

Book Roundtable

Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe. 2022. *Menkiti's Moral Man*. London: Lexington Books.

Introduction

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Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe's *Menkiti's Moral Man* is about Ifeanyi A. Menkiti's efforts to foreground the community in our understanding of person and thereby illuminate the axiom that a person is a person because of other persons. *Menkiti's Moral Man* offers a thorough interrogation of the most conspicuous features of Menkiti's maximal view of person. In this book, Oyowe writes as a repentant critic of Menkiti with the belief that there are resources in Menkiti's general account of his maximal view and conception of person. He engages Menkiti's maximal view of person but remains as faithful as possible to Menkiti's views as borne out by the written evidence. He interprets them in light of Menkiti's wider commitments and his wide range of philosophical production. His book does not deny the merit of some of the criticism levelled against Menkiti, but it responds to some of the recurrent criticisms that have been placed at Menkiti's door. Oyowe gives a novel interpretation of Menkiti's approach to personhood, which departs radically from what is presently available in the literature. And it is important to know that each chapter makes a novel contribution to the current debate.



Below are essays by Katrin Flikschuh, Ovet Nwosimiri, Dennis Masaka and Sanelisiwe Ndlovu. These essays stem from the discussions that Oyowe had with these contributing philosophers during and after his book lunch.

On Real Ancestral Existence

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SOFT AND HARD PERSONS

According to Chapter 6 of Tony Oyowe's excellent *Menkiti's Moral Man*, ancestors exist as 'soft persons', that is, as social, not as natural kinds: ancestors belong to the domain of social ontology. As such, they are not mind-independent beings but constructs of a collective intentionality that sustains ancestral existence through memory and relevant shared social practices, including libation-pouring, ancestral consultation and naming ceremonies. However, Oyowe thinks that such mind-dependent existence is no bar to ancestors' real existence. After all, other mind-dependent entities also exist: states, money, traffic regulations. No one doubts the real existence of these mind-dependent things.

Oyowe further argues that a socio-ontological reading of ancestral existence makes sense of Ifeanyi A. Menkiti's contention that traditional African metaphysics 'trades on an extended conception of the material universe' (Menkiti 2004), according to which the predominantly material world can nonetheless accommodate non-material or quasi-material entities. On Oyowe's interpretation, 'extended materialism' simply consists in a joint commitment to the hard entities of natural ontology and the soft entities of social ontology.

In part, Oyowe develops his socio-ontological conception of ancestors in critical response to my own previous attempt to make sense of ancestral existence by way of an analogy with Kantian ideas of practical reason (Flikschuh 2016). According to Kant, we cannot prove the existence of supersensible souls. Nor, on the other hand, can we disprove their existence. Moreover, given our moral commitment to the idea of the Highest Good, and given the necessity of belief in immortal souls to that commitment, we have a

practical warrant for affirming the immortality of the soul. I previously suggested that one might think of ancestral existence along similar lines. We can neither prove nor disprove ancestral existence; however, given the moral significance of their possible existence, we have a practical warrant for belief in their existence. Of course, in contrast to souls, ancestors do not exist supersensibly – the Kantian notion of a theoretically indemonstrable yet practically necessary idea of reason would have to be considerably amended for it to be applicable to the idea of ancestors' this-worldly, quasi-material existence. However, the details of my previous argument need not detain us here. I wish merely to note one similarity and one difference between my earlier attempt and Oyowe's response to it. The similarity lies in the fact that we both defend the possibility of ancestors' existence within the constraints of Menkiti's quasi-materialism. The difference is that, borrowing from social ontology, Oyowe defends the *mind-dependent* existence of ancestors, whilst I myself, borrowing from Kant, defend practically grounded belief in ancestors' *mind-independent* existence.¹ Another way of putting the difference is to say that, while Oyowe thinks ancestors' social existence theoretically demonstrable, I take morally grounded belief in ancestors' natural existence to be rationally defensible even though ultimately indemonstrable.

I have since become increasingly interested in the rationality of *theoretical* belief in ancestral existence. In a sense, my interest has shifted from ancestors' moral functions to their ontological status more directly. I would still not go so far as to argue that we can *know* ancestors to exist. However, I believe that, on a quasi-materialist conception of the universe, belief in natural ancestral existence may be rationally justifiable independently of their moral and social functions. Given my shift of interest, Oyowe's conceptualisation of ancestors as soft persons might seem attractive. In fitting ancestors' existence as soft persons into Menkiti's extended materialism, Oyowe shows that ancestors can be part of the basic furniture of a quasi-material universe. I suspect, however, that the appeal to social ontology evades the ontological question instead of answering it. First, the very distinction between 'soft' social kinds and 'hard' natural kinds is highly concessive: however real the existence of soft persons may be, it not *as* real as that of hard kinds. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the socio-ontological approach assumes

a third-personal epistemic standpoint: it says of members of a given community that *their* collective intentionality to that effect sustains *their* belief in ancestral existence. But can social ontology justify first-personal belief in ancestral existence? Can I say that I believe my ancestors to exist in virtue of my community's intentions to that effect? I do not think that belief in ancestral existence takes this form. I can say of money that it exists only in virtue of our collective intention to that effect. I can say of states that they exist only to the extent to which we agree, collectively (as it were), to organise political life in this way. But I do not think that I can say of ancestors that they exist only in virtue of our collective intentions to that effect. Kwame Anthony Appiah is onto something when he says that 'it seems absurd to claim that what was happening, when my father casually poured a few drops from the top of a newly opened bottle of Scotch onto the carpet, involved anything other than a *literal* belief in the ancestors' (1992: 112–113).

In sum, when it comes to belief in ancestral existence, I do not think it gets the phenomenology of the belief right to liken ancestral existence to the existence of money or states. Ancestors do not exist because we pour libations: we pour libations because we believe ancestors to exist. Belief in ancestral existence includes the belief that their existence is as little down to us as is the existence of the tree outside my window; it involves belief in their existence as hard persons.

QUASI-MATERIALISM AND PANPSYCHISM

If ancestors are more like natural kinds, we cannot account for their existence by way of sinking social ontology into quasi-materialism. In so far as social ontology distinguishes between natural and social kinds, hard and soft entities, it presents no challenge to what I shall call 'all-out materialism'. And yet Menkiti does represent quasi-materialism as a challenge to Western all-out materialism. Menkiti affirms the *natural* existence of non-material entities within quasi-materialism. According to him, the metaphysics of the 'village' explains some observed *natural* phenomena by way of positing the existence of invisible forces or agents that interact with material entities *within the order of nature*. For Menkiti, this is a rational strategy that looks for causal explanations, reasonably positing non-material forces or agents as imperceptible causes. The very resort

to a causally interactive explanatory framework within the order of nature tells against an account of those forces as socially constructed.

Menkiti asks: ‘How does one reconcile belief in material agency with belief in nonmaterial agency?’ He says: ‘My answer is that traditional African societies have a belief system that is fully committed to material agency but that trades on an extended notion of *what is embraced by the material universe*’ (Menkiti 2004: 117, emphasis added). Menkiti speaks of the world as an ‘ambiguous place’ (2004: 122) – that is, as one of many aspects which we do not fully understand, including the relation between material and non-material elements and agencies. He says: ‘Give up the belief in physical bodies and it becomes a weird world whose contours defy articulation. Give up the belief that persons have consciousness and think thoughts . . . and it becomes, also, a world equally weird’ (2004: 120). That persons have consciousness is not a fact of social ontology but constitutes, for Menkiti, a real if as yet inexplicable non-material phenomenon within the material world. My reading of Menkiti is that ancestors – ‘dead ancestors who still act in a living world’ (2004: 114) – are more akin to consciousness than to money or states: they are an as yet not fully explicable non-material but natural phenomenon within a largely materially constituted world.

In so far as Menkiti’s quasi-materialism posits non-material entities *within* the order of nature, the position seems to me to resemble pan-psychist conceptions of the universe more than social ontology. Panpsychism is the recently revived view in Western metaphysics that

mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world. In conjunction with the widely held assumption that fundamental things exist only at the micro-level, panpsychism entails that at least some kinds of micro-level entities have mentality, and that instances of those kinds are found in all things throughout the material universe. Whilst the panpsychist holds that mentality is distributed throughout the natural world – in the sense that all material objects have *parts* with mental properties – she needn’t hold that literally everything has a mind, e.g., she needn’t hold that a rock has mental properties (just that the rock’s fundamental parts do). (Goff et al. 2021)

In Western metaphysics, the revival of panpsychism is a response in part to the perceived failure of reductive physicalism to account

for consciousness. This failure has yielded the conclusion that the mental is irreducible to the physical and that the former must therefore be acknowledged as a distinctive building block of the natural world. According to the above specification, panpsychism holds that at least some (if not all) micro-level entities have mentality and that those entities can be found in all (or most) higher-order entities. This position resembles Martin Ajei's (2009) description of the Akan conception of *sunsum* – life-force – as elemental to all natural kinds, albeit to differing degrees. It is nonetheless questionable whether panpsychism as sketched out above would countenance the existence of an ancestor as a kind of post-mortem, physically non-embodied but conscious person. For one thing, ancestorship posits the persistence of the mental independently of material embodiment, whereas panpsychism posits the mental as a constituent part of some or all material entities. Possibly more importantly, panpsychism might well reject the idea of the mental as an inherently normative elemental building block. By contrast, the ancestor, as a type of person, is regarded as not only non-material but also normative in kind. In so far as ancestral existence is constitutive of quasi-materialism, the latter might be said to see value – or normativity – as intrinsic to the natural world.² Panpsychism does not appear to entertain the idea of the mental as inherently value-based or normative (but see Nagel 2012). Despite these discrepancies, the affinities between panpsychism and quasi-materialism regarding the mental as constitutive of our world's fundamental building blocks suggest a possible alternative to ancestral being as a social kind. If consciousness in general is a non-material natural kind, then perhaps ancestral persons too, who lack embodiment but have consciousness (of some sort), are natural though non-material in kind.

BELIEF IN ANCESTORS AS A NATURAL KIND

I cannot in this short commentary offer a more extensive defence of a 'natural kinds' approach to ancestral existence. But it seems to me that if one is interested in defending the rationality of belief in ancestral existence, then this – and not social ontology – is the way to go. I have already hinted at several reasons as to why this may be so. First, in so far as the social/natural kinds distinction hinges on a differentiation between soft and hard existence, it is difficult

to avoid the conclusion that soft entities are not as real as hard ones. Perhaps this does not matter in and of itself. It seems to me, however, that belief in the existence of ancestors is belief in their existence as hard kinds – the socio-ontological explanation seems to me to get the phenomenology of the belief wrong. Second, and again as noted above, the socio-ontological approach is deflationary: it posits social kinds alongside material kinds, so it poses no challenge to all-out materialism. Yet, quasi-materialism challenges all-out materialism. And it does not do so gratuitously.

Quasi-materialism seems to me concerned not simply with defending the rationality of belief in ancestral existence. Ancestors are merely one among a range of beings or entities whose quasi-material existence is being posited. Nor, in so far as ancestors are conceived as natural in kind, is this defence contextual. Social ontology is contextual: belief in the existence of money is rational where the convention exists and irrational where it does not. Quasi-materialism is not conventionalist in this sense: it claims to offer an account of how the universe is. On the quasi-materialist account, if ancestors exist anywhere then they exist everywhere, and if all-out materialism fails to countenance their existence, it fails to get something about the universe right. In this sense, the defence of ancestors as a natural kind is philosophically more ambitious than a defence along socio-ontological lines. According to the latter, the rationality of ancestral belief in Lagos need worry no Londoner, since the social contexts, conventions and practices differ. On the strategy here proposed, the possibility that ancestors exist in Lagos should worry the Londoner in the sense that the natural universe might turn out to contain types of beings whose existence the latter had hitherto failed to countenance. Of course, one might say that the proposition that ancestors exist as hard kinds is so implausible as to be irrational and that the best one can do is offer a defence of them as soft persons in the social universe. But here the fact of consciousness poses itself as a counter-example to all-out materialism: we cannot but think of ourselves as conscious, and we cannot think of the fact of our consciousness as socially constructed. Under all-out materialism, the fact of our consciousness is utterly mysterious. Under quasi-materialism, it is at any rate less mysterious, though quasi-materialism seems to ask, additionally, why on earth we should assume that we are the only natural kind around that is ultimately irreducible to all-out material being.

LGBTIQA+ People and the Politics of Exclusion

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Chapter 4 of Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe's book, *Menkiti's Moral Man*, speaks about social recognition, social justice and the inclusion of women in community and their full recognition as persons in the community. In this section, he showed that 'social architectures can be oppressive toward women or to sever the link between the oppression of women and their standing as persons' (18). According to Oyowe, 'persons require a social architecture'. By this, he means 'the traditions, practices, institutions and other intangible aspects of social existence, including interpersonal relations as well as a shared linguistic, conceptual and interactive framework, which foster communication and structure the forms of life characteristic of persons' (93). His focus is on women. The reason for this is

because Menkiti's view of personhood foregrounds the social aspects, it has to respond to the challenge that cultural patterns of exclusion toward women preclude their *full* recognition as persons in community. The concern is not that it endorses an oppressive ideology or inequality, but that its emphasis on social aspects makes it more vulnerable to oppressive social architectures. (17–18)

In view of the above, he uses Polycarp Ikuenobe's (2006) work in which he brings Menkiti and Achebe into productive dialogue as his point of entry. Here, he tries to show how oppressive social architecture can be. While believing that Achebe's *Umuofia* is a reliable guide to understanding how the maximal view of person is applied in the social world, he argues that it also exposes the ways in which a gendered social architecture forces women to the margins, ultimately resulting in the social production of men as archetypal persons. Social architectures, for Oyowe, present two dilemmas. The first is that 'they support personhood'. Specifically, 'they afford the context for nurturing social bonds, developing robust psychological and forensic capacities, inculcating humanistic values, and so forth' (93). The second is that 'they have historically been the

sites of many kinds of oppressive practices. These sometimes occur when markers of social identity, chief among which are race, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexuality, become indexes for social status and roles, and subsequently the means for normalizing, and in some cases legalizing systemic patterns of inequalities, exclusion and violence' (93). These dilemmas are of crucial importance. He uses them to show that while it is important to include women in the community or confer personhood to them, given that the community confers it, the oppressive practices by others to exclude and marginalise women will persist if oppressive practices are not addressed.

In this short essay, I stress the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people in the African community and community of persons. My argument is that since the LGBTIQ+ people duly discharge a familial and communal obligation, display good conduct in the community and share in the responsibility to respect non-persons, humans and non-humans alike, like other recognised community members, they deserve social recognition and should be included in the African community and in the community of persons. One major reason for the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ people is the discussion of personhood in the African community, wherein there is the persistent axiom that 'the community is prior to the individual'. Or, possibly, it has to do with the ways in which the concept has repeatedly been interpreted (Metz 2020: 33). Communitarian theory holds that ontologically the community forms the individual and is prior to the individual. African communitarianism emphasises the group over the individual. African communitarians believe that African reality is construed by the reality of the community over the individual. For example, Claude Ake asserts that African peoples 'do not allow that the individual has any claims which may override that of the society' (1987: 5). Similarly, Gessler Muxe Nkondo suggests this when he advocates for 'the supreme value of society, the primary importance of social or communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual. This social ideal depends on a notion that proposes a general theory about the ontological priority of society over the individual' (2007: 90). And, according to D. A. Masolo, 'Negro-African societies put more emphasis on the group than on the individual, more on the solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy' (2010: 321).

In Africa, personhood is socially defined in terms of harmonious relationships with members of the community. In Ifeanyi A. Menkiti's (1984) normative conception of personhood, communal values and norms shape personhood. Menkiti points out that what confers personhood on individuals within the African view is how well individuals 'incorporate' into their community – his maximal view of person. This incorporation involves a process by which individuals adhere to communal norms and discharge their communal obligations accordingly. Personhood is not something one is born with but a thing to be acquired. Personhood can be acquired over time through various processes. Hence, one's basic aim should be to become more of a person or a real person (Metz 2020: 34). To this, I think, an individual will desire to be 'so much of a person as to become an ancestor' (Metz 2020: 34). And to become a person, a real person, or to develop this personhood, one must socialise, recognise and relate with others, duly discharge a familial and communal obligation, and display good conduct in the community.

Using the experience of the women of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, Oyowe shows that 'the hierarchies of social power and patterns of exclusion disproportionately disadvantage Umuofian women' (101). He further explains that 'given a gendered social architecture in which women are seen and treated in terms of differentiated codes that essentially exclude them from and position them on the fringes of economic, social and political activities, their prospects of achieving personhood in community is severely restricted' (101). He believes that Menkiti's socially embedded conception of person must confront the issues like social injustice, which attend ordinary practices of attributing personhood to each other in community. Such pursuit will have a positive outcome for the maximal view. The reason for this is because the consideration of social injustice, like that of oppression and exclusion, will be an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which our conception of person is intimately linked to issues of social justice. More clearly, he 'suggest[s] that what Menkiti's maximal view of person reveals quite powerfully is that the normative aim of social justice is to make each other persons in community. Alternatively, the imperative to make others persons is at the heart of the demand for justice' (18).

While I am persuaded by his position and his push for the recognition and inclusion of women, I am worried that the discussion of

personhood in African communitarianism will always and will continue to be between or hover around heterosexual men and women while neglecting LGBTIQ+ people. I am not in any way saying that women need not be socially recognised and included, or that they should not be considered as persons for their various roles in society. What I am in fact saying is that consideration should be granted to LGBTIQ+ people. To this, Oyowe might possibly say that his introduction of social justice is inclusive of every marginalised group. While I acknowledge that he indeed mentioned marginalised groups, I think that for his idea to be more inclusive he should distinctively name the marginalised groups, just as he mentioned women. This is because there is a difference between ‘calling a spade a spade’ and calling it a card. Just like straight men and women, LGBTIQ+ people should be socially recognised and be included in the discussion and in the conferring of personhood, given that they are members of the same community. LGBTIQ+ people suffer real damage both socially and psychologically. This is because ideologies which posit them as unnatural and adrift from the normal make them feel that they are not persons or human enough. They should be considered in the conferring of personhood, because it should be an inclusive process to ensure that any individual worthy of such is not denied what is owed to them.

Going back to Umuofia, one can see that it is a deeply gendered society. In the community, various duties that have to do with physical strength were assigned to men and boys. Due to a lack of space, I do not intend to give a detailed discussion of this issue here, but in a nutshell in Umuofia gendered roles and obligations are entrenched in adult life. There are (1) the ‘division of labours tracks differences in gender’; (2) ‘forms of work are graded in such a way that those linked to masculinity invariably rank higher’; and (3) ‘the reward of work, specifically social recognition, is determined on the basis of gender’ (99). This is not to say that women do not go to farms. They do, but some harvests, like yam (the king of crops), are left for men, while some, like coco-yams, beans and cassava, are left for women. But that does not take away from the fact that men, women, boys and girls all worked hard. In Umuofia, the patterns of distribution of social recognition disproportionately disadvantage women, and the highest form of social recognition is essentially reserved for men. After further discussion, Oyowe concludes that in Umuofia ‘social

recognition is tinged with a gender bias against individuals embodied or socially classified as women' (100). He further explicates how the hierarchies of social power are connected with the private and public domains, which are domains that are defined as being essentially and exclusively for men. He also says that the presence of men and consequent patterns of exclusion disproportionately disadvantage women in Umuofia (101). This shows how the man is the archetypal person.

Oyowe's analysis and arguments in this chapter are complex to capture here, but upon analysing and rejecting Polycarp Ikuenobe's, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's, Menkiti's and Marya Schechtman's views, he asserts that, 'given the close relationship between personhood and social architectures, the imperative of the maximal view to make each other persons in community consists first and foremost in social architectural reform' (121). He further asserts that 'what is needed is the institutionalization of principles of mutual recognition so that our social architectures begin to bear the marks of a just society' (121). He concludes the chapter by establishing that the maximal view of person is intimately linked to social justice. The reason for this is that 'it is based on social aspects, and situates personhood in the context of normative interpersonal relations, and interactions and practices in the public domain, it opens up itself to questions about fairness and justice' (121). He notes that Menkiti's maximal view of person cannot and should not seek to escape the above conclusion.

Finally, Oyowe's work is of crucial importance because it shows that the true measure of social injustice in the maximal view of person concerns the extent to which recognition as persons is withheld in community. In this regard, he highlights two requirements for this sort of recognition to be at the heart of social justice. The first is that it 'involves overhauling the social order so as to achieve a society that encourages greater social inclusion and participation' (121). And the second is that it 'involves improvements to interpersonal relations' (121). According to Oyowe, both requirements are intimately linked. This is evident in the encounter between Mda and the old lady in Chapter 1. I believe that if both requirements are not considered, it will be difficult to make sense of the idea of inclusion and the idea of the 'We' that is the bedrock African community – 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. Despite this maxim, community life and the current reality appear to be different from what they have been purported to be by the

African community. And, if we are not able to extend full recognition to LGBTIQ+ people, we cannot say ‘I am because we are’ with any internal assurance. Oyowe puts it thus: “‘I am, because we are’ precisely because the “we” is not a thoroughly fused we, as Menkiti says it must be, but instead a community fractured along racial and gender lines’ (120). Also, one cannot declare with any internal assurance that ‘I am a person because of other persons’, if others do not see and treat them as such. Thus, given that we live in societies in which the personhood of others depends not only on how we organise and structure social existence but also on how we relate to each other, there is a need address the wider structural conditions that inhibit social inclusion and participation so as to avoid oppressive patterns of exclusion accompanied by the deprivation of recognition (120–121). This, I believe, is why the society needs a just and inclusive social architecture in order to make LGBTIQ+ people into ‘persons in community’.

Therefore, given the discussion thus far, I am apt to think that Oyowe’s argument for social recognition, social justice, inclusion and the full recognition of persons in community can also and should be extended to LGBTIQ+ people. After all, part of what it is to be a complete person is for someone to socialise, recognise and relate with others, duly discharge familial and communal obligations, display good conduct in the community, and share in the responsibility to respect non-persons, humans and non-humans alike. Just like heterosexual men and women, LGBTIQ+ people engage in all of the above. Thus, the social recognition, social justice, inclusion and the full recognition of LGBTIQ+ people as persons in community will make Oyowe’s view *more* inclusive.

Are Ancestors Exclusively Mind-Dependent? A Response to Oyowe’s Views on the Persistence of Ancestral Persons

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In this essay, I react to Oyowe’s understanding of the personal existence of ancestral persons as mind-dependent and, at the same

time, real. While I do not object to the understanding that ancestors cease to exist in the memory of humans once they are forgotten by the minds of humans, I am not optimistic about the explicit denial of their potential to exist outside human minds even when such an existence has proven to be of a kind that is difficult to defend. My intention is to test the possibility of their surviving termination in the human mind by dint of a lapse of memory as not essentially precluding their potential to exist outside it as entities that are not exclusively mind-constructs. I intend to do so without necessarily implying that this other potential existence is necessary for them to be real. I will first give a summary of Oyowe's view on the personal existence of ancestral persons and his defence of this view. Thereafter, I will try to show why such a view and its defence could be challenged by positing the potential for ancestors to enjoy both mind-dependent and mind-independent existence.

INTRODUCTION

Talk of entities beyond the ordinary reach of human experience has always evoked diverse perspectives ranging from expressions of doubts about their independent existence outside the cusp of human minds to spirited affirmations of their ontological independence and superiority to their counterparts that are still existing in the mundane space. This is a debate that might not be easily settled without probing the role that human memory or the human mind play, if at all, in sustaining the existence of ancestral persons. Such a debate is necessary in order to establish whether ancestral persons are mere mental constructs or whether they could be conceived as enjoying some mind-independent existence thereby giving space to some form of correspondence to some entities outside human minds. Mounting a philosophical defence for such mind-independent existence of ancestral persons might prove to be a daunting task, though such a looming failure predictably might not put a stop to widespread belief in their mind-independent existence. Yet public and widespread belief in mind-independent ancestral existence is not at all a plausible basis for showing that such a belief is worthy of acceptance. Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe has offered interesting insights into the existence of ancestral persons in his recent book titled *Menkiti's Moral Man* (2022). More specifically, of interest in this submission is Chapter 6 of Oyowe's book, 'Ontology, Realism, and the Persistence of

Ancestral Persons' (159–190), wherein he discusses his perspectives on the question of the existence of ancestral persons, an idea that Menkiti (1984) has defended. Oyowe brings into perspective interesting insights into this problematic topic that are worth commending on.

I will first give a summary of Oyowe's view on the personal existence of ancestral persons and of his defence of it. Thereafter, I will try to show why such a view and its defence could be challenged by positing the potential for ancestors to enjoy both mind-dependent and mind-independent existence. While I see some merits in Oyowe's averments in defence of a mind-dependent idea of ancestral persons, I still feel that they can be seriously challenged in some ways.

OYOWE'S DEFENCE OF MIND-DEPENDENT PERSONAL EXISTENCE

In presenting his idea of the continued personal existence of ancestral persons, Oyowe engages Menkiti's account of the same. Oyowe sets out to provide answers to three related questions. The first one focusses on the ontological status of ancestral persons. Here, Oyowe is interested in knowing the nature of ancestral persons, that is, whether they are material, immaterial or quasi-material (159). The second one focusses on justification: he is specifically interested in two connected issues, that is, (a) whether ancestral persons enjoy mind-independent existence or are mere projections of social structure; and (b) whether the existence of ancestral persons is redundant in a complete ontology (160). On the two questions of status and justification, Oyowe notes that Katrin Flikschuh shows that Menkiti is unclear on the status of ancestral persons and that mind-dependence undermines the reality of ancestral persons. In opposition to Flikschuh, Oyowe argues that Menkiti has a clear idea of the ontological status of ancestral persons and that he favours the conclusion that, while ancestral persons are mind-dependent, they still have ontological significance. This conclusion is of particular interest to me, as I will further discuss below. The third question addresses the issue of the persistence of personal existence: Oyowe wants to establish what is required for some living human persons to continue existing as ancestral persons after death. This concern is inspired by Menkiti's claim that personal existence continues after death. The position that Oyowe takes is that ancestral persons persist by virtue of the continuation of life histories (160). But this persistence of personal existence is considered to be tied to the fact that humans still remember them.

OYOWE'S INTERPRETATION OF MENKITI'S IDEA OF ANCESTRAL PERSONS

Though Oyowe compares his interpretation of Menkiti's idea of ancestral persons to that of Flikschuh, I will restrict myself here to the former. Oyowe holds that Menkiti is clear that the universe is a material universe and that it is a single reality 'in which all existing things have a material basis' (164). And in line with this reasoning, ancestral persons are understood as having a basis in the material world. But, as Oyowe notes, this ought not to be interpreted as meaning that ancestral persons are identical with or reducible to the material world. And yet Oyowe also notes that a proper use of reductionism in explaining ancestral persons is welcome in Menkiti's reasoning. At the same time, he argues that Menkiti is not committed to immaterialism but holds on to materialism by making reference to quasi-physical reality by making reference to quasi-physical reality (165–166.). The idea is that, though ancestral persons have a material basis, they are not identical or reducible to it. So, Oyowe sees Menkiti as taking a promising middle way between what he calls 'the extremes of physicalism and immaterialism' (166). And for Oyowe, this middle way is what Menkiti describes as 'an extended notion of the material universe', thereby showing the complexity of a materialist universe that embodies more than mere physical objects. In this connection, ancestral persons have a material basis and are not reducible to physical properties and relations (167).

A point of significant interest to me is Oyowe's seeming endorsement of Menkiti's mind-dependent notion of ancestral persons. Oyowe argues that ancestral persons are mind-dependent and real. In other words, he holds that mind-dependence does not at all pose a threat to their existence and their reality. In fact, they exist in the memory of their human counterparts. And lapse of memory heralds the end of their personal existence, since they cease to be useful in the material schemes of humans. By so doing, Oyowe is showing that the claim made by those who take mind-independent existence as a basis for showing that something is real is at best disputable. In fact, as he argues, the existence of ancestral persons can best be saved if we accept that mind-independence is not the basis for realism (175).

REACTIONS

Oyowe raises useful insights into the debate about whether ancestral persons are exclusively mind-dependent and are not in some

sense sharing some notion of mind-independence. He very much helps the case of Menkiti by arguing that ancestral persons are part of the material world, though this could not be construed as implying that they are reducible to the material aspect of reality. The reason is that, when materialism is understood in the broad sense, it would embody the existence of a plethora of things such as ancestral persons or soft persons given its assumed complex nature. Even though ancestral persons are of a soft nature, they can still legitimately be conceived as being part of the material world. More importantly, Oyowe endorses the view that ancestral persons are mind-dependent and part of the material world in all its complexity. It would appear that Oyowe's preference for a mind-dependent explanation for the existence of ancestral persons is plausible given that they are constituted by humans' attitudes and beliefs about them, thereby rendering them real. It seems to make sense that we can competently talk about ancestral persons from the perspective of how they impact our lives and thereby make them real. However, the mind-dependent explanation for the existence of ancestral persons might raise a number of critical questions worth considering.

First, it appears that the basis for construing them as real seems to fall foul of similar misgivings that could be extended to thoughts about their possible mind-independent existence. Notice that Oyowe claims that grounding ancestral persons' existence on their relations with humans does not at all pose a threat to their existence. In fact, 'because ancestral persons are constituted by human attitudes and practices, they cannot exist independently of them' but all the same are real (175). As I see it, Oyowe does not do enough to spell out the sense in which he deploys the term 'real' in this context and to determine whether the claim of them being 'real' is also not a reflection of the 'attitudes and practices' of humans. If it is, then perhaps we can have a number of 'real' things by virtue of them being constituted by human attitudes and practices. If human minds might constitute a number of things, would this not open the gates for all manner of real things? I think it would.

Second, Oyowe does not seem to furnish convincing reasons why mind-dependence cannot be said to threaten the reality of ancestral persons. One need not be faulted for grounding ancestral persons in human attitudes and practices alone, but at the same time one should realise that what the human mind might think of ancestors

is essentially subjective and dependent on the individual mind. It is uncommon, one can argue, for ancestral persons to remain useful in one person but not in another in a particular community. Assuming that this is a legitimate supposition, this seems to put to question the plausibility of grounding existence of ancestral persons on human attitudes and practices alone. To my mind, while it might be plausible to cast doubts about the possibility of the mind-independent existence of ancestral persons, similar reservations might be extended to the mind-dependent existence of ancestral persons. To base claims of their existence on human attitudes and practices that may on occasion shift and change does not seem to give them a solid foundation. The same may be said of the mind-independent existence of ancestral persons, for we do not seem to make sense of such existence outside of what we think of it.

Third, while it appears compelling to defend Menkiti's position that the continued existence of ancestral persons depends on human memory as Oyowe does, this at least creates problems given the assumed power that humans perceive ancestral persons to have over them. Would this not mean that such relatively powerful ancestral persons who on occasion have overbearing influence on humans might enjoy some mind-independent existence? I would feel that such mind-independent existence might not be completely rejected, even though furnishing proof of it has proven to be a daunting task. Moreover, if the human mind is as central to the existence of ancestral persons as the mind-dependent thesis might seem to suggest, then it might simply jettison their personal existence for any given reason.

Fourth, 'usefulness' as a criterion for sustaining ancestral persons seems to be problematic. It would shift the balance of power to humans who may discard them whenever they feel that ancestral persons are no longer useful to their circumstances. In arguing thus, I am angling to the following position: ancestral persons may cease to exist in our minds if and when they are no longer useful to us, but they may nevertheless continue to exist unnoticed by our minds. This remains within the realm of possibility. This seems to make some sense, as it takes note of how the human mind feels about ancestral persons to the extent of 'terminating' them when it considers them no longer useful but without necessarily implying that their existence outside it has necessarily ended. The point that I am

trying to make is that both mind-dependent and mind-independent existence seem to make sense when talking about ancestral persons, with the former largely telling us more about how changes in human attitudes and practices decide the fate of ancestral persons, at least in human minds.

CONCLUSION

Oyowe has offered useful insights into the problematic question of the existence of ancestral persons by noting that they are mind-dependent and at the same time real. I am not so convinced, however, of the sense in which he considers them to be ‘real’. Perhaps this is an aspect that may need to be ventilated. I would also argue that, while it appears attractive to say that ancestral persons’ existence is terminated when they are no longer useful to humans at least in their minds, their existence outside the human mind cannot completely be denied – even though a defence of such existence is yet to be convincingly posited.

Rethinking the Relationship between the Individual and the Community: Personhood as an Epistemological Question

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INTRODUCTION

One of the pressing issues in the contemporary debate about personhood in African philosophy is the difficulty of the relationship between the individual and the community. Shedding light on this problem is Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, who takes the community to be prior to the individual in the conceptualisation of personhood. This view, however, faces several problems such as ‘misrepresenting the relationship by crowding out the individual, including her autonomy and freedom’ (Gyekye 1997: 37). Kwame Gyekye argues that ‘the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing’ (1997: 41). Problems arise, however, when the community and individual are in conflict. Thus, the real problem in contemporary African philosophical debates on personhood concerns

how to negotiate and resolve the relationship between the individual and the community. Accordingly, in his book *Menkiti's Moral Man* Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe's task is two-fold. First, he needs to show how the ontological and normative significance of individuality was never in doubt in Menkiti's general account of personhood, and second, he has to focus on the practical ways in which moral agency is exercised within the constraints imposed by the community. I agree with Oyowe that individuality is never in doubt in Menkiti's general account of personhood. However, I do not think that personhood is something one achieves as Menkiti argues. I argue that we should explore the question of personhood from an epistemological framework; this can potentially provide alternative ways in which to think about personhood and resolving the relationship between the individual and the community.

THE CHARGE OF COLLECTIVISM: OYOWE'S DEFENCE OF MENKITI

In the section entitled 'The Charge of Collectivism', Oyowe aims to defend Menkiti against two criticisms. The first has to do with the erasure of a person's individuality as an ontological being, and the second has to do with the erasure of moral individuality. On the first issue, Gyekye (1997) commented that individuals have essential attributes such as rationality, having a moral sense and capacity for virtue and, hence, for evaluating and making moral judgements: all this means that the individual is capable of choice. These mental attributes give him or her the opportunity to make moral judgements. So then, if these attributes play any seminal role in the execution of the individual person's lifestyle and projects, as indeed they do, then it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is fully defined by communal structure or social relationships (Gyekye: 1997: 53). In his defence of Menkiti's account, Oyowe points out that Menkiti is uncharitably read by his critics. I agree with Oyowe that 'the impression that intrinsic psychological properties play no role at all in Menkiti's account of personhood is misleading' (35).

It is not clear that Gyekye's criticism is fair. After all, Menkiti requires that persons carry out responsibilities – and you can only carry out responsibilities if you are endowed with rationality and freedom of choice. For instance, in Menkiti's view a 'maximal definition' of personhood involves the attainment and ascription of

socio-moral status in the community: one uses their descriptive biological, metaphysical and psychological features as a material condition. In order to satisfy these socio-moral criteria, one must have the metaphysical capacities of free will, rationality and agency. Criticising Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, Menkiti (1984) indirectly implies that one should be able to appreciate their circumstances and the options available to them, and make rational choices on that basis. This means that he requires rational awareness and freedom. In fact, citing William Abraham Menkiti says that 'reason is part of our nature' (1984: 178). So, it is unfair of Gyekye to say that he does not focus on non-communal aspects of the self. Polycarp Ikue-nobe and Edwin Etieyibo endorse this position when they say: 'It could be argued that Menkiti's view is predicated on hybrid ethics based on human agency in that it requires one to use metaphysical capacities and rationality to enhance communal harmony' (2020: 3). That is, one uses their descriptive biological and metaphysical features in order to satisfy the above-mentioned socio-moral criteria, so the normative view implies the metaphysical features. One cannot be a person in the normative communal sense unless one is already imbued with metaphysical properties. Thus, Menkiti's view indicates that one's metaphysical and psychological capacities of autonomy are a foundation for their moral substantive view. Just because he does not emphasise these features does not mean that he discards them. Accordingly, Menkiti would agree with Gyekye that a community cannot do without individual autonomy, initiative and free choices in terms of individuals' abilities to use their talents, creativity and ingenuity (Etieyibo 2018).

The second criticism which Oyowe highlights is the charge of moral individuality. Gyekye argues that defending the idea that the community always takes priority over an individual threatens certain crucial features of an individual like their autonomy and rights: 'A communitarian denial of rights or reduction of rights to a secondary status does not adequately reflect the claims of individuality mandated in the notion of the moral worth of the individual' (1997: 61). He points out that this view, however, fails to give adequate recognition to the individual's creativity and inventiveness, and that it also fails to give individuals due regard for their human rights. Two ideas are worth pointing out here. The first is that I think it gets dicey to take a topic about social relations, social belonging

and sense of self, and bring in political topics about rights, since the issue then necessarily becomes not so much about how one understands their individual place in the world but what laws restrict how one understands their individual place in the world. Most importantly, it is not clear in Menkiti's analysis that the primacy of the community is related to individual rights and freedoms (Asante 2019). More specifically, Gyekye did not demonstrate how and why this idea of community taking priority over an individual is related to the whole enterprise of rights, but simply assumes that it does (Asante 2019).

The second idea is on the relationship between the individual and the community in African thinking. The individual is often considered to be in conflict with the community, which is a Western framework that ignores the way in which an African derives their identity, self-concept and sense of self, and sense of belonging through their community. Approaching the topic as one of conflict is to frame it backwards: it paints a picture of a Western individualist trapped in a communitarian world rather than an African individual living in an increasingly Westernised, globalised and post-colonial context. My submission is that Gyekye, Oyowe and others err when they take up the perspective of an individual who is at odds with their community: they are taking a Western point of view, and not an African one, which would have a perspective ensconced in a communitarian set of norms. Framing the topic of African personhood as a situation where an individual has a hostile relationship with their community seeks to erase their individuality is simply flawed. African personhood as a topic of enquiry related to morality is about how an individual understands their responsibility to others. One is responsible to and for others well beyond their nuclear family. There is no threat to their rights as Gyekye argues; rather, there is a sense of right and wrong and of duty and responsibility that extends beyond just the individual and the nuclear family. This is not to say that I agree with Menkiti's account of personhood, however.

*RETHINKING THE MAXIMAL VIEW OF PERSONHOOD:
PERSONHOOD AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY*

The question about personhood should be epistemological, not ontological. To approach personhood ontologically is treating

personhood as a thing that is attainable and measurable in society; on this view, you can deny an African person their own African-ness if they do not meet certain moral qualifications. For instance, Menkiti informs us that ‘personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained and one who has it is marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense’ (1984: 176). As a result, children, for instance, do not qualify as persons. In their case, ‘there is an absence of moral function in this sense’ (Menkiti 1984: 175). Children tend to be concerned solely with their own needs and have a tendency to see the world through their own eyes (Menkiti 2004). I do not agree with this view. African kids are born into an ontological network of interconnection, built on the ancestors, so they are also persons in that sense from birth. They do not have to do anything to maintain this connection. They are always part of this network within African knowledge systems. Further, if there is a difference between a human and a person, then why does it not exist linguistically in any African language? One might ask what the noun is for personhood that is different from the noun for human in any African language. More importantly, treating personhood as an ontological thing itself is essentially arguing that there is a state of being that you can either be in or not be in, which goes against the very concept of personhood, which is that we are all connected. I would further argue that making personhood something that one must attain is antithetical to what personhood is about. The individual is not trying to meet the moral criteria for some ontological personhood; rather, the individual’s culture has instilled (epistemological) meaning and processes through which one understands their place in the world through others. Accordingly, in his defence of Menkiti Oyowe is also focussed on ontological and moral issues when the real blind spot in the analysis has to do with epistemological issues.

Personhood is about the process of making sense of one’s world, drawing from cultural knowledge systems (which include values, norms, expectations, kinship, etc.) – the idea is about one’s understanding at the level of morality and self-identity of how one’s perspective is impacted by a collective (where one’s understanding of who they are is derived through others, their relationship to them, their responsibilities to them, and their spiritual connection to them, and their well-being is derived from and through them). So the question is now about epistemological concerns about how

we know the world and how we employ our culture's knowledge systems to do so. I think treating personhood as something that is achieved (an ontological issue) just starts the conversation off with something that may be fundamentally flawed. More importantly, this approach is more inclusive than Menkiti's take on personhood as an achievement.

Menkiti might object and insist that personhood is achieved. For instance, being a responsible person changes one's social standing – throughout history, Zulu women who were married and bore children received considerable recognition in the community and gained status (Ndlovu 2008). So, through marriage and the birth of a child a woman can become more fully a person. However, I am of the view that one goes up in societal status because one is contributing more to building their family, but completing social obligations such as marriage is not really something that affects how much of a person someone is – one is not more of a person than an elder unmarried relative. I argue that we intuitively ascribe personhood, and hence respect, to beings who do not use their capacities to a large degree. For instance, there are many elderly people who do not reflect any moral maturity and who are not accomplished enough and have any socially recognisable achievements but who are not denied their personhood. These individuals might certainly have less of something (prestige or honour) but are not less of a person. One's lack of achievements does not take away one's personhood.

*RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY*

Debates about the relationship between the individual and the community have often focussed on whether or not the individual overrides the community or whether the community overrides the individual. I agree with Oyowe that the focus should be on practical ways in which individuality is exercised within social constraints. The debate should not be so much about which one overrides the other. Rather, it should be more about focussing on whether and to what extent certain attributes of the moral agent allow them to navigate through the social world. We should focus on the practical ways individuals often respond when the community seems to impose itself and how those responses can help us better understand

the relationship between the individual and their community. In spite of social constraints, contemporary strategies seem to exist for the expression of individuality. It is not a matter of the community taking precedence over the individual, as Menkiti implies. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that the individual overrides the community. The picture comes much closer to Wiredu's view that the relationship is symmetrical or Eze's view that it is dialogical. When there is tension between the community and the individual, it is not often the case that the community trumps the individual or the individual trumps the community, as it is often implied in the literature. The relationship is purely dialogical.

CONCLUSION

An important underlying idea from Chapter 6 is that no society is 'purely' individualist or collectivist. There is still an individual in collectivism; it is just about how society is structured, how interactions go and how kinship is understood. African culture is 100 per cent interdependent, but that does not mean that the individual has no room to exercise their autonomy and agency.

Notes

1. In his critical response to my previous article, Oyowe claims that I deny the ontological significance of ancestors. I think this is a misunderstanding of my view. I deny the knowability of ancestral existence: I do not deny their possible existence. My claim that we may have practical reason to affirm ancestral existence crucially hinges on the possibility of their existence. My claim is simply that we cannot know whether ancestors do or do not exist, not that their possible existence is ontologically insignificant.
2. This is evidently not a crazy view. Aristotle also saw value as intrinsic to the natural order. It is not clear – at least not to me – that he was evidently wrong about this. What is clear is that this belief is inconsistent with a Newtonian view of the world.

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