue. Nor have I undertaken to give detailed replies to them. Both undertakings will come at another and more appropriate time. The chief purpose now is to acknowledge the counterpoints to the positions I hold in *Self and Community* and to state briefly what I consider obvious enough misreadings of *Self and Community* to warrant some response at this time. While I leave to the convener the statement about the gathering and of its intended impact on the rapid demographic and curricular transformations in South African academia, I believe that aca-

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<sup>68</sup> Published by Indiana University Press, 2010. From here onwards in this essay, it is frequently referred to simply as *Self and Community*

democratic and scholarly gatherings such as the one from which these essays emerged are the crucial beginnings of a greater and desirable integration of the practice of philosophy in the country. This integration is needed because South African universities have become the training ground for young and emerging philosophers from around the continent, especially from the non-Arab parts of Africa. The universities have become the destination of choice for the graduate work of such scholars because of South Africa's command of professional and financial resources. This was a major factor in making the workshop on *Self and Community* possible. However, much appears to await greater mental transformation if African philosophy is to be integrated into the regular philosophy curriculum at all South African institutions that offer that discipline.

### **1. *Cheerleading for the individual***

It is pretty straightforward that I think of human selves as communitarian rather than as atomic individuals. A major misconception of a communitarian conception of human selves is that it erases their individuality. Among the essays in this special issue of *Quest*, the piece by Mpho Tschivhaze is notably emphatic that the communitarian view of self such as I espouse in *Self and Community* denies the individual of her/his unique identity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. No-one needs any theorization to notice that we are born, live, and function pretty much as individuals. Biology affirms that each one of us humans bears a unique genetic coding that not even identical twins are, contrary to the conventional usage of the term, really "identical". Denying this sense of individuality would therefore dwindle into triviality. To be sure, communitarians uphold this individuality as pivotal to some of the core positions it holds such as democracy as a socio-political process, and human fallibilism in the quest for epistemological truth. But Ms. Tschivhaze makes other claims against communitarianism which may require a longer reply that we will save for another time. For now, let me say that she casts her own understanding of the self as unique not only in her/his

individuality, a position which we share, but also as the object of moral endeavors. Her argument, hardly new, is that social values which direct both moral and political ideals ought to be directed at the cultivation or promotion of the interests of the individual. As individuals, then, our primary focus is the promotion of self-interests, and the broader social realms should be evaluated in respect of whether or not they provide the conditions that enhance and protect individual interests. Based on this position she lambasts communitarianism for allegedly holding the view that individuals have obligation to their communities rather than to themselves. On account of this alleged communitarian position, she claims that community therefore would appear to hold the key to whether or not its individual members attain personhood which, also in her view, is measured by the degree of every individual's allegiance to community. It therefore would follow, she disapprovingly contends, that personhood is the gift of approval by communities to their individual members.

First, let us say something about individuality and how it is experienced sometimes. As I sit here at my desk and strive to make sense of the many ideas that run through my mind, I experience no doubt that I am alone. I look through the window and wonder what a beautiful late summer day it is. I am thinking about whether the many goals I have for the day have any scale of priority or whether they should matter to me at all. At some point in the day, I will feel the urge to eat or drink something because my body will feel a certain way that will indicate that I am hungry or thirsty, or that I simply desire a little bit of good alcoholic drink. I have received several requests to contribute to efforts to help people who either have been struck by a disaster or who face difficulties in trying to solve one or more problems in their lives, and I wonder whether and why their problems should matter to me. As I sift through these and numerous other matters of my experience, I am alone, just like many other individuals might be, if they are like me, and the ideas and thoughts I produce appear to come solely from me alone. Everything I do ought to arise only from how I evaluate its worth to me. My obligation, I frequently think, ought to be directed toward attaining or improving my interests. This is not only how the human condition *can* be perceived, it is indeed how people tend

to think of themselves; how they think they are constituted based on the activities I have described above. Some people go farther than these constitutive descriptions of self. They claim that the mental activities listed above are evidence of the centrality of “the individual” and hence of its unity and reality, of body and psychology (things of the mind generally), and have an autonomy that no other good can surpass. In this view, no social or political system can have goals that supersede the interests of the individual, and hence the worth of the actions of everyone, and indeed of a political system, should be measured only in terms of whether or not they promote those interests. Stating the value of the individual such that everything else can have value only to the extent of its recognition of the primacy of the individual and her/his interests is called *individualism*.

As I discuss in *Self and Community*, the history of the term “individualism” in the sense I have just described can be traced to the general history of Western thought and to the social and political transformations on the European continent as people sought a feasible and desirable social order. In these traditions, individualist tendencies in general and individualist thought specifically permeate different layers of society and people’s interests. For example, current debates in the United States over gun control or over the new universal health insurance law that will require universal healthcare protection and will protect people with existing conditions from discrimination by health insurance companies have produced polarized opinions about the extent to which the government can legitimately impose policies that curtail constitutionally-protected individual freedoms. In the sharply contrasting positions around these issues, even some poor people whose lives would become far better by having subsidized health insurance have voiced strong opposition to the introduction of universal health insurance because of what they perceive to be an infringement on the freedoms of the individual. In their eyes, every individual has the right to own a gun and to decide how her/his healthcare should be managed. At the same time, some people in these same groups vehemently oppose the right of a woman to choose, as an individual, whether or not to have abortion.

In the two examples of American public debate on individual rights one can identify three forms of individualism, namely epistemological individualism, ethical individualism, and political individualism. The individual is sovereign over what is true or false, just as she is sovereign over what is the right thing to do, and over determining who makes decisions about how people should live their lives. But the examples also show that individuals do not necessarily hold all three views. Consider, for example, how the proponents of political individualism would read Jean-Paul Sartre's radical existentialist individualism, or Friedrich Nietzsche's anti-Christ; both strongly oppose the imposition of group beliefs, values, and myths on individuals. In these expressions individualism is viewed primarily as the antonym of "socialism", "collectivism", "communalism" or "communitarianism", the "masses", or what may be indicated by such terms (usually in pejoratively, by Nietzsche, for example) as the "herd", the "crowd," and so on. The question, however, is the extent to which, short of anarchistic position, both Sartre's and Nietzsche's respective brands of individualism explain the psychological constitution of the individual and the basis of individuals' pursuit of values, including the very idea of individuality as a value.

In some traditions, then, communitarianism is regarded and studied predominantly as a sociopolitical idea. It was once regarded as the driving idea in some parts of western Europe such as France, for example, before it lost its influence in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It flourished in France under the theocratic system in which the papacy of the Catholic Church had authority over whole societies under the direction of Church leadership on behalf of God. As I explained briefly in *Self and Community* (Chapter 6), there are varieties of communitarianism. What is apparently unclear to some people is whether the espousal of communitarianism is or is not compatible with upholding of the value of the individual. In what follows, I hope to dispel the impression that communitarianism is incompatible with upholding the view that the individual has irrevocable importance and undeniable degrees of autonomy based on her/his natural capacities, especially in the present time of heightened awareness of the rights of the individual. I hope to

clarify further that naturalism, which recognizes all the capacities and endowments of the individual for moral and cognitive functional autonomy, leads directly to communitarism rather than to individualism, as those who subscribe to the uncompromising trends of liberalism claim.

Individualism, writes Rosalind Shaw<sup>69</sup>, stands “in contrast to the ‘collectivist’ ideas of the individual...[as] a more ‘atomist’ strand of thought, derived from philosophers such as Hume and Hobbes, developed into nineteenth-century liberal and utilitarian ideas. This strand, in which human beings are defined as self-interested, ‘rational’ calculators of individual advantage, has.. The strongest claim to be the precursor of modern individualism..., long dominant in [such places as] the United States, where ‘individualism’ primarily came to celebrate capitalism and liberal democracy’, and ‘became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance.’”<sup>70</sup> In these two countries, in both dominant social theory and strong political organizations, the individual became the preeminent agent from whose actions the nation-state depends and whose interests become the defining factor that separates good and desirable socio-political conditions from bad ones. Concluding, Shaw writes that “The rhetoric of ‘the individual’ thus proceeds based on the use of implicit contrasts with relational systems of personhood in which such formulations as ‘the shackles of tradition’, ‘unchanging social custom,’ ‘tribalism,’ ‘determinism,’ ‘fatalism,’ etc., construct negative, mirror-image descriptions of the kinds of societies in which both individuality and personal agency are supposedly erased.”<sup>71</sup>

There cannot be enough condemnation of bad practices in the name of community, such as the denial of freedom to individuals in the course of practicing culture, regardless of how crucial a customary practice may be deemed to be as a marker of individuals’ group membership. *Self and*

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<sup>69</sup> Shaw 2000: 28.

<sup>70</sup> Shaw quotes from Lukes 1973: 26.

<sup>71</sup> Shaw 2000: 29.

*Community in a Changing World* bears testimony to my own condemnation of the persistent yet unwarranted denial to millions of individuals each year of their basic right to make personal choices, especially on matters of denying education to the girl-child, forcing girls into the universally condemned practice of female circumcision, subjecting girls to child labor, and dragging girls into prearranged child marriage. As I have argued there against these malpractices that contravene the female child's right to self-preservation (with references to Pierre Bourdieu<sup>72</sup>, Corinne Kratz<sup>73</sup>, Kwame Anthony Appiah<sup>74</sup>, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ<sup>75</sup>, among others), these constraints on the individual are usually perpetrated by persons – either parents or guardians – who view themselves as custodians of their traditions. Note that the authors I have just mentioned display concern with how overzealous protection of the ways of traditional institutions of society generates conflict between the values of the individual and those of the community. But while they depict these values in sharp contrasts, they also affirm the relative autonomy of the individual as stemming from the constant and dialectical engagement with other consciousnesses in public space. I hold the view that the relational reality in which the individual lives is the only factor that shapes her/his rationality. Through training in social environments the individual learns about the nature and importance of truth, and about a host of ethical and social values like truthfulness, trust, right, wrong, good, bad, kindness, honesty, friendship, and others alongside their regulative applications to deliberation and action. Similarly, we learn from society the principles of artistic and aesthetic judgment. The view that people learn these values from society rather than intuitively on the strength of some

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<sup>72</sup> Bourdieu 1977.

<sup>73</sup> Kratz 1994. Note that Kratz does not trace the effects of tradition and custom on the individual like Bourdieu and Appiah do, hence it is not easy to say whether she shares or disagrees with their views about the matter.

<sup>74</sup> Appiah 1992.

<sup>75</sup> wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ 1982.

ontological constitution is based on what I term philosophical anthropology which, again in my view, asks questions about how we become who we believe we are in both our thoughts and conduct. Is there an inner “I” that intuitively discovers itself as “me” without the mediation of experience or exposure to the outside world? Our integral (somatic, cognitive, moral, and emotional) development prepares us to become effective participants in or active members of the communities we live in. I use the term “learn” not in a passive sense, but to indicate the interactive experience that enables individuals to grow and develop into agents. To fully attain this participatory role in our lives, we often have to resist the dominating powers of the institutions of society because they disable our capacity for full development and effective participation. The question, then, of whether good communities make good individual persons, or good individual persons make good communities appears to be a perennial one as it has been asked by thinkers of almost every millennium, albeit for different motivations, and it lies in the heart of contemporary debates in all disciplines that study different aspects of the human condition.

The often-asked question “What’s in it for me?” summarizes popular attitudes about the interests of the individual. Concepts of the dignity and freedom of the individual are powerful and appealing reminders of what every individual should be accorded. Dissidents against different types of twentieth-century authoritarian governments in both colonial and post-independence Africa were empowered by the ideals and appeals of individual freedoms. Long before the collapse of the Cold War, these same ideals empowered dissidents in the Soviet Union against the mighty Communist Party. More recently, we have seen a similar campaign for individual freedoms in the confidence and resolve of Chinese students in the famous Tiananmen Square standoff. The good (bonum) driving these instances of resolve, as it drove the global student uprisings of 1968 or uprisings in South Africa for over two hundred years, especially in the struggles against the racist and unilaterally legalized segregation policy there between 1948 and 1994, was the quest for greater freedoms of speech, association, and of personal choice. The ideal of autonomy and

the freedoms affiliated with autonomy appeal to anyone who values the ability to make decisions for her or himself. The goal of opposition to colonial rule, both peaceful and armed, was to win back and reestablish these freedoms for citizens of occupied territories, countries, or nations.

That we are individuals is quite obvious for everyone to see. At birth, we are ushered into the world as single individuals. Even in multiple births, the arrival of one infant after another is what is regarded as normal. Conjoined twins are an anomaly, and advancements in medical technology have made it possible in some cases to separate the pair – to give each sibling his or her own individuality. Fair enough, and really no-one would deny the need for this kind of autonomy; it is necessary for both basic biological functioning and the exercise of the capacities that give individuals personal autonomy, such as performing and expressing thoughts and making decisions. A well-developed brain demonstrates the ability of its different compartments to execute functions that which are regarded to be the basis of every individual’s autonomy – such as motor functions, sensory functions, cognitive functions, moral functions, and emotional functions. In this sense, and without any slight implied, the makeup of every individual human is comparable to, say, the composite makeup of a bicycle or any other composite and complex machine whose various parts must be “well” or “healthy” in both their makeup and functional roles in order for the composite entity – in this case the bicycle – to be and to function as it is intended to do. That said, we should now turn to see how an organistically healthy individual becomes a person.

## **2. *The communitarian view***

Thaddeus Metz has raised questions regarding the relation of individuals to community, and how this relationship plays out in respect to the concept of personhood. Besides making some sweeping, unwarranted, and admonishing remarks directed at what can only be understood as “the field” of African philosophy. That charge is about the now almost rhe-

torical claims that “in African thought, ‘community comes before the individual’, or, as in some idioms, ‘I am because we are’”, and so on. The background provided by the literature in which these idioms have been prominent have certainly influenced Metz in his remarks.

The view that I hold is not a function of my identity, nor is it an essentialist claim about how some assumed “African personhood” ought to be understood. It is simply how, to my understanding, the human condition is. I will start by stating that the idea of communitarianism is neither inimical to nor incompatible with some aspects of liberalism, at least not in the strong sense like communism is. Yet, in contrast to liberalism, it does not espouse a picture of social reality as made up of atomistic individuals whose relations with others are purely but informally contractual. Communitarianism is committed to the view that for human beings the world starts with the individual. This is why the freedom of the individual plays a central role in understanding, according to this philosophy, how the individual arrives at his/her self-awareness., of why epistemological objectivity is inherently problematic. Elements of communitarianism differ from those that accompany the idea of “public” or “socialist” states in which society tends to be thought of as comprised of empty and depersonalized institutions. Communitarianism, by contrast, sees community, or society, if you wish, as a valuable reality within which, besides becoming able to grasp the sense of “I” through the interactive mediation of (the presence of) others, the individual acquires also other forms of language and the conceptual realm it relates to, whether it is descriptive or normative. The individual acquires these abilities only in community or harmony with the interests and goals of others. These special characteristics of communitarianism are universal, and so do not describe biological characteristics special to Africans. What is astonishing, as revealed by Metz, is how it escapes the unwarranted and obviously misplaced arrogance of individualists. Descartes showed them the way.

Liberalism thrives in the recognition and celebration of the individual as an autonomous and therefore a complete cognitive and moral agent. By contrast, communitarianism sees the self as part of a biosocial context in

which her/his organistic capacities such as the ability to imitate others and to form ideas and concepts are not only dependent on behavior for active appearance (“showing up”), but are also oriented toward behavior. Babies are spoken to so they can imitate, and they are propped to take that first step in walking when the mother takes the lead in slow motion, and so on, just like people, adults or not, are taught to hit the right note in singing when the conductor leads them to repeat several times in *practice*. In other words, what we come to know as mind, for example, would not even be known to be if a human being were not immersed in a communicative system, any system of rational communicants. It is the case, for example, that one of the early signs of autism, a condition widely considered in medical circles an obstacle to human socialization, is a baby’s or child’s inability to respond to behavioral props. Subsequently, the so-enabled active capacity becomes a necessary tool for abiding within that particular and any other system of rational communication by learning both the language of the group and the norms of conduct that define good citizenship in the group.<sup>76</sup>

Among several implications of the indeterminate concept of mind is the fact that it is not just the as-yet-to-be-enabled mental capacity of an infant that can be adapted to any given cultural system, the minds of adults can adapt too. I consider the former case to be unproblematically obvious. A

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<sup>76</sup> Extreme cases of developmental anomalies are the subject of stories, both fictional and real, about what is generally referred to as the “feral child” or the “wild child”. Imagined or known to have been isolated from human contact from a very young age and therefore lacking human care, the “feral child” is usually depicted as lacking in the idea or showing of love, social behavior, and most importantly, human language. “Feral children” may be the result of accidental separation from parents or other family members, or they may be victims of deliberate seclusion due to a condition that other family members do not wish to associate with or expose to the outside world. In the latter case, the child is usually locked up in a secrete part of the family residence and is given food without any other form of contact. If not inflicted by malformations, the “feral child” may operate on the basis of instinctive drive in his/her encounter with the world around him/her, but cannot function as a person unless trained to immerse into a human community.

child born, say, in Louisville, Kentucky, of biological ancestry of white-skinned parents can be made to grow to become a member of the Luo community if, from birth or soon thereafter, the child were taken to grow up with Dholuo (the language of the Luo) as its primary mode of communication and the culture of the Luo was the primary source of concepts for making sense of the world and the norms of conduct. Since being a Luo is a cultural rather than a biological attribute, this lad would grow up as a Luo person no less than, say, my own or my brother's children who are brought up under the same system. Contrary to the biases our upbringings tend to tell us, we can never tell for sure what it means biologically to be Polish, Swede, Tonga, Shona, or anything else. What we do is to identify with any one of the groups in the world as the cultural system by which we organize our conduct.<sup>77</sup>

I define personhood as a socially generated category, or one that is conferred by society in a variety of ways depending on the context in ques-

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<sup>77</sup> Politics of culture, and subjection to cultural domination of Africa have left many Africans not only unable to recognize their indigenous languages as respectable modes of communication, but much less as sources of concepts of the nature of the world and of normative principles for moral conduct and for socio-political organization. This collection of essays contains many examples of such disdain for use of concepts from African languages. Human reality reveals, however, that we think in words, and words belong to specific languages, which are the products of specific cultures. Sometimes I wish there was a language better than the one I grew up speaking, but I have found none, just as I believe anyone who has grown up with her/his own believes about her/his own like I do about mine. If you have been privileged with learning and speaking more languages than just your own, like most formerly colonized peoples do, tracing a concept and the subtle variations it acquires when expressed in different languages should not be considered a futile exercise. As regards the role of language in the construction of the self, it has been observed, and it is easily observable in children's growth, that the gradual process of acquiring linguistic capacity unveils the fact that we are fallible, a trait which comes from our embodiment, a condition that 'conditions' us to learn from lived experiences of intersubjective relations with other embodied selves, mainly through language which spurs an internal language in the child or any learner of a new form of linguistic structure of "the world". This picture reveals a social self, not a hidden Cartesian self that wakes up only to find that it is contemplating itself.

tion, invariably depicting society's expectations of an individual, usually based on society's awareness of the degree of an individual's development. Thus, for example, to say that "a person X is morally rotten" is not synonymous with saying that "X is not person", or that "X lacks personhood". Living and acting in society not only makes us become aware of regulation of conduct such as the moral implications of some of our actions, it is also the place where we improve our moral character. Moral awareness and character are derived from and are improved in society. Society sets standards in different domains of life which it expects its able members to try to attain. And while it generally blames violators, the average member goes almost unnoticed, and praise is generally reserved for those who exceed the average expectations in any circumstance. Regarding the latter, for example, the lad who helps the elderly lady down the street by pushing her trash can back to her garage earns praise in a world where folks don't easily give such help any more. Or the man who maintains calm and peace when he is pushed out of his path by a rogue lad is praised for his composure and rejection of a retaliatory action where such would have been a general expectation.

The cattle thief from across the river is no less a person than the disciplined and virtuous army captain whose life is a model of a good member of society. They are both persons, and maybe they are siblings, but the cattle thief is a bad one. While he is averagely normal in most senses of good health, he developed bad habits that cause him continuously to make bad choices. On this basis, he may be reported to the village chief for arrest and prosecution. His captain brother, on the other hand, habitually makes choices that reflect what he was taught was the proper way for people to conduct themselves: one does not take other people's property without their permission. But if it were to be determined that the brother who takes people's cattle or other property was in fact not acting out of free will but by a compulsive push to do so, then his family might be asked to restrain him by means other than having him arrested and prosecuted. Instead, they might want him to be admitted to a specialized health facility for treatment. Likewise, if his brother was not a soldier but only dressed like one and marched around the village like the army captain

that he was before he was discharged from the military because of mental illness, people in the village would pity rather than adore or praise him, even if they had fond memories of him dressing in a similar way when he was a real soldier. In both of these latter cases, the respective personhoods of the two brothers are diminished. They would not be assigned duties in the village that require proper judgment because their capacities for this expectation of all healthy persons are compromised.

The idea of personhood as conferred calls for the need to understand personhood in terms of a balance that gives equal weight to culturally objectified, and subjectively apprehended aspects of social life. In their discussions of what persons are, philosophers often focus on transcendental categories that fail to capture the impact of the lived experiences of individuals who, besides having a pretty good idea of who/what they believe they are, confront the expectations that society imposes on them every day of what it means to be *someone*. They do this by behaving as they presume or project that society expects them to behave. This observation is not new, as it is what all humans experience everyday.

Perhaps a bit of consideration of what the social sciences teach us to observe would help. The German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl developed what he called transcendental phenomenology in order to develop an approach that avoided (by suspending or, as he preferred to call it, bracketing) the details and variations of the natural stance, by which he meant everyday lived experiences. This approach drew a sharp critique from Jean-Paul Sartre, who insisted that understanding the existential condition of humans cannot suspend any aspect of experience, including the contradictions of everyday experience that characterize precisely our strivings in the quest for freedom. The thesis behind Sartre's radical existentialism can be summarized as claiming that the very conditions of our existence have placed us in the position of striving to escape the strictures of everyday life; we cannot ignore or wish them away. The term "strictures" should be understood to describe all kinds of conditions of limitation imposed on individuals by other individuals, groups of individuals, institutions, as well as by collective beliefs, customs and traditions. These

limitations “herd” individuals toward already chosen beliefs and practices, thus giving individuals no freedom to make their own choices. For example, discrimination against black people based on their race, or against women based on their gender, against other categories of people based on their ethnicity, or against yet another category of people based on their sexual orientation have all long been opposed as wrongly assuming that people in those categories were inferior and therefore undeserving of treatment equal to that of people who were unlike them – namely white, male, straight, and of Anglo-Saxon descent. It was Sartre’s view that besides these politically and socially more pronounced conditions, even in ordinary existential conditions the “I” is always in oppositional relation to another “Is” and the circumstances created by the fact of their “being- there”. In this sense, Sartre says, “what I am can be revealed as the term of a relation... It implies as such a comprehension of what I am as being-there. But at the same time it is very necessary to define what I am from the standpoint of the being-there of other ‘thises.’”<sup>78</sup>

Earlier, Marcel Mauss had indicated this concept of self in lived experience by separating that aspect of personhood that he referred to as *moi*, the awareness of self, from *la personne morale*, the ideological definition of self in terms of rules and roles<sup>79</sup>, although he thought of the latter in terms that focused on the experiences of the self that are deep, interior, and idiosyncratic, as opposed to wearing a mask that is meant for people we want to judge us in a particular way. Understanding personhood as competence to exercise agency in a social world does not, therefore, use the idea of “competence” in terms of virtuous perfection; it uses this word in Mauss’s sense of *personne morale*, or the public aspect of human life. In this conceptualization, the active participation of humans is defined by the correlativity of stimulus and response; people act as agents because they exhibit their cognitive, emotional, and moral ability to live in society. This understanding of personhood recognizes but also differs from

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<sup>78</sup> Sartre 1956: 632.

<sup>79</sup> See Mauss 1939.

the substantialist view that one finds, for example, in Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke. It claims that reason, conceived as ability to engage in both reflective and nonreflective experience, occurs as a natural attribute of mind. This attribute is affected by society in the sense that it is the result of specifically human responses to the stimulations of the conduct of people in our social environment. In this sense, the mind “erupts” as a responsive impulse of the human organism (we are not free to choose to have or not have mind), and its functional order is gradually shaped through informal and formal guidance by those who surround us. The experiential aspect of mind is “wired” appropriately for its “ignition” by virtue of its presence in the natural conditions of social experience.

The primary tool of social engagement is language. A combination of words and ostensive behavior introduces all children to “the world” they are located in. For many children, this world starts with relating certain types of sounds with ingestible objects and with words and tones of voice that indicate reassurance, such as “Okay, everything is okay., here we go”, which the parent or any other caregiver follows with specific actions such as feeding. Alongside these primary forms of socialization, children are introduced to concepts of the social world around them, usually relational concepts with “Mother” or Daddy” leading the list. Later, other concepts about the specific social world of the baby are formed that follow and reflect the expanding world of the child. Opinions differ about when exactly in its growth and development the child begins to sense and react to the social events happening around it, thus signaling when the mind comes into function. Regardless of where and with whom, every child’s life begins with exposure of the biological individual – the child – to a minimal society whose communicative conduct transforms the child into a minded individual.

### **3. The self as local and universal: The management of knowledge**

In his essay, Kai Horsthemke raises a fundamental question about the very idea of indigenous knowledge. He argues that there is no use of promoting the idea of indigenous knowledge if the belief that make up such an idea were false. The joke he tells at the beginning of his essay is about the physical world; it is about members of an Australian tribe that relies on their chief to predict how severe the impending winter is likely to be so they can prepare for it effectively. The point of the story is that there is nothing indigenous about knowledge. If the tribesfolk in the anecdote had used the appropriate methods, not only would they have attained the desired answers to their worries, but, also, the answers could have been attained by anyone applying the same methods - in this case, the methods of predicting the weather.- correctly.

The assumption Horsthemke works with is not new. Here is a brief statement as a start: while the world of physical objects, of their laws, and just of natural events generally precede us, and probably will go on with or without us, our discourses about it do not. The reader probably will remember my use in *Self and Community* of the opening statement of Wittgenstein's well known *Tractatus*: "The world is all that is the case."<sup>80</sup> The significance of this statement for me in relation to what I say about indigenous knowledge is what is required to fully describe "the world". As Russell says in his introduction to *Tractatus*, "The world is fully described if all atomic facts are known, together with the fact that these are all of them."<sup>81</sup> *The difficulty unveiled by Russell's comment does not lie in the logical sense or possibility of "fully describing the world."* *It lies in the view of Wittgenstein that such descriptions would have to be empirical, leaving no doubt that for the Wittgenstein of this stage, there was one universal language whose propositions had this special picture-relation*

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<sup>80</sup> Wittgenstein 1961: 5.

<sup>81</sup> Russell 1961.

*to reality, as every proposition is a truth function of all atomic facts of which it is constituted. The idea that we can fully describe the world by taking into consideration only the totality of facts about that world gives the false impression that there must be a limited number of facts about the world which must be experienced by all people in identical ways as only this can lead to a universal language whose claims are assessable by anybody. Not only would this deny the possibility of private language at the personal level, but would, by sort of a poor extension, also deny the possibility of language restricted to groups of people. The argument, usually associated with Wittgenstein's other work, Philosophical Investigations, claims that if a person assigns signs to the sensations that only he/she experiences, hence are private, he/she would never be able to assign the same sign to any subsequent sensation because he/she would never know that they are identical sensations; hence it would be impossible to assess whether his/her subsequent signage is correct or incorrect, as this would assume some sort of publicly accessible process and criteria. We cannot make sense of the notion of correctly (or incorrectly) reapplying a signage to a private sensation, and we cannot make sense of the notion of a private language. In addition, a language with terms for publicly accessible objects, or natural conditions like in Horsthemke's argument, would, if regarded to be private or indigenous to its users, still be claimed to lack criteria for the correct reapplication of such terms. Hence, he argues, the claims about indigenous knowledge, which he takes to be a broadened notion of private language, is equally incoherent.*

Two things: one, Horsthemke's argument overextends the idea and problems related to "private language" which, in its historical origins dating back to Hume and taken up more recently by the proponents of positivism, addresses only mental occurrences as opposed to "what it is like to live through an exceptionally cold winter". Assessment of the latter may include memory of known folks who have either perished or suffered in some other ways because they were not as prepared for an exceptionally severe winter. The idea of "experience" that informs concerns with a season is not identical to that of "direct experience" in sensation. Two, Horsthemke appears unduly to think that knowledge is only about empirical

claims. The world of humans is made of far more than preoccupation with just empirical claims about “the world”, or only with the truth value of such claims. Objects may be the same to a group of people who populate a particular region, but it does not follow that everyone in that region thinks only of the same atomic facts out of such objects even if it would make sense to them when made. Horsthemke’s argument rests implausibly on a reductionist definition of “experience” as pure somatic movements of nerves, muscles, lenses, and so on. In other words, the meaning of “experiencing objects” would have to be restricted to what occurs when we encounter one in empirical senses alone; but is it?

To borrow from Appiah<sup>82</sup> *on a matter that has long been debated in a variety of ways, knowledge that a few words with hands extended over a cup of wine does not turn the wine into blood does not bar the Christians who sip the wine from believing that it has been “converted” into blood, or, likewise, that the wafer they eat during communion is suddenly the body of a man who asked them to do so. The conversions are definitely questionable from the standpoint of science, but it has not prevented sound scientists of repute from engaging in these rituals. Appiah narrates how when European travellers, some of whom were missionaries who had come to Africa to tell the Ashanti that engaging in the rituals I just described were acts of salvation, observed Ashanti offerings of gold to their god, they were quick to remark that the Ashanti falsely assumed that God would “actually” take the gold dust offered to him. Christians, not the Ashanti, believe that prayer and extension of the consecrated hands of the priest effect a transubstantiation that warrants the belief that drinking the wine and eating the wafer following the consecration is indeed drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ. Fillipo Selvaggi, who taught me metaphysics and the philosophy of science in college, was as good a physicist and a member of the Italian Council of Nuclear Physics as he was a devout Jesuit priest. The view, therefore, that the world of science eliminates the idea of indigenous knowledges is as unreflective as the*

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<sup>82</sup> Appiah 1992: Chapter Six.

*belief that because womanhood is biologically the same everywhere, there is nothing that warrants differences in the idea of motherhood. The language of Christianity or of Ashanti rituals may not have made it into Wittgenstein's notion of atomic facts or the totality of complex propositions that have been built out of those facts, but knowledge of the Ashanti experience of the world would not be complete without considering how they regard gifts, favors, respect, and matters of that kind, both in the terrestrial sense, and in their relations with their gods. Today, however, some people reject religious beliefs or arguments for such beliefs on scientific or agnostic grounds. The idea of indigenous knowledge is far broader than how people express concerns or make claims about empirical reality. It is also about people's creative transformation of the physical world around them in response to their needs; and it is also about how people design norms of conduct to regulate their relations as well as access to and distribution of resources.*

The joke that Kai Horsthemke shares at the beginning of his article is bad, to put it very mildly. If people collect wood to feed their furnaces when it is cold, preparing for the condition, if true, by collecting wood will always be the rational action to take. People who have been through a similar condition would be well served by their memory in order to make the appropriate judgement about what to do. In the narrative, in fact, people seek any sign (prediction) from their elders that the precedent (an exceptionally cold winter) is indeed going to be the case. The elder, for whatever reason, tells the people that the precedent has been predicted to be true (severe cold winter ahead). The people's reaction by deciding to do what they believe any reasonable person or reasonable people should do when the winter is cold, namely collect wood to feed their furnaces, is both reasonable (seek warmth in cold conditions) and rational (concluding, appropriately, the rational course of action in such circumstances). I see this kind of behavior all the time where I live when the city readies salt trucks "because" the weatherwoman has predicted that a snowstorm is headed our way. Just remember that weather predictions are independent of people's reactions to the news. They are not materially related as there is no causal relation between them. Not everyone prepares for the

storms that are coming when the forecast announces their imminent arrival. Because they fear the severity of the consequences of storms and winters generally, people seek preparedness by consulting predictive sources that have proven reliable in the past. Sometimes these predictions err, intentionally or not, so people “reasonably” prepare for what does not come to pass.

In another example, the aborigine chief who chooses to intentionally cheat his people does not consult as they probably expected him to do. His capacity to consult is why they believe his advice is credible. Because they trust him to give a reliable prediction, like his predecessors have probably done, the people gather wood. Surely the gathering of wood does not predict the weather, even when a neighbor might retort that “it appears that winter will be cold” simply because they have seen their neighbor gathering wood. The remark “it appears that winter will be cold” neither claims nor even remotely implies that gathering wood proves that winter will be cold. It only states that “this neighbor of mine might have heard it from somewhere.” The trust is not in what the neighbor is doing as proof. Rather, it is in the assumed reliability of the source the neighbor is assumed to base his action on. For other examples, we might think of people who die because their physicians misdiagnosed their condition or people who died because their nurse knowingly gave them a lethal drug. In both of these cases, people perished because they trusted what the titles of these caregivers stood for.

Thus, trust is always part of knowledge-creation, especially when and where the field of envisaged consumer(s) is broader than that of the creator her/him-self. If a weather siren sounds, we become worried about what might be about to happen because we trust the person who operates the siren switch. We take a quick glance at the sky and say, “The weatherwoman is telling us that something bad is about to happen and that we should heed what she is telling us to do by sounding the siren. We trust her competence, her ability to detect and retain information about the kind of event or fact in question. Secondly, we also believe that the weatherwoman is using the tools of her trade as she is turning the siren

on. She is in the weather room as opposed to being in a hospital bed where she is being treated for cerebral malaria. Thirdly, we believe that she is being sincere or honest about what she is telling us and not playing a prank. Now, what would happen if instead of the weatherwoman sounding the siren herself, or us believing that that is indeed what is happening, someone else comes up and says we should run to a safe place because she heard the siren and believes the weatherwoman is telling us something and that she trusts her? How do we deal with the second-hand reporter? And what if there were a third-hand reporter?

Since chiefship is not directly related to expertise in weather detection expertise (this would be the case only if only expert weathermen were appointed chiefs), we would need additional evidence as the basis for trusting the chief on matters of weather reporting. There ought to have been an additional narrative to explain why the people of the tribe resorted to their chief on these matters. In the end, of course, he abused the trust by degrading himself to the rank of a con man, just as would be the case if an expert weatherwoman reported a weather-related event from her hospital bed while stricken with cerebral malaria.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the term “indigenous” is not a synonym for “non-Western” or for “non-modern,” although it was given these connotations in colonial language and literature. Its variant, “native”, is equally common. Horsthemke refers to Hallen and Sodipo’s discussion of the distinction in Yoruba language between belief and knowledge, one which, perhaps inappropriately, I brought into affinity with Wiredu’s concept of truth as opinion in *Self and Community*. Hallen and Sodipo’s distinction between belief and knowledge relates, as I understand it, to an important point about the role of testimony in considering whether or not to accept as true statements that are delivered by a second-hand or third-hand reporter. Layers of reportage, as Alvin Goldman called them, are often present in the treatment of knowledge in social contexts.<sup>83</sup> *The idea*

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<sup>83</sup> Goldman 1999: 103 - 130.

that there is “a reduction of ‘indigenous knowledge’ to first-hand, direct, experiential knowledge-claims that may, indeed, be mistaken!”<sup>84</sup> is a false reading of *Self and Community*. My discussion of Hallen and Sodipo’s comparative analysis of the concept of truth in English and Yoruba was not offered as an illustration of “indigenous knowledge.” The concept of “indigenous knowledge” is not exclusively about truth-claims, much less about the inference that all indigenous knowledge is true. The idea that a perfect translation is difficult to attain when moving between different languages has its own merit as a philosophical problem, and Hallen and Sodipo used the fascinating Yoruba example to illustrate the point. On the other hand, assuming that it is indeed a form of indigenous knowledge, then what would exempt the definition of knowledge as “justified true belief” from being an example of indigenous Western knowledge?

#### **4. *Self and moral values***

Communitarianism does not imply that we are all limited to our specific experiences in groups such as our families or ethnic communities, even if the experience of self as socially embedded is best exemplified in them. The family in particular functions as the primary location of social experience for many people. It is where socialization starts for most children, however it (the family) is defined. It is because experience has a social dimension, because the self or the human organism is always located in a field with others, that we feel ourselves to be anthropologically situated to start the human journey with the social act of communication and to ground the development of personhood on a complex system of social interactions. On this topic, I quoted Meyer Fortes in *Self and Community*:

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<sup>84</sup> Horsthemke, this volume, p. 7 of the draft.

“Thus, from whichever way we approach our enquiry we see how important it is to keep in mind the two aspects of personhood. Looking at it from the objective side, the distinctive qualities, capacities and roles with which a society endows a person enable the person to be known to be, and also to show himself to be the person he is supposed to be. Looked at from the subjective side, it is a question of how the individual, as actor, knows himself to be – or not to be – the person he is expected to be in a given situation and status. The individual is not a passive bearer of personhood; he must appropriate the qualities and capacities, and the norms governing its expression to himself.”<sup>85</sup>

I have decided to go back to this quote for a reason: that read carefully, and reflectively about the multiple ways of expressing senses of a person, some folks may desist from arrogantly claiming that they know “the precise [ assuming there was only one] meaning of the relationship between social interaction and personhood” (Metz, p. 4 of draft).

My account of the self claims that self-awareness is derived rather than direct or intuitive, and that it develops from birth as a function of the communicative conduct of those who make up the primary social environment of the child. Social distinctions, the pivotal point of which is the onset of the idea of “I” as distinct from others, are followed by the development of agency, namely that bodily interactions with objects cause them to change. For example, a child’s furious throwing of arms can cause her dinner plate to fall on the floor and break, thereby making her food no longer available. Because these actions are regularly followed by comments of the parent or any other caregiver; (“See, you don’t throw things to the floor; now you don’t have dinner, it is all gone!”), the child learns agency, that their actions can cause undesirable situations. On other occasions, the child is warned not to pull the cat’s tail because the cat could bite her, but she does so anyway. Then the cat turns around fast with a hiss of disapproval and lurches at her hand and gives her a bite, to which the observing mother retorts: “See? I told you”. From this the child will learn several things: first, that she can be wrong, be a source of error; second, that other people’s testimony can correctly describe the world out

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<sup>85</sup> Fortes 1973: 273.

there, which they know and she does not; and third, that some mistakes can have painful consequences. Gradually, as the child develops a way to make sense of the world around her, learning through trial and error as in the case of the cat, she develops a sense of who she is, not only in relation to the world of objects but also in relation to other people, who she comes to learn to be the other “Is”. She comes to regard and trust other people as possible sources of reliable beliefs and knowledge. Like herself, they too make mistakes sometimes. She realizes that everyone is fallible.

Although it is biologically true that as an individual each person has a unique identity defined by their DNA that through the wonders of biology he or she has inherited from their ancestors, the same cannot be said of what makes us into cultural subjects. What we learn when we become self-aware is our relationship to the world, including and driven by the social environment of our growth and development. As biosocial beings, we are at the same time the products and the vehicles of this process.

To term this understanding of personhood as uniquely African, or that understanding African ethics is based on the idea of personhood, is a misunderstanding of what communitarianism is all about. Communitarianism is a general theory that claims that the distinctive qualities and capacities that define us as persons are socially generated, and that the constitution of the self as a cognitive and moral agent comes not from a special cognitive faculty of intuition but from our interactions with others and our conduct in the world. Born with utter deficiency except for her or his biological capacity and readiness for the social world, the self is totally dependent on the social world and thus can be understood only by external and public criteria (as all observations of human growth attest), not by criteria that are internal and private. This position reverses the order of priority for the Cartesian who holds that thought is grounded in self-consciousness. From the brief outline above of a child’s communicative encounter with the world through the gradual leads of parents or other acquaintances, the child learns basic principles that anchor her or his sense of self and the basic attributes of self.

Hence, the child, and all humans for that matter, do not develop their sense of the world, including their sense of themselves, from an innate faculty that grasps not only the sense of self but also, as presented by Descartes, the application of the inferential principle (*ergo*) from which it grounds its primacy. This sounds like “I am because I am” of the biblical Yahweh’s proclamation of his primacy. The Cartesian tradition may probably lead there, and Descartes might have wittingly made the analogy, but that is not our preoccupation here. Mine is a naturalist view that stands up against the perception, central to Descartes’ “thinking substance” and Kant’s “transcendental ego”, that there is an innate order of cognitive and moral reason that works for humans as a transcendental law of the atemporal substantive self.

Does the “acquisition of personhood” have a time line? The problem lies in the misunderstanding of the term “acquisition”, which some read as “coming into the position of having or possessing something”, usually by doing something else. Applied to personhood, “acquiring” seems, in this sense, to suggest that one has to work hard in order to “achieve” personhood, which quickly (mis)leads into thinking of personhood as an additional quality that society bestows on its members as just pay after their successful performance of a duty or task, hence conferred upon them as recognition of their excellence. That is not the case.

In common usage, persons are human beings, and human beings are persons. In common, we use the term “person” to apply to all members of the species *homo sapiens*. This is why, I think, some readers appear to be confounded by the idea that certain conditions, such as the moral agency of a human being, transforms one into more than just a human being. However, it is a mistake to conclude that ascriptions of personhood function only in a purely descriptive manner. The term “person” is often used in declarative utterances and statements that are meant to emphasize an individual’s normative standing. “But she/he too is a person (*En be en mana dhano*)” is a common form of declarations that are usually used to protest inappropriate treatment of an individual as if she/he was a thing. The term “human being” is frequently used in similar senses.

The normative sense conveyed by the term “person” when used in the manner that specifically conveys claims of rights – for example, expectations of treatment by others – may indeed apply to individuals or groups of individuals merely by virtue of their membership in the species *homo sapiens*, as can be exhibited by the physical type expected of all members of the species as a minimum requirement. The difference between human beings and other animals is their dependency on each other for much longer time than most animals need. Humans need each other virtually all their lives, as they move from being totally dependent to the state of relative autonomy in adulthood, which corresponds to stages of learning that lead later to role playing, acting on one’s own, or coming out of the mask that was society, or, more specifically, the family acting on our behalf. Marcel Mauss has written a beautiful, albeit brief, historical trace of the concept *persona* through the “eyes” of different cultures (Classical Greece, Rome, Africa, China, India, and Australia), all of which, in his reckoning, point to an interestingly common notion of “that which sounds behind the mask”, *per/sonare*, as the Romans put it.<sup>86</sup> In Mauss’s cultural history of the term is the legal sense it acquired among the Romans is significant. Since then, in law, legal experts say, there are only *personae*, *res*, and *actiones*. But “person” has come to mean more than it does in its classical juridical sense. Declarations of the form “She/he too is a person (*En be en mana dhano*)” inject a moral sense into the idea of a “person”. When the appeal to the normativity of personhood is dropped (which is done by dropping the comparative “too” in English and the word “be” in Dholuo), the resultant declaration, “She is just a human being (*En en mana dhano*)”<sup>87</sup> appeals to the fallibility of persons. Persons, or human beings, are fallible, a realization that is imprinted into our self-awareness

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<sup>86</sup> Mauss, *o.c.* Someone should clarify to youth under their care that the approach of clarifying concepts by tracing their uses in different contexts, or distinguishing them from their cognates is not the same thing as “analyzing words”.

<sup>87</sup> Variants are: “*Aparo kaka dhano* (that is just my human reason), usually used by a speaker to indicate their modesty by indicating that despite trying their best, human reason always has room for error.

early in life, when we are children.

Many African cultures may not reveal a separation between the juridical and moral senses of the term “person” in their different popular or “traditional” expressions, at least to my knowledge. That is not what cultures do in their traditional forms. Because custom and tradition tend to produce maxims of conduct rather than analytical distinctions of meanings in their respective language traditions, they tend to focus overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, on the moral senses of the term “person.” The point Mojalefa Koenane has made is therefore quite a valid one. Analytical distinctions at the traditional level do occur in the context of conflict resolution, sometimes very intensely, especially where there is an interpretative disagreement about a path of action. Disputes on such occasions can produce interesting and complex nuances of meaning buried within apparently trouble-free uses of terms. What might be absent in this context is the analytical distinctions that produce and preserve meanings under different disciplinary categories or formalized institutional usages. The practice of conceptual analysis of meanings for its own sake – that is, to produce knowledge that is believed to be useful to proper understanding as an end in itself – is often left to someone else in society – namely you and I and all our cohorts and colleagues in their respective fields.

Yet this division of labor does not imply that such a distinction could not be easily made on proper occasions. Here is an example I ran into one time. In a particular village I was visiting, there was a young man who was severely autistic. Although he could not speak at all, he could on occasion respond to restraining tones of voice, especially if the voice was accompanied by some gestures. He had to be kept within sight so he could be stopped from causing mischief. One day, however, he slipped out of the otherwise careful watch of his brothers and parents who took turns watching over him. He walked over to where a neighbor had tethered his goats so they could browse and clubbed one of them to death. In the ensuing debate *over* what had happened, it was quickly and unanimously resolved that the young man could not be blamed as “he was not a ‘person’ who could bear blame (*Ok en dhano ma inyalo kaw richo*).” So,

while the normative declaration given earlier emphasized rights for the individual by conferring upon her/him a normative status of “personhood (*dhano*)”, in the latter case “personhood” is exempted from blame because the person in this case is said to lack the capacity that would form the basis for imputing culpability on him. Hence he was totally exonerated. His parents could replace the neighbor’s dead goat on the grounds of sympathy alone. As the quote from Meyer Fortes indicated, community places expectations on persons based on the qualities, capacities, and roles it bestows upon them. The quality and capacities of this young man’s personhood did not come up to the level where they would be subject to society’s codes of public conduct.

Every person or human being of reasonable age is usually fairly aware of things they believe they deserve, either by virtue of specific contracts or by the mere fact that they are human beings. Children are aware that they deserve to be fed by their parents or treated fairly in relation to their siblings. Most people believe they deserve a certain amount of freedom from harassment, whether it is by the state or by other persons, and to be treated justly and fairly by the law. These types of rights, which lie at the base of the declaration form we mentioned earlier, are believed to belong to all, irrespective of their position on religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, education, or skin color. Because they proclaim the normative status of personhood at the passive or receptive level, they are usually considered basic human rights. No one should ever have to beg or fight for them. In other words, their basis is the demand that circumstances exist that allow everyone’s humanity to flourish to the fullest degree their faculties allow. The declaration of the form “she/he too is a person (*en be en mana dhano*)” says that the individual cannot be treated as if he or she has descended below the category of “human being”. Implying that there may be instances where this might not be the case, the declaration urges that the individual be treated like they deserve to be, namely like all human beings ought to be treated. In the case of the autistic young man, however, the observation addresses a different aspect of “personhood”, and that aspect is not different from what we would have in mind when we claim, for example, that a five-year old child cannot be held legally or

morally liable when they pick up a gun and shoot a sibling or a friend. We commonly argue that at that age a child does not yet have the judgment capacity to fully understand the nature of their actions, even if they show a partial grasp of what “hurt” means (like physical hurt that is associated with pinching or the hurt that occurs when another child takes their icecream). In this latter example, the child is a person, just like the autistic youth, or like a mentally ill person of any age, but not in the sense that society expects of a grown and all-around healthy individual.

### **5. Personhood and agency**

The all-around healthy individual deserves to receive other things besides their fair share of goods given out to, say, all members of a family. If membership in the family is the sole criterion for distribution, then it should not matter that one or more members are not all-around healthy. Their rights in this regard are protected by the fact that they too are members of the family no less and no more than all the other members of the family group. These rights are protected by our first principle, which emphasizes on the moral status of a “human being or “person”. In a slightly different wording, but bearing the same moral weight, the Luo say “*En be en mana nyodo* (she/he too is an offspring like everyone else)”, which literally means “she/he too is the result of sperm and egg,” like all other offspring.

But let us go back to our autistic youth. When his community evaluated his action, it recognized that although the act itself was wrong, he was to be exonerated from blame. Why? While the receptive sense of his personhood remained intact, he was not regarded as an agent of his actions. If he were to cause physical harm to another person, that act could be seen as wrong, both legally and morally, but he would hardly face punishment by law, nor would he be scorned as a moral outcast. If he came from the community I come from, he would be subjected to a ritual cleansing, as any normal person would, because the act is regarded as a breach of the

integrity of another human being. In other words, the act, not necessarily the actor, treats another human being as if they were just a thing. Hence, anyone who sheds another person's blood, accidentally or at war or in any form of self-defense, must still go through the cleansing ritual for the act. One more thing should be explained about the autistic youth. The decision to not blame him is informed by the assumption of his society that full-fledged persons not only have rights, they also have duties. This belief implies that a full-fledged person has awareness not only of self, which they develop – gradually from childhood – by recognizing and having an understanding of how the external world responds to their actions (what can happen when they fail to heed the counsel of other people, for example), but also of the expectations of others, which she/he may have learned from the reactions of others over time. Our understanding of self (Mauss's *moi*) comes not as a function of a special faculty of intuition that makes the appearance of such awareness to occur as a sort of epiphany, but from our interactions with others and our conduct in the world. That is the order of nature. The autistic child remains trapped within the realm of Mauss's *moi*, living a life that unfolds on a track that runs parallel to that of a *personne morale*<sup>88</sup>. For the *personne morale*, self-awareness rises out of the circumstances in which she/he interactively participates, by judging and being judged, erring and being cor-

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<sup>88</sup> Mauss's use of this expression should not be misunderstood as implying that anyone who is socially aware is moral in the sense of being virtuous or morally right, like the opposite of "immoral". The expression "*personne morale*" means simply she/he who can be held responsible, or can be judged, as in the opposite of "amoral", like most people with mental impairment, such as the severely autistic youth of our example, are regarded to be. Similarly, contrary to the misunderstanding shown by some readers of my use of the adverb "successfully" to describe the accomplished or ideal personhood as implying a sort of perfection in the acquisition of personhood, a successfully acculturated person is she/he who, by virtue of being averagely all-round healthy, becomes one who learns the behavioral ways of her/his society as a "normal person" who, among other things, is also fallible as they may have learned just too well in the course of their growth and development. Nor does being a behaviorally successful member of society imply that such a person is greeted with approval at every turn.

rected, and so forth. According to the indicators of human development, sociality is regarded as indicative of successful development while unperturbed fixation on the self, the “I” that expresses itself in spontaneous actions that lack variation and sometimes in unpredictable spontaneity that ignores “norms”, is considered to be both medically and socially problematic.<sup>89</sup> “Successful” in the previous sentence is intended to mean possessing all the qualities, capacities, and abilities that enable an individual to live an average human life that entails, among other things, averagely well functioning organs (including the brain, of course). In addition to the uniqueness encoded in the genes inherited from one’s mother and father, this body has the capacity to perform all the activities expected of a human body, including the capacity for sensory experience and a brain life from which mental life springs.

Because the body is susceptible to as many different types of malaise that may result from its encounter with its surroundings, it is also furnished with responsive abilities to thwart illness or injury on its own or to overcome or to compensate for other negative conditions by its own endowments of resistance and adaptation. The brain discharges the function of commanding and co-ordinating the various functions of the body. The same brain also produces mental functions and experiences that include emotional reactions such as sadness and happiness, liking and disliking, different levels of loving, feelings of pain and pleasure, and, ultimately, the use of reason. The performance of the latter function, like all the other functions, takes place under very specific conditions that apply to it. From changing skin color to deal with the abundance or deficiency of the vital Vitamin D to developing habits of body postures to deal with irritations in its nervous system, the human body is a complex organistic system that organizes and adjusts itself to the kind of environmental stimuli it has to deal with.

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<sup>89</sup> Among the early signs of autism is lack of variation in a child’s reaction to its surroundings, and avoiding to look people in the eye. Even as the child grows, it tends to cling to single objects, or performs repetitive actions that appear not to have much sense.

Both consciousness and thought are part of the same organism, are products of the same process of the need to adapt to the environment in which humans live. Again, this is not a description of the “human being” as a perfect organism, for humans are hardly perfect, but these elements are the physio-psycho-social elements that make us who we are. They are in the hero just as much as they are in the horrific, which is why we check the organismic system each time someone does an unthinkable thing in an attempt to determine if the action was intentional or was the result of a faulty organismic makeup. Intentional actions are regarded as having a causal agent, in contrast to actions of our autistic youth or of anyone else whose actions may be the result of a break in the human hardwiring, or the result of some dominating compulsive disorder.

The regularity and character of the habits of human agency are “molded” by factors in the environment in which humans live and develop in their infancy. Most people who have brought up children with some care will remember their struggle to create regularity in the infants’ primary environment, the home. Children learn quickly which parent gives in more easily to their demands; sometimes this difference in parenting creates unnecessary confusion about directions for the child, and conflict between the parents themselves. To resolve such a situation, parents learn quickly that the regularity of children’s habitual activity parallels the regularity of their environment, in this case the parents’ establishment of clear and regular paths of conduct in relation to specific needs of habit formation. If one parent tells the child that it is okay to go play on a Saturday morning before cleaning their room and the other parent denies permission until the condition is met, not only does the child get confused, but she/he quickly learns to play the parents against each other. If on the other hand, the environment provides regular forms of answers, activities, or responses to certain requests, the child will develop regular habits. In addition, the child will also learn to trust the value of shared opinions, especially if the consequent of the conditional statement is delivered as promised. Thus the Kiswahili saying that “*Umleavyo mtoto ndivyo akuavyo* (A child grows into what they are brought up to become)” sounds apt, and, when placed in relation to accounts of the emergence of

human agency from the natural circumstances of community, speaks to the interactive character of experience and human nature. Another Kiswahili saying proclaims that “*Asiyefundishwa na wazazi hufundishwa na ulimwengu* (the child who does not take in parental counsel quickly runs into the unforgiving teachings of the outside world).” Together, these two sayings appear to confirm as true the thesis that the self is a product of social interaction, so one had better take the sympathetic and cuddly counsel of the family rather than wait to face the unbending ways of the (indifferent) world.

For readers who experience confusion because, in their reading (of *Self and Community*), sometimes I appear to prioritize community and other times to prioritize the individual, the above should give them a less obscure answer. The individual is never a passive subject, as we saw from Meyer Fortes. If she/he were, then she/he would never become an agent. Her/his agency grows out of her/his constant interactive encounters with the environment in the form of different stages of community (family, school, sport, workplace, etc.). But each human person is already a unique product of the inherited and complex genetic makeup that can only be her/him, and exercising this uniqueness in the encounter with the given environment stamps further characteristics on this uniqueness. Emphasis is on the concept of experience which, in these terms, is not limited to sensing. Rather, in the interactive encounters, the give-and-take that happens when, for example, a child enters a room full of many other children he has never met before who are gathered to celebrate a birthday, and an interesting dynamic unfold. The already gathered group, both as a group and each one individually, takes a pose to look at the newcomer, and he too looks at them, scanning each one rapidly before turning around to give the escorting grandfather or parent a look as if to say: “Kwara, I’ll be okay., I can handle this...” As each child wants to stamp their way on how the play should go, the dynamic progresses toward a kind of truce based sometimes on consensus and sometimes on dictatorship and conflict. Experiences are the interactive dynamics defined by perceptions and counterperceptions that create a path toward group activity. Look at how this encounter makes it possible for each child to come

to self-awareness as he looks into the eyes of the other child when both of them grab the same toy. Cries such as “I want it!..It is mine!,” or “I touched it first!” are characteristic of this scenario. While an observer may never know what exactly goes on in each child’s mind at that moment, the observable behavior usually includes exchanges of slaps or punches, and more cries. Conflict! In this type of situation, the winner often does not exactly celebrate her or his victory. Sometimes, the winner might abandon the booty altogether, perhaps even showing some sense of shame.

In this example, conflict defines both protagonists as having similar desires that, because of limited supply at the specific time, cannot both be satisfied. But while it places added value on the object, it also teaches the participants that actions have consequences, some of which may be unpleasant. The shame the winner finally feels is an indication of how our public actions generate reflexivity for participants, especially if the unpleasant nature of those actions are immediately made known to the protagonist in question. Our sense of self is predominantly “thrown” into us by our active presence in the public space. To be sure, we often find ourselves mulling, alone and in the privacy of our conscience, over our past actions and the consequences they have had on other people. On further thought, however, one realizes that there is not much that is private on these occasions. The replay in our private mind places the action in its original public space, only now represented in our memory. Conscience becomes the privately (in the mind) recreated public stage on which our individualism is put to test by making the “I”, or *moi* of Marcel Mauss, question if its action made it worthy in the public eye.

## **6. Of ends and means**

Some critics have stated that I do not make a distinction between interaction as a means to an end or as an end in itself. I mulled over whether to address this critique many times, because in fact I do distinguish between

these two ideas.<sup>90</sup> I finally decided to give it a brief reply for the benefit of the undergraduate student who may be given *Self and Community* as a reading assignment. So here is my attempt at a reply.

Think of the millions of folks who wake up in the morning to go to their farms, let's say to plant at the peak of the season. When a farmer buries the millet seeds in the ground, what is her purpose with the seeds? I still do this beside my mother whenever opportunity allows me to be in my "Tall-grass" neighborhood. Last time I was there, my mother had a different breed of millet seeds, which prompted me to ask her: "Nyar Oloo, why this kind of seed this time?" What she proceeded to describe to me was not the seeds we had in our baskets, ready to throw into the ground. She said: "Are you remembering our old indigenous breed of millet? That one has become rare, and not many people like its *kuon* [bread made from its flour]. This one yields a bigger head [meaning more grain], and its stalk is shorter and more stout, so birds don't fell it so much. Finally, it withstands drought far better, and ripens in about three months as opposed to the five months the indigenous breed used to take."

My mother told me something about what she *expects* of the seeds, what, subject to the climatic conditions they need, they should become, namely the stout cereal grass with long blade-like leaves that, in maturity, bears a ball-like cluster of tiny grain seeds that are ground into flour for making a variety of staple foods in many tropical lands. All things whose nature involve motion of sorts or change have ends, what they become when mature, before further change starts to result in their degradation. For my mother's millet, the growing process, her tending of the plants during weeding, and generally all of the tasks that ensure that the process has no hindrance, are, together, the means. If you go to buy seeds from a supplier, they usually will be in packets that show a picture of what will result from the seeds. That picture depicts the "end result", a tautology of sorts. Hence the idea of ends is present in every vocabulary and is always

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<sup>90</sup> *Self and Community*, p. 237-9. For the convenience of a critique, Metz cites different pages but skirts around these specific ones.

a consideration, not only of things that change by their very nature, but also of the many things that humans do. So if the end of my mother's millet seeds is the grass stalk with a ball of grain seeds on its top, and then the end at the next level is the type of bread that results from its flour, and then the satisfaction of the grower and consumer, what is the end of human life? It seems a truism, some would say, that given the means, we ought to realize our ends, and given the ends, we ought to take the means that best promote them. This truism applies to my mother's farming just as well as it does to the realm of ethics.

In the history of ideas, different thinkers, particularly philosophers, have weighed in on this question. The concepts of Buddha and Brahman have explained what humans ought to strive for, and that they could attain this end if they followed specific prescriptions of ideal conduct, generally known as the Eight-fold path. Shaaban (bin) Robert gave us the concept of *Utu bora*, ideal human life that is characterized by hard work, humility, and love and practice of justice among other virtues; and Plato and Aristotle, the noted fathers of the idea of ends in Western philosophy, used a term in their vernacular called *eudaimonia*, usually translated into English as "happiness", a term coined from the adjective *eudaimon*, happy. Commentators have pointed out that the Greek term does not mean happy as in having pleasure, or being blissful. In view of the multitude of human capacities and desires, in all segments of life (such as intellectual, moral, social, biological, emotional, etc.), it is hard to imagine a single human being who can attain perfection in all these areas, let alone, as Socrates suggested, knowing (and knowing that one knows) what is meant by perfection in any one of those areas. Because humans are differentiated from other animals by their capacity for rational thought, any sense of "happiness" ought to start with this function, which humans would have to put to use with excellence. Hence, exercising rationality with excellence in all domains of life would be a significant constituent of *eudaimonia*, and this would have to be done throughout life, and this would have to include having pleasure. In these terms, even Shaaban Robert thought that *Utu bora* is a life-long pursuit, not a specific achievement of excellence in one area of life. Hence, in these senses,

happiness can be identified only with a life-long performance. If communitarianism (interactive living) is a relational state that describes how human life is lived in a manner that is fundamental to human flourishing, then it is an end. Yet because it is not a passive state but rather one in which active human experiences are accomplished, *Utū bora* is an active state, an end, like *eudaimonism*, or states as suggested by such terms as liberalism, socialism, communism, individualism, Confucianism, or Buddhism. With the exception of the last two, these terms signify types of society characterized or defined by practices of specific modes of economic production and distribution, political structures, regulation of property ownership and other amenities, and so on. In these senses, each one of these sociopolitical visions stands, in the eyes of their proponents, for the best of all possible worlds. And who says that modal language cannot describe a vision of the best of all possible worlds from an ideological standpoint?

My use of the term “interaction” goes beyond the everyday encounters between individuals as happen between neighbors, colleagues at work, family members, and so on, namely meeting with people during the several excursions we make out of our homes on a daily basis. It is true that while these interactions are part of the broader idea of human intersubjectivity as its specific instances, they become possible only on the strength of the social orientation that guides our growth and development from infancy. The intersubjective nature of early infant-mother interactions, a fundamental and important aspect of “proper” human development<sup>91</sup>, leads children toward the development of a sense of self that is significantly social and mindful of others. Play time with other children later in life reinforces this discovery and affirmation of self as located in the midst of other selves. From these interactions the self learns limitations and the virtues of social living such as those Shaaban lists in *Koja la*

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<sup>91</sup> We take into consideration the millions of children without their biological mothers with whom to have these bonds, but that undesirable circumstance does not eliminate or even lessen the necessity of the socializing function of the interactions. Foster mothers or other care-givers can still stand in to provide the functions.

*Lugha*. These include the virtues of moderation, kindness, justice, knowledge, respect, peacefulness, courage, humility, and reasonableness.<sup>92</sup> There is no hidden self in us that primarily contemplates itself or that makes inferences about its own existence from its own self-consciousness.

The idea of being mindful of the welfare of others comes directly from the “seed” of other-regarding that we get in infancy. And while this idea may fit with an institutionalized sense of “social welfare” as practiced in some countries around the world (for example most Scandinavian countries, and Qatar in the Middle East, or the United States), it is not how I use the idea in *Self and Community*. In these countries welfare is legally protected for the fulfillment of the basic needs of those who cannot, unaided, fulfill those needs on their own. Usually examples of this public assistance includes food stamps or an unemployment income and shelter. Together, when these protections against economic deprivation are ingrained into a country’s laws as rights, we have a welfare state. Some countries levy taxes for this public care-taking of needy citizens, but leave the actual disbursement to nonprofit or charity organizations such as Churches. Germany and Switzerland are two examples of this brand of organized or institutionalized public welfare practice. Hence I have been totally surprised to see this idea used to try to discredit my idea that communitarian regard for the welfare of others as making a false statement. Nowhere in *Self and Community* do I make any claim that African governments practice welfare systems. is absent in Africa. I know no African country, other than Botswana in some limited or selected ways, that practices this social policy, but if there were to be, they would be institutionalizing what I call for, but which, for now, I described only in the form of the informal, culturally-based, or morally-driven way of minding needy folks’ interests. The word “welfare” is frequently used, in philosophy and ordinary English alike, interchangeably with the term “interests”. For the most part, in many African societies, minding the welfare of those

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<sup>92</sup> Robert 1945: 17-19. These virtues are discussed in *Self and Community*, pp. 260- 2.

in need is practiced as an informal but culturally embedded practice.

The drive behind institutionalized welfare is noble, because helping those in need addresses a dimension of human character that should be promoted, namely that minimizing the degree of suffering for deprived members of society adds a humane dimension to how happiness can be distributed on utilitarian grounds as a start. Some historically significant Western philosophers like John Locke<sup>93</sup>, for example, argued that once born, every human being has a right to self-preservation, especially by having such natural needs for subsistence as food and water, or other needs as nature may call for. In the United States, the proposed universal healthcare policy (in)famously or pejoratively called Obamacare, by the objecting Republicans, could be understood as fitting this bill as its postulation is that everyone should have a right to healthcare.

Prior to its recent overwhelming proportions, culturally-supported welfare was ingrained into society for noble reasons, which was the reduction of levels of inequality between the worst-off and the best-off in lineages or clans. The practice was deemed to be ethically necessary to curb the possibility of crime or labor-related abuses such as minor forms of enslavement of the poor by the economically more able members of a community. It was driven by the principle that is stated by John Locke. Every human being has a right to self-preservation. In many African communities, this basic human principle was translated into a duty for members of communities to not let one of their own fall below the levels of human dignity for want of basic necessities of life. It is said in the language of the Luo people that a man is only as good as his kin are. Nobody should take pride in his achievements if there are several destitute people or families in his lineage. To ward off this shame, members of a lineage would come together to provide their needy relatives with start-up investment (either in the form of land or of other economic asset) from which the needy person or family would gradually gain economic inde-

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<sup>93</sup> Locke 1980 [1690], § 25, p. 18.

pendence. The idea is seen to be grounded on the view that there are certain basic requirements that every human being, subject to their health condition, should have as their natural right. For example, while the autistic child or adult would not gain from being given start-up capital on which to gradually build her/his economic independence, they nonetheless have the right to food, drink, shelter, clothing, and, as Locke says, “other provisions that nature may endow upon [her/him under their specific health conditions].” On the same principle, orphans were quickly taken in by the extended family, while no son of a lineage was allowed to stay unmarried for lack of assets for a dowry. But the relatively healthy neighbor or kin whose lacking is limited to the economic deprivation they are suffering was deemed as deserving the start-up capital, and the counsel that goes with it, to ensure that he made the right decisions that would enable him to profitably engaged in economically rewarding activities.

## ***7. Mind, self, and society***

Let us reconsider the personal experiences I described as I was sitting at my desk. There is no doubt that most people like you and I can have the kind of experiences I described there. What is not clear, but what the supporters of individualism are particularly prone to wrongly inferring to be the case, is whether mental experiences sufficiently justify the view that we are individuals in the strong atomistic sense. There is no doubt that the exercise of physical and mental capacities emanates from and solidifies each of us as individuals who, in the practice of these capacities, appear to be cut off from others. Everyday, we perform activities that reflect this autonomy. The liberal understanding of the priority of rights stems from the belief that the unhindered amelioration and defense of these capacities is necessary for the attainment of our individual well-being as our human end.

A major question, then, is how one arrives at the experience of oneself as an integral subject, designated in most human languages as the equivalent

of the English “I” (German “Ich”; French “moi”; Italian “Io”; Dholuo “An”; Kiswahili “Mimi”). These indicators announce or identify a speaker or actor as the subject of their action; they are forms of identifying oneself as the performer of an action. Hence, through them, self-identity springs from every locutor as the anchor or originator of their own actions. Although such expressions as “I do” and “I think” indicate a sense of the integrity of the self as the source of its own actions, something that I presume to be normal, the point is that they do not tell us much, or anything at all, about the origin of the self’s own awareness.

We ordinarily tend to think that there is some commonality between a human being, a person, and a self. Yet we often equate only the “human being” with “person”, even when we make important distinctions between the different moral senses in which “personhood” is given different qualities and capacities. We rarely substitute either “human being” or “person” for “self” in those locutionary habits or even in situations bounded by moral concerns. Yet “self”, in terms of its connotations of the unity of subjectivity underlies “human being” and “person” as well. When we talk of “the many chambers of selfhood” as a description of the many and conflicting capacities that we exhibit (love, hate, calm, rage, reason, impulse, strength, weakness, kindness, cruelty, generosity, selfishness, etc.), we attribute them to “self”, not to “person” or “human being”. (Dholuo has only one term, *dhano*, for all three, except in relational descriptions, when “ng’ato” is used.)

Communitarians admit this *descriptive* rendition of the functional capacities of the individual. Among the implications of communitarianism with regard to those functional capacities is the view that the relative autonomy of the individual plays itself out – emerges and stays – within the interactive conditions that both community and the external circumstances, which I sometimes refer to merely as “environment”, generally provide. It is not only the biological aspect of humans that belongs to natural origins. Her/his psychological and sociological aspects belong to those origins too. The body, which is the perceptive and organizational tool for interacting with the external world, is the *sine qua non* organ for

shaping human experience in a broader sense. Here I am using “Okham’s razor” to separate a naturalist approach to understanding the human condition from otherworldliness and mythical accounts of what are truly psychological (cognitive and emotive) and sociological (moral and other normative) domains in the understanding of human nature. I am in sympathy with the position held by Kwasi Wiredu, one that I have referred to as communitarian<sup>94</sup> because it locates the origin of mind and intelligence in conduct, and suggests that the moral domain should be understood only by reformulating concepts of human goods in terms of attitudes toward and results of the socially determinable concerns and their relation to value. For him, then, mind, by which he means the full-fledged, reflective, creative, responsible, self-conscious mind, appears within the natural conditions of conduct. Wiredu answers the question of how the human mind and self arise in the process of conduct in biosocial terms. The individual act is seen within the social act.

To call this view communitarian does not imply that all individuals are obligated or are tied to their respective ethnic groups or family.<sup>95</sup> *It is an account of how humans (in the very general sense of the term as members of the species) acquire the capacities of self-consciousness, thinking, abstract reasoning, purposive behavior, and moral devotion. It presupposes*

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<sup>94</sup> This does not imply his agreement.

<sup>95</sup> The origin of the related misperception – that communitarianism is only another term for “group interests”, or that it cherishes “tribalism” – is that in attempts to rid reference to groups who share cultural values and practices such as language and custom of the colonial lexicon of “tribe”, an alternative term, “ethnic communities”, has in recent years been preferred and increasingly more used in scholarly and general vocabulary over “tribe”. With this misperception, some people have expressed fear that “communitarianism” would encourage a return to the idea that one needs to stick with her/his ethnic group. The fear is legitimate, especially in the context of fresh memories of the Rwandan, Burundian and other instances of ethnic cleansing. Communitarianism has nothing to do with the object of such fear except in describing the family, whose members would normally claim to be related, as the primary “environment” of human socialization. But the concept of family no longer refers exclusively to people related by blood other than for the two or more principal heads.

that such a biological organism would acquire these defining capacities irrespective of where they are born, where they live, or with whom they interact in the course of being exposed to the social circumstances out of which these capacities are generated. Its emphasis is solely and generally on the biosocial characteristic of humans as rational animals.

Communitarianism is only now emerging as a framework for reconsidering what has not worked in the long history of side-stepping the basic foundations of human experience. The challenges it faces are not uncommon to similar perspectives whose impact is often viewed as a disruptive challenge to the old and familiar view that has long enjoyed the embrace of many who, often by unquestioned intellectual habits of inherited culture, may continue to regard it as the “obvious” view. This is the challenge that communitarianism faces from individualism, not because the latter is a better principle but mostly because it is the axiomatic assumption of a culture whose domination across the globe has gone largely unquestioned in its supply of theories of experience – of thought and practice – and the orders of reality.

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