Recent Work in African Normative Theory

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1. Introduction

Despite growing calls for those working in Western philosophy to expand their philosophical canon, contemporary African philosophy remains largely ignored by philosophers working outside of the African continent.[1] This is especially unfortunate given that the majority of African philosophy is written in English and also in a style that is intelligible and amenable to those working in the Anglo-American tradition, such that there is significant opportunity for meaningful cross-cultural philosophical engagement. The purpose of this article is to introduce readers working in the Western or Anglo-American tradition to some of the main ideas in African normative theory. This topic is an obvious choice since given the pressing social–political challenges that exist throughout much of Africa, topics in moral and political philosophy often take centre stage. Specifically, I will highlight recent work on three branches of African normative thought located in normative personhood (§2), harmonious relationships (§3) and vitality or life force (§4).

Before proceeding, three caveats are in order. First, readers steeped in the Western or Anglo-American tradition will likely notice the highly communitarian nature of African normative theory. The health of the community is rarely, if ever, peripheral to questions about how an individual should act. Second, it is impossible in an article of this length to cover every topic and author worthy of consideration. I have chosen to include the recent work of a mix of both junior and senior philosophers, while also taking into consideration the need for breadth of coverage. There are many other articles, chapters, and books that I could have chosen to discuss instead, and I simply had to make difficult choices in light of space constraints and my own finite capabilities. Third, in what follows, for the sake of simplicity, when I refer

1 In this context, by 'contemporary' I mean the tradition that emerged in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, with the rise of literacy rates and development of universities on the continent.

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to an idea as 'African', I mean that it has been salient to indigenous black Africans in the sub-Saharan region. This does not mean that the idea is exclusive to the African continent, nor that such ideas are unchanging. Rather, my goal is to focus on certain ideas that are especially central in contemporary African philosophical discussions (Metz 2022: 7–8).[2]

2. *Personhood*

In the Anglo-American tradition, 'personhood' is not usually a normative term. Instead, it is often discussed within metaphysics, which asks which properties are essential for personhood or are indicative of personal identity over time. However, in the ethical tradition throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, personhood carries significant normative implications.[3] This concept has probably received the most attention to date of any concept in African philosophy.

As I will explain below, sometimes personhood is interpreted in the context of a formal theory of right action or moral value. This means understanding right actions to be those that aim at positively developing one's personhood, while wrong actions are those that degrade one's personhood. In many cases, 'personhood' is a success term, which means that it is something that can be earned. Other interpretations suggest that it is a socially constructed property that a community designates of an individual but that it is not itself the basis of a moral theory, though it contains normative elements. Though some interpretations of personhood are clearly amenable to categories used in Anglo-American moral philosophy, other times such categorizations are forced.

One of the key ongoing debates about personhood in the literature is between what is known as *radical communitarianism* and *moderate communitarianism*. The former says, roughly, that personhood is only possible within the context of a community and that the needs of the individual come second to those of the community (or stronger still, that individuals cannot have needs that conflict with communal needs). The latter says that though personhood exists within the context of the community, the needs of the individual are normatively on a par with communal needs (with some recognising there can be genuine differences between such needs).

One of the first and most influential pieces on African personhood is Ifeanyi Menkiti's (1940–2019) paper 'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought' (1984; see also Menkiti 2004; 2018). Menkiti was the first to be called a *radical communitarian* because his view appears to imply that the

2 This is not intended to gloss over the fact that precisely how to define 'African philosophy' is hotly debated.

3 Of course, personhood is sometimes normative in the Anglo-American tradition. The debate over abortion is perhaps the most obvious place but see also Rovane 2006.

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needs of the individual are always subsumed under the needs of the community. He writes, 'The reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be' (1984: 171). A person can only be known within the context of their community. Menkiti believes that 'without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description "person" does not fully apply' (172). He repeatedly emphasizes that individuals can only develop their personhood in the context of community, in part because the norms required for personhood are set by the community (172, 176). Notice that this explains the high place of respect given to elders in many African cultures; it takes a lot of time and work to develop personhood (Menkiti 2004: 325–26). It should come as no surprise that Menkiti has been pressed on whether human rights exist (Allsobrook 2023; Masaka 2018; Molefe 2016).

Kwame Gyekye (1939–2019), widely recognized as a founder of contemporary African philosophy, was the first defender of *moderate communitarianism*. He claims that Menkiti and others assume 'that by emphasizing communal values, collective goods, and shared ends, a communitarian social arrangement necessarily conceives of the person as *wholly* constituted by social relationships' (Gyekye 1997: 37; see also Gyekye 1992). Gyekye defends a moderate view because, although he affirms that persons are by nature communal, they are not *only* communal. He believes that individuals are ultimately responsible for their successes or failures. Indeed, he assigns equal moral status to the individual and the community (1997: 41). Gyekye believes that his moderate position is attractive because it preserves human rights, a notion he thinks is too often rejected by postcolonial African socialists (62).[4]

The second chapter of Polycarp Ikuenobe's important book *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (2006) contains influential work on personhood (see also Ikuenobe 2016; 2017;; 2021; 2023). Ikuenobe argues that communalism cannot be properly understood without understanding the relationship between persons and the community. Normative personhood is a form of recognition that comes from the community (Ikuenobe 2006: 51). Though some thinkers try to separate these notions, Ikuenobe argues that the metaphysical and normative conceptions of personhood are actually intertwined (52). For instance, the metaphysical conditions of personhood must be met in order for it to be evaluated normatively.[5]

4 Another highly influential African philosopher who worked extensively on personhood was Kwasi Wiredu. See Wiredu 1992; 1996. He appears to endorse Mentiki's position (see Wiredu 2009: 16). However, he seems to deny that it is as radical as Gyekye supposes (Eze and Metz 2016: 74; for more see Molefe 2021).

5 Indeed, for Ikuenobe community is grounded in the metaphysical holism implied by vitalism. See §4.

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In addressing Gyekye's objections to Menkiti, Ikuenobe appears to defend a slightly less radical communitarianism by claiming that individuals need not be in tension with their community: 'Although, theoretically, a problem may arise if there is a conflict between the interest of the community and that of the individual, practically, such a problem is rare because the way communal principles are framed and the way people are socialized, it is difficult to find a conflict' (77). This is less radical because it is not claiming that clashes between individual and communal interests are *impossible.* Still, the general idea seems to be that if the normative terms of personhood are set by the community, an individual is incredibly unlikely to develop plans or interests that run contrary to those terms. The very conditions of community and personhood protect against such conflicts in the first place. Since Gyekye understands autonomy in individual terms, there could be conflicts between the individual and the community when the former attempts to exercise their autonomy. But when understood in African terms, autonomy is something that is exercised such that 'an individual's good must be [placed] in the context of communal good' (Ikuenobe 2006: 79). Autonomy is always to be judged by the morality of the community (80). Having said that, placing an individual's good within the context of the community does not automatically entail that communal goods always trump individual goods. This leaves open questions about the extent to which the radical and moderate views are actually distinct from each other (see Eze and Metz 2016: 74).

Much of Bernard Matolino's book *Personhood in African Philosophy* (2014) is concerned with arguing against the normative conception of personhood. Matolino argues that community constitutes the 'metaphysical basis of personhood' (1655).[6] He believes that Gyekye does not take seriously the separateness of persons in addition to failing to explain when individual rights could reasonably be violated (1662).[7] Matolino rejects both moderate and radical communitarianism, arguing that there is no substantial difference between the two views, at least as they are represented in Menkiti and Gyekye.

Matolino is also concerned with preserving a 'metaphysical view' of personhood that cannot be reduced to normative personhood (1677). This involves offering a description of personhood that does not contain any normative elements. Matolino ultimately develops and defends a view of personhood that he calls *limited communitarianism*. One of the main differences between his view and Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is that Matolino is explicit that community does not *always* take precedence over the individual such that 'certain individual rights are inviolable' (3470). He

6 The pagination for the citations of Matolino are from an e-book, and will not match the hard copy.

7 Chapter 2 of Matolino 2014 contains extensive discussion of Ikuenobe 2006.

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wants to preserve the importance of community without having it as a necessary condition for personal identity, as it seems to be in Menkiti's radical communitarianism. In sum, 'the statement of the nature of persons as defended by radical and moderate communitarianism reflects concerns that belong to the domain of social, political, and moral philosophy as opposed to identity' (3998; see also Matolino 2018; Ikuenobe 2018).

In his book *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics* (2019), Motsamai Molefe defends an interpretation of personhood that is agent-centred and perfectionist. Personhood is a moral achievement that needs to be earned. Indeed, Molefe also takes the African concept of *ubuntu* to be equivalent to personhood (12 n. 8). The most literal translations of 'ubuntu' often found in the literature appear to be 'personhood' and 'humanness' or 'humanity' (Shutte 2001: 2; Battle 2009: §32; Ewuoso and Hall 2019: 96). Alternatively, Edwin Etieyibo says that 'if we break down the word Ubuntu in these expressions what we will end up with is the notion of *beingness* or being-a-person. This is because *ubu* and *ntu* generally translates to "being" and "person", respectively' (2017: 142). However, there also seems to be agreement that it cannot be translated into English with perfect accuracy (Tutu 1999: 33). In more general terms, 'ubuntu' is sometimes used to indicate the relational or communal nature of African ethics, and is associated with phrases like 'I am because we are'.

For Molefe, ubuntu as personhood requires that the individual needs to seek moral perfection (2019: 38). On this view, being a human is a biological category but personhood is normative such that 'the high praise arises as a moral response to the quality of the performance of the agent in the light of the norms prescribed by society' (39). For Molefe, morality is about developing one's personhood, which is accomplished by exercising other-regarding virtues in the context of community (see also Lougheed 2022; Molefe 2020a). Molefe clarifies that 'the primary focus of personhood is the character of the agent, and actions dynamically and reflexively draw from and contribute to the development of a virtuous character' (45). He also believes his theory is reasonably characterized as egoistic because the primary moral goal is for the agent to achieve *her own* personhood (46). Molefe's view can clearly be categorized as a version of moderate communitarianism because he believes that individuals can pursue goals that are distinct from communal needs. For example, he argues that an individual is permitted to spend money and time pursuing education even if doing so is of no obvious benefit to their community (60).

Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe's book *Menkiti's Moral Man* (2022) is aimed at defending Menkiti's description of personhood against the objections that have been levelled against it over the last few decades. Oyowe is therefore concerned with defending a version of Menkiti's radical communitarianism. The first chapter of his book contains one of the most thorough expositions of Menkiti's view of personhood currently on offer in the

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literature. According to Oyowe, Menkiti believes that personhood cannot be achieved unless one is a full member of their community (10). This does not just involve certain actions by the individual, but it means that in order to be a person, one must be recognized as such by their community (12). This implies that whether there are persons is ultimately up to the community (13). For Oyowe, maximal personhood 'is a composite view comprising physical, psychological, and social (including moral constraints)' (14). Importantly, it is also a view about '*social status* conferred on each other by psychologically competent human beings by means of social recognition and on the basis of their respective participation in social life, especially by demonstrating in behaviour, compliance to appropriate social and moral expectations and norms' (14). Notice that this implies that Oyowe is not offering personhood as a theory of right action or moral value; it is perhaps better described as a theory of social recognition that contains normative elements. The criticisms that Oyowe defends Menkiti against throughout the book include the charges of extreme collectivism, speciesism and justification for oppression. Oyowe concludes his book with an extensive discussion of ancestors in relation to personhood, a subject sometimes ignored in recent discussions of personhood (see 2022: ch. 5; see also Oyowe 2018; Ikuenobe 2022).

Apart from the debate between 'radical' and 'moderate' communitarians about how best to construe personhood, the concept has also been applied to a vast array of topics. Here I briefly highlight the numerous topics to which personhood has been applied just within the last five years or so. One persistent worry that emerges in this literature is that the concept of personhood is sexist, ableist and anti-queer (see Beck and Oyowe 2018; Manzini 2018; Maponya 2021; Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014). For example, Julia Huysamer and Louise du Toit (2023) explore what this critique looks like when applied to non-binary genders. Evaristus Matthias Eyo (2023) argues that Menkiti's version of personhood excludes those with mental disabilities. Personhood has also been applied to questions around emerging technologies including artificial intelligence (Wareham 2021) and transhumanism (Chimakonam 2021a; Fayemi 2018). Likewise, personhood has been applied to various issues surrounding Covid-19 (Chimakonam 2021b). Other topics that have been analysed using personhood include well-being (Ihuah 2023), the meaning of life (Molefe 2020b) and the epistemology and metaphysics of personhood (Beck 2021; Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022; Edema 2023).

3. *Communal harmony*

African ethics is often labelled 'communitarian' because regardless of the particular normative theory in view, it tends to emphasize the community much more than Anglo-American normative theories. But it is also true that

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there are some branches in the Anglo-American tradition that are communitarian. Communism and the Hegelian tradition are two such examples that come to mind. These seem to define the relevant size of the community as the state, if not something larger. In the African philosophical tradition, it is a matter of debate how to define the community (Imafidon 2023: 36–39). For example, some have suggested that the ethical concept of ubuntu only works in isolated small-scale communities and has little to offer the global village that is the modern world (Matolino and Kwindingwi 2013; for a reply see Metz 2014). Others suggest that the moral community includes every person (Etieyibo 2017). It would take this article far too afield to address the extent to which these different communitarian traditions might enrich each other, but it is a promising area for future comparative research.

Distinct from personhood or vitalism (see §4), some theorists in the African tradition have focussed on communal harmony itself as providing the basis for a normative theory. The most common approach can reasonably be described as teleological because it says that communal harmony is the end that should be pursued in all moral decision-making. A different version that has emerged recently is deontological in holding that the human capacity for harmonious relationships or love grounds value.

With respect to teleological approaches to communal harmony, two leading scholars, Mogobe B. Ramose and Peter J. Paris, stress the importance of harmony not only between humans, but also with the spiritual realm. For Ramose,

> The concept of harmony in African thought is comprehensive in the sense that it conceives of balance in terms of the totality of the relations that can be maintained between and among human beings, as well as between human beings and physical nature. The quest for harmony is thus the striving to maintain a comprehensive but specific relational condition among organisms and entities. It is the constant striving to strike, and then maintain, a balance between human beings and physical nature. (2015: 71)

He suggests that the 'expression of African thought' manifests itself by seeking harmony with consensus (2003: 235; see also Ramose 1999). Paris agrees with this assessment when he writes that 'the preservation and promotion of community is the paramount goal of African peoples in all spheres of life' (1995: 130–31). Paris also emphasizes how interdependent humans are. Individuals are quite literally responsible for actions undertaken by members of their communities. This means that 'Africans never view wrongdoing strictly as an individual matter' (130). These views are clearly *teleological* by implying that harmony is the end that ought to be pursued above all else. Indeed, in African thought, social or communal harmony is most often described in teleological terms (Gbadegesin 1991; Murove 2007; Tutu 1999).

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Since his article 'Toward an African Moral Theory' (2007), Thaddeus Metz has been systematically defending a deontological normative theory based on communal harmony. The culmination of his thinking is represented in his book *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent* (2022). For Metz, human beings are valuable inasmuch as they have the capacity for 'friendliness', a technical term for something like the capacity to love and be loved. It is this capacity that grounds human dignity and hence the requirement for honorific treatment. His shift to deontology is motivated by the fact he doubts that teleological approaches to harmony are able to ground human rights (or dignity; 2022: 91). Metz also claims that 'some non-teleological harmony-based or communal approach, which takes into account decisions others have made, is needed in order to account adequately for the permissibility of violence directed against aggressors to protect innocent lives' (102). His view also implies that decisions about how to allocate life-saving scarce resources can reasonably be made based on the prior actions of the agents. For example, if someone has acted in ways that are unfriendly, and this means that a harmed party now requires a scarce resource, then it is prima facie permissible to give the resource to the harmed party instead of the unfriendly party.

Metz explains that his 'view is not that communal relationship itself has a moral status, nor that only those who are in such a relationship have one, but rather that those who in principle could relate in that way have a moral status' (106). He explicates friendliness in terms of two concepts, identification and solidarity. It is thus the capacity for identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them that grounds moral value. This leads Metz to offer the following two principles:

(1) An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be party to harmonious ways of relating.
(2) An act is wrong insofar as it degrades those with the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects. (110)

Not only does Metz apply this framework to a wide variety of issues in applied ethics, but he has also recently adapted it into a comprehensive theory of justice (forthcoming).[8]

4. *Vitalism*

The final strain of African moral thought I examine is based on vitalism or life force. Such theories appeal to a robust metaphysics which says that everything, whether animate or inanimate, is imbued with imperceptible

8 For other work on communal harmony, see Asouzu 2011, Ikeke 2015, Masolo 2010, Mosmia 2023, Oluwagbemi-Jacob 2014, Negedu and Ojomah 2018, Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2020, Oyowe 2013 and Táíwò 2016.

energy that comes from God.[9] The goal of morality on this view is to preserve and protect the life force of those within one's community. I begin by explaining more details of this view before exploring recent attempts to naturalize it.

It is worth being clearer on what vital force amounts to before explaining its normative implications. There is universal agreement amongst expositors of this view that the highest value is vital force (Anyanwu 1984: 85, 90). Everything that exists is interconnected in virtue of possessing some degree of force, which is all ultimately derived from God. K.C. Anyanwu writes that 'because everything is filled with force, the African concludes that all things are similar and share the same qualities in spite of apparent differences' (1987: 249; see also Mulago 1991: 124). This suggests an *ontological unity*, with some interpreters suggesting that it implies a kind of *sameness* (see Behrens 2014: 55; Chemhuru 2014: 80; Kehinde 2014: 151, 152; Unah 2014: 109; Uzukwu 1982: 198). Vitalism also undergirds the African hierarchy of being or chain of being (Anyanwu 1984: 91; see also Gbadegesin 1991: 88; Kehinde 2014: 151, 152, 156; Unah 2014: 109, 118; Uzukwu 1982: 195–96). God is at the top of the hierarchy because God has the most vital energy, and all other force comes from God (Anyanwu 1984: 92–95; see also Bikopo and Van Bogaert 2010: 44–45; Bujo 2005: 424; Hamminga 2005: 63; Imafidon 2014: 144; Kasenene 1998: 25; Mulago 1991: 124; Ubah 1982: 92). God has placed humans at the focal centre of the visible world, giving them the strongest vital force in that realm and dominion over animals and the rest of nature.

Though the scholarly descriptions of vital force contain normative claims or strongly imply them, it is rare to find the development of an explicit normative theory on the basis of vital force. One recent exception to this can be found in the work of Motsamai Molefe and Mutshidzi Maraganedzha (2022), in which they spell out two different theories of right action that they claim are plausibly grounded by vitalism (see also Molefe 2018). They first claim that vitalism can ground a perfectionist normative theory when combined with ideas found in normative personhood. With personhood also in view, an ethic based on vitalism can be thought of as developing one's vitalism in the context of their community (362). This means that the goal of morality is to achieve moral perfection by developing one's vital force, which is achieved by exercising other-regarding virtues. On this view, 'an act is right insofar as it perfects the agent's spiritual nature; and, it is wrong if it fails to

9 This metaphysics is sometimes associated with African Traditional Religion. This is a monotheistic religion with millions of adherents in the sub-Sahara which says that God created the world *ex materia* and gives life force to literally everything that exists, and that when people die, they typically become a member of the living dead for around five generations, remaining very much a part of their community, just in the invisible realm. See Mbiti 1969; 1975, Metz and Molefe 2021 and Lougheed et al. 2024.

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do so' (363). The second ethic they claim could be developed from vitalism is a dignity-based normative theory. If vital force grounds respect because it comes from God, then it can be used to undergird the claim that there are strong negative duties not to harm and strong positive duties to empower the life in others (364). This means that 'an act is right insofar as it respects a person's spiritual nature, and [an] act is wrong insofar as it degrades this valuable human nature' (364).

Metz has sought to develop a naturalistic version of an ethic based on vitalism that he names 'liveliness' (2012: 25). Though he ultimately concludes that his own relational moral theory is superior, he believes liveliness warrants further consideration on a global stage. Metz devotes a chapter of *A Relational Moral Theory* to developing liveliness, explaining that he will 'work with a notion of vitality that: is construed in terms of force, not substance; is thought to be perishable, as opposed to eternal; comes in different degrees or kinds; and plausibly varies in value depending on the quantity or quality of it' (2022: 80). According to Metz, descriptions of life force

> tend to say that human beings are good in some way for exhibiting a superlative degree of health, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, complexity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence. Or they characterize undesirable states as reductions of vitality understood as disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction, disintegration, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression. (80)

Of course, these characteristics are consistent with naturalism. Metz explains that this can be interpreted in teleological terms, where the aim of morality is to increase the liveliness in oneself and in others. However, he argues that this ethic is flawed because it cannot account for various important African and global intuitions. I have recently argued that Metz is wrong to suggest the same worries apply to deontological formulations of liveliness (Lougheed 2024). A deontological version of liveliness says that people are owed respect because they have the capacity for liveliness. I also offer the first full-length book treatment of liveliness, *A Moral Theory of Liveliness: A Secular Interpretation of Life Force* (manuscript).

5. *Conclusion*

I hope that this article shows that there is much to be excited about in African normative philosophy. I have ultimately tried to map out the main themes in African normative theory as located in work on personhood, harmony and vitalism. Of course, these categories are necessarily somewhat artificial, and it will be interesting to see whether entirely distinct branches emerge in the future.

I conclude by acknowledging that the reader may have noticed the relative dearth of black African women authors cited in this article. In the West or

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Anglo-American world, it is usually said that there about two male philosophers for every one woman philosopher. The ratio of black African women working in African philosophy is undoubtably much smaller (Chimakonam and du Toit 2018). Consider that the first black South African woman to earn a PhD in any area of philosophy in South Africa did so in 2018.[10] The first woman from Botwsana did so in 2023.[11] By my unscientific lights, I suspect that women's enrolment in philosophy graduate programs is on the rise on the African continent such that I hope someone writing a similar article in a decade from now will have far more African women voices to cite.[12]

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11 '#UPGraduation2023: UP student becomes the first African woman from Botswana to get a PhD in philosophy', University of Pretoria, September 18, 2023 (https://www.up.ac.za/news/post_3181900-upgraduation2023-up-student-becomes-the-first-african-woman-from-botswana-to-get-a-phd-in-philosophy).

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