

**THE FUNCTION OF “IT” IN IFEANYI MENKITI’S
NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF PERSONHOOD: A RESPONSE
TO BERNARD MATOLINO**

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Abstract

This article is a response to Bernard Matolino’s criticisms against Ifeanyi Menkiti’s elucidations on the normative notion of personhood in African philosophy. This article argues that Menkiti’s article is best understood to be ultimately focused on articulating the normative notion of personhood; so understood, Menkiti’s analysis eschews many of the objections made against it by Matolino. We show that the confusion lies in a general failure in African philosophy to distinguish three distinct senses of the notion of a *person*. We further show how the referent ‘it’ as used to pick out infants by Menkiti, contrary to Matolino’s analysis that suggests that it is an instance of ‘mal-function’ may be charitably construed to be capturing the idea that infants have *moral status* and/or that they are *morally neutral*. A defense of Menkiti’s idea of personhood is crucial in a search for a robust African perfectionist ethics.

Keywords: ‘It’, Moral agency, Moral Perfectionism, Moral status, Personhood

Introduction

In this article, we revisit Bernard Matolino’s (2011) article titled: ‘The (Mal) Function of “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s Normative Account of Person’. We offer three responses to Matolino. We accuse Matolino’s critique of Menkiti’s analysis of personhood to be born out of a lack of charity. We expected a more objective presentation of Menkiti’s thoughts so they are critiqued for their true limitations, something Matolino failed to do. We think Menkiti’s project properly understood is one that should be limited to elucidating on the idea that personhood is some sort of moral achievement. Understood in this limited focus on moral issues, we think it would have avoided the many objections raised against it.

At the heart of Menkiti’s talk of personhood is a perfectionist interpretation of morality that involves the idea that each human being has a moral duty to realize their true human self or perfect their humanity. This thesis of personhood is generally considered to be a plausible one in an African tradition (WIREDU 1992; GYEKYE 1992; IKUENOBÉ 1996), where Menkiti appears to flounder, so far as we are

concerned, is in terms of the arguments he marshals to secure this kind of a moral claim by obstructing it with unnecessary ontological considerations.

As a response to Matolino, we begin by targeting his characterization of the idea of personhood (as discussed by Menkiti) by invoking Didier's Kaphagawani's analysis of personhood in African philosophy. We note that Matolino is involved in a conceptual confusion because Kaphagawani and Menkiti are using two distinct notions of a 'person', one ontological and another normative. Secondly, whereas Matolino critiques Menkiti's reference to infants as 'its' as a (mal)function; we observe, on the contrary, propose a more plausible understanding of this 'it' reference to infants. We submit that this re-interpretation of 'it' ought to be understood in light of the idea that personhood is a moral achievement. Lastly, we insist that Menkiti's claim about 'ontological progression' can be rendered more plausible if it is interpreted in light of his main thesis; as such, it can be referred to as 'moral progression'. We note by simply drooping a talk of ontology and instead, concentrate on talk of morality, Menkiti's analysis becomes less susceptible to the critique like ones made by Matolino.

We undertake such an engagement with Matolino's analysis mainly because much discussion of Menkiti's contribution to the notion of personhood (*qua* character perfection) hasn't received the proper and correct attention or even the credit it deserves in the literature. This starts to hint on the idea that there is a general misconception regarding Menkiti's notion of personhood. This is so, largely, due to a negative influence by Kwame Gyekye, a seasoned and influential African philosopher, towards Menkiti's talk of personhood. Gyekye (mis)interprets Menkiti's contribution of personhood to amount to what he refers to as a "radical/extreme/unrestricted communitarianism" (GYEKYE 1992; MATOLINO 2011, 24; MOLEFE 2016, 37).

Gyekye (1992) considers Menkiti's conception of personhood to be 'radical' insofar as it allegedly denies the individuality of an individual *qua* her autonomy. In this light, talk of personhood within a communitarian framework is accused of failing to appreciate the inventiveness and creativity of individuals (GYEKYE 1992). Gyekye also considers this theory to be 'radical' insofar as it denies individuals their rights to the point of sacrificing them (in the style of utilitarianism) for the sake of the common good – this amounts to the claim that this theory has no place for human rights (NOZICK 1972; GYEKYE 1992; METZ2012). The problem with this critique is that it completely (mis)understands Menkiti's (main) project of articulating the moral notion of personhood (MOLEFE 2016a). Menkiti in this project is not largely interested in articulating a correct relationship between an

individual and the community. He is also not interested, ultimately, in detailing out an account about the nature of dignity and individual rights. Though he does *touch* on these issues, his main project is to offer a philosophical account about the nature of normative personhood in African philosophy (WIREDU 2009).

As such, it is not philosophically justified to drag and construe Menkiti as offering a radical vision of communitarianism that denies persons their rights. It is in light of this negative treatment of Menkiti (by Gyekye) that we respond to Matolino's criticism of Menkiti¹. It is this context of Gyekye's unfair criticism of Menkiti that provides us with a motivation and a conducive ground to respond to Matolino's criticism of Menkiti. We also do so, influenced by this commentary by Metz: "I submit that the Menkiti-Gyekye debate on personhood should be revisited while keeping an eye on these three distinct senses of person" (2013, 13). This article, therefore, is a positive response to Metz's call for African philosophers to revisit this debate on personhood, largely, on our part, to defend Menkiti's specific use of the concept of a person to denote an individual's moral achievement against unfair criticisms that creep up due to a lack of conceptual sensitivity to the three distinct senses of this notion.

There is consensus in the literature that Menkiti was right to identify the normative notion of personhood as "germane" to African moral thought (IKUENOBE 2006, 117). Wiredu, for example, states that Menkiti can be credited for being the first African philosopher to explicitly articulate a normative conception of personhood in the African tradition (WIREDU 2008, 336). Even Gyekye, in his later work, has come to endorse Menkiti's main thesis about the nature of moral personhood in the African tradition (2010, no pages).

This article is structured in the following fashion. In the first section, we seek to offer a charitable interpretation of Menkiti's main project of personhood. The reason for this re-interpretation is to present Menkiti's article in its most positive light so as to establish its promise or even plausibility, and dismiss Matolino's criticisms. In the second section, we propose a novel interpretation of Menkiti's reference to infants as 'its'. Whereas Matolino considers this reference as a 'mal-function', we suggest that the reference to infants as 'its' simply denotes that they are moral patients and it also signifies that they are morally neutral. We will also proceed to suggest that a more charitable way to

¹ We are aware of Matolino's criticism of Gyekye in this regard [2009]. But even in this regard he does not quite emphasize that Menkiti is not an extremist with regards to communitarianism.

read Menkiti will be to jettison his talk of ‘ontological progression’ in favor of a talk of ‘moral progression’, which is more in line with his thesis that personhood is achieved. We begin in what follows by reconstructing a more plausible reading of Menkiti.

Menkiti on Personhood

There are at least three distinct senses of the notion of ‘personhood’ in the African tradition (METZ, 2013; MOLEFE, 2016). Firstly, a talk of a ‘person’ could be a *metaphysical* one to the effect of distinguishing a human being, say, for example, from a tree, dog or a grain of sand. For example, when one is hunting and immediately sees a human being and says – “it’s a ‘person’” (IKUENOBE 2006; GYEKYE 2010). Talk of a ‘person’ in this context is concerned mainly with identifying descriptive features that characterize a human being as opposed to an animal or any other thing. For example, Gyekye’s talk of a human self, a ‘person’, as constituted by *autonomy* and *sociality* is such an ontological account (1992, 1997). It is this notion of personhood that Kaphagawani’s survey is analyzing among differing traditions (2004, 332). For example, when he talks about an Akan concept of a person he states – “from the Akan perspective, a person is composed of three fundamental elements: “nipadua (body), okra (life-giving entity), and sunsum (that which gives a person’s personality) ...” (2004, 332). Here, we have an account of what constitutes a human being as some properties as mentioned above. Another way of thinking about this (metaphysical) talk of a ‘person’ is in terms of ‘philosophical anthropology’, which concerns itself with the theorizing about human nature. Is a human being a material, spiritual or some combination of these properties? Henceforth, we will refer to this sense of a ‘person’ as P₁.

The second sense of the notion of a ‘person’ is that of moral status. Thad Metz, an influential scholar of African philosophy, defines ‘moral status’ as “the idea of something being the object of a “direct” duty, i.e., owed a duty in its own right, or is the idea of something that can be wronged” (2012, 389). When one refers to some entity as a ‘person’, one is, among other things, identifying such an entity as morally significant and as such deserving our moral regard. To talk of such an entity as ‘morally significant’ is to designate it as a moral patient. Things referred to as ‘persons’, in this sense, can be characterized as those that can be *wronged* i.e. certain ways of treating them harms them or makes them worse off; and on the other, certain ways of treating them are *wrong* insofar as they violate or break some moral principle (Metz. 2012). It is a theory of moral status that will spell out a principle that defines wrong and what amounts to harming a ‘person’.

Kevin Behrens informs us that this talk of personhood is normative insofar as it specifies some property, like, for example, rationality, sentience and so on, as that which qualifies some entity as a moral patient. He also points out that this normative talk of personhood is common in the Western bioethical context (2013, 113). So, what Menkiti refers to as a theory of a 'person' that picks out some lone property, as a minimal concept of a person, could be a reference to this sense of a person or so we construe his writings (MENKITI 1984, 172; METZ 2012). We will refer to this sense of a 'person' as P₂.

Lastly, talk of a 'person' refers to a moral agent who has performed or conducted herself in a fashion that is morally praiseworthy insofar as she has lived according to the demands of morality. To refer to one as a 'person' in this sense, is to make certain claims about her moral achievements, like, she is morally excellent insofar as she is courageous, kind, sympathetic, friendly, among others. For example, Tutu has this kind of personhood in mind in his assertion that:

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "*Yu, u nobuntu*"; "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours. (1999, 31)

To say someone has 'ubuntu' is the same thing as saying that they are morally upright. So, Menkiti is rightly construed as concerned about this particular notion of personhood. This observation is borne out in the following comments by Menkiti:

For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed ... Thus, it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellences seen as truly definitive of man. (1984, 172)

He continues and observes that:

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 excellences implied by the term [1984, 173].

And lastly, he observes:

That full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society, indicates straight away that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes. (1984, 172)

The above quotations capture Menkiti's main thesis and its implications. Menkiti is here primarily concerned with two aspects related to what we can refer to as P_3 . On the one hand, he wants to spell out what is at the heart of African moral philosophy: its preoccupation with character perfection [GYEKYE 2010]. In this moral tradition, more is expected of a human being; she is required to achieve the ideals of a true or genuine human life. It is not and never enough to be just a human being [METZ 2009, 89]. The more one lives, the more she is expected to grow morally and to be morally excellent.

On the other hand, Menkiti is concerned with spelling out the *means* necessary for achieving such a status of being a moral exemplar (BEHRENS 2013). He cites how African societies inserted young ones into social-moral transformational technologies, meant to assist them to acquire the status of personhood (PRAEG 2013). So, we may safely observe that on the one hand, Menkiti wants to make a claim about what is expected of human beings within a perfectionist moral model: she ought to be virtuous or one manifesting excellences befitting a human life. On the other hand, he wants to give some limited account of the means, the how part, for achieving this status of being a good person. In this regard, he postulates a communitarian or relational context as necessary for one to achieve such a status (SHUTTE 2001; LUTZ 2009).

If personhood is something that is achieved in a relational context of a community as one grows older; it follows logically, that at the beginning of life, infants, do not have moral excellence. What is biologically given, at birth, is a human being in sense of P_1 . What is not in dispute is the human status of infants – that would be a bizarre position to hold. Where the discussion could have been advanced fruitfully would have been with regards to an enquiry to the second sense of personhood (P_2). What would have been at issue on the part of Matolino (and others) would have been to push Menkiti to say something about the moral status of the young over and above referring

to them as ‘its’, and we are of the view that this would have been a meaningful contribution to the literature since this is one of the areas that have received little attention from African philosophers². And, this contribution would have been very useful because Menkiti makes statements that could be read as diminishing the moral status of infants (P₂).

Furthermore, it is also interesting to clarify a development from a status of an ‘it’ to that of an adult (personhood) which one attains as she grows – we will not here concern ourselves with discussions of ancestors. Menkiti represents this journey from an ‘it’ to full personhood as an ontological journey – ‘ontological progression’ (1984, 174). But, if we understand Menkiti’s project as one concerned about the nature of moral personhood (P₃) then we might have reasons to think he is mistaken to consider the process of growth in question as an ontological one. We think what we have here is a moral journey. In his later work, Menkiti appears to think of it as a moral journey though he still talks of ontological progression.

For married to the notion of person is the notion of *moral arrival*, a notion involving yardsticks and gradations, or, more simply, involving an expectation that certain ways of being or behaving in the world may be so off the mark as to raise important questions regarding the person-status of their doers. (2004: 326)

If Menkiti is talking about a growth of human beings in terms of ‘moral arrival’, it implies, or, should imply, that one is engaged in a journey that is moral, as opposed to being ontological, in the first place. It is also important to note that Menkiti confuses anthropological (cultural) considerations from moral ones.

The so-called “ontological progression” begins at birth with the child basically considered an “it” – essentially an individual without individuality, without personality, and without a name. Then the born child is brought through the various naming ceremonies, and, in the process, begins the first phase of that special journey toward incorporated personhood via the community. (2004, 325)

²There is not much that concerns itself extensively and systematically with the case of the young in the African. Scholars need to devote some focus on this issue.

The fact that a child arrives in the world has no individuality and self-awareness is a biological consideration; and facts related to naming are anthropological and cultural. These are not moral considerations, strictly speaking. There is no relationship between being named and having a virtuous moral character. The process of naming and other rituals may have something to do largely with anthro-cultural technologies employed by a society, largely, to socialize or humanize an infant to become a functional human being. Thus, Menkiti refers to infants as 'its' because they have not yet been processed through these cultural processes. Given Menkiti's confusion over anthropological/cultural and moral claims, it becomes incumbent upon us as philosophers to attempt to reconstruct his theory in a more plausible fashion. To do such a reconstruction, we draw cues and clues from Menkiti when he states:

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that this phenomenon of a depersonalized status at the two polarities of existence makes a great deal of sense given the absence of moral function. The child, we all know, is usually preoccupied with his physical needs; and younger persons, generally, are notoriously lacking in moral perception. Most often they have a tendency towards self-centeredness in action, a tendency to see the world exclusively through their own vantage point. This absence of moral function cannot but have an effect on the view of them as persons. (1984, 175)

Several things are worth noting from this passage. Firstly, the above passage read in light of Menkiti's main aim should amount to the claim that it is not common to think of infants in terms of whether they are good or bad human beings, in the first place. Such a moral consideration is not only senseless but should not even arise because of the very nature of infants. As such, Menkiti's talk of children as 'preoccupied with physical needs' and 'notoriously lacking in moral perception', 'self-centredness', among others, does not justify his reference to infants as 'its'; in fact, it could be read as suggesting that infants are morally culpable since this reads like he is positing some moral agency to them. Or, maybe he can be interpreted more positively, so much so that when he talks about children as lacking moral function, he means they have not yet developed moral agency. And, we may now ask: so, how does their lack of moral agency, in light of Menkiti's aim, help in referring to infants as 'its'?

One useful way, if not plausible, to respond to this question is in terms of P_2 and P_3 . On the one hand, we recognize that infants are

human beings, P₁. There is thus no dispute about the fact that they are human beings even Menkiti will glibly accept this position. But to refer to infants as 'its' can be hanged on both P₂ and P₃. On the one hand, when we refer to infants as 'its' in terms of P₂, we are making a moral claim about our duties or obligations to them as beings of (moral) value. In other words, we are saying since these infants have a potential to become moral agents in a way a cat or a tree cannot, they feature in as a part of the moral community; and as such, require our protections from anything that will undermine or harm their potential to become moral agents (GYEKYE, 1992). This then calls upon moral agents to treat infants with some moral respect.

Then a central challenge is for us to justify this claim about P₂ in light of Menkiti's own project. Menkiti gives us a clue when he talks about infants' 'lack of moral function'. A lack of moral function on the part of infants is temporary, as they grow, they will be able to develop and exercise moral agency. As such, unawares, Menkiti suggests a theory of moral status *qua* potential for moral agency. That is, insofar as children unlike a stone or a donkey have a potential for moral agency then they have some moral status. This interpretation is sustained by Gyekye:

The foregoing discussion of some morally significant expressions in the Akan language or judgements made about the conduct of persons suggests a conception of moral personhood; a person is defined in terms of moral qualities or capacities: a human person is a being who has a moral sense and is capable of making moral judgments. This conception of a person however, must not be considered as eliminating or writing off children or infants as persons even though they are not (yet) considered as moral agents, as capable of exercising moral sense. The reason is that even though children are not morally capable in actuality, *they are morally capable in potentiality*. Unlike the colt which will never come to possess a moral sense even if it grew into an adult (horse), children do grow to become *moral* agents on reaching adolescence: at this stage, they are capable of exercising their moral sense and thus of making moral judgments (GYEKYE 1992, 110, emphasis mine).

Thus, to refer to infants as 'its' could be construed in terms of P₂ as proffering an account about what qualifies them as morally deserving of our moral regard. This interpretation of 'its' is an interesting philosophical implication that needs serious consideration since it is

connected with P₃ (a perfectionist moral theory). It implies that if the goal of morality is for a human being to achieve their true ideal of being virtuous and this happens by engaging in some meaningful relationships; it follows that what makes a human being, at the beginning of life, valuable, in terms of moral status, is their capacity/potential for moral agency. But making sense of a reference to infants as 'its' in terms of P₂ does something important, it explains why we only focus on human infants with such a reference and not other things like animals and trees, because they lack the relevant potential to embark on a moral journey. But we are not convinced that this is the whole story of what Menkiti had in mind when he talked about infants as 'its'. We think to get a fuller story we may ask: can we give an account of a reference to infants as 'its' in terms of P₃?

We start by observing that the notion of P₃ indicates some moral content or record that places one in a position where they could be assessed either as morally successful or defective. In this sense, one's life will be assessed relative to how they have exercised their moral agency in the world. This immediately raises problems for infants precisely because, at this stage, they do not have this content of moral performance. This observation is banal insofar as it is senseless even to want to talk of infants as either good or bad in terms of character perfection? So, what meaningful conclusions can we draw about infants as 'its' with regards to their moral *contentlessness*?

We think an insight that is obvious and yet worth our consideration is that the reference to infants as 'its' *qua* P₃ marks out the fact that infants are not morally assessable and as such it makes sense to refer to them as morally *neutral*. Thus, to refer to infants as 'its' *qua* P₃ amounts to a claim that infants are morally neutral until such time they have developed and exercised their moral agency. This reference to infants as 'its' *qua* moral neutrality, in light of Menkiti project, makes more sense. This position is also discussed by Gyekye, in a way we think strengthens the interpretation offered here:

The logic of the acquisition of our character or habits is that the original nature of the human being was morally neutral, neither good nor bad. A person's original moral neutrality will in the course of his life come to be affected, in one direction (the good) or the other direction (the bad) by his actions and responses to moral instruction, advice and persuasion. The original moral neutrality of a human being constitutes the foundation of our conception of the moral person, for it makes for—allows room for—choice, that is, moral choice. Consequently, what a person does or does not do is most crucial

to the formation and development of his or her character, and, thus, to becoming moral or immoral. (2010)

Gyekye argues that the philosophical stance of ‘the original moral neutrality of a human being’ at the beginning of life is consistent with the thesis that Menkiti is making. Menkiti’s argument is that morality is a function of developing a virtuous character. Such a character has to be developed precisely because one is not born with it, one is simply born with a potential for it, and those with such a potential, when they reach the relevant age, can then develop virtuous characters. So, the use of ‘it’ captures this significant idea that when one is born, in the African tradition (as opposed to a Christian doctrine that conceives of a human being as born with the original sin), a person is born morally neutral, simply awaiting his chance to make something of herself, morally speaking. It is this insight, we think best captures Menkiti’s reference to infants as ‘its’ insofar as it is consistent with his thesis.

If the connection between these two senses of ‘it’ articulated here make sense at all then we shall continue by showing how they are connected. To say an infant is an ‘it’ *qua* P₂ is to claim that there are certain ways of treating her that are wrong because they do not respect her as a moral patient. What makes her a moral patient is the fact she has a *potential* for moral agency. On the other hand, to refer to an infant as an ‘it’ *qua* P₃ is to claim that at the beginning of life or one’s journey as a human being, one is morally neutral. So, given the value attached to a human life at the beginning, the idea that an infant has moral status because she has the potential to become a moral agent, engenders us to protect her and create a socio-cultural space where she may exercise her opportunities to make something of herself morally speaking i.e. achieve personhood. So, the process of moral incorporation, is a way of creating such a possibility i.e. offering means to assist individuals to lead truly human lives.

So, above we argued that Menkiti should be construed as interested in P₃. Furthermore, it is best - instead of talking about *ontological* progression - for us to talk about *moral* progression. This suggestion naturally follows when one recognizes that we are correct when we opine that Menkiti is concerned with the moral philosophical notion of personhood. Thus, a journey from an ‘it’ can be construed in terms of P₂ and P₃: ‘it’ *qua* P₂ amounts to a claim about the moral status of infants; and ‘it’ *qua* P₃ amounts to the claim that infants are morally-neutral. Having re-worked a reference to infants in terms of P₂ and P₃, we now proceed now to offer a three-pronged response to Matolino.

A Response to Matolino

Matolino opens his discussion by noting that the notion of a *person* is hotly debated in the African tradition and has led to a variety of schools of thought that are characterized by “irreconcilable differences” (2011: 23). He captures these different schools of thought on the notion of a person in terms Kaphagawani’s survey of literature in African philosophy. Kaphagawani identifies competing interpretations of ‘personhood’: force, communalist and shadow theses [Matolino 2011, 24]. After these comments and characterizations of the notion of a person, Matolino claims:

If, for argument’s sake, we were to accept that Kaphagawani’s characterization is correct then it would be clear that African thinkers talk about the same concept in different ways. The difference that we have here is a conceptual difference. An advocate of the communalist thesis will not use the same categories of definition and will not use the same language as a proponent of the shadow thesis. (2011, 23)

In light of Matolino taking Kaphagawani’s characterization of the notion of ‘person’ as a point of departure, he locates Menkiti in the communalist school of thought and then proceeds to make this claim about Menkiti:

My present aim is to inquire into a particular aspect that is raised by one of the proponents of the communitarian view. Ifeanyi Menkiti has become one of the most strident champions of the communalist version of personhood. *His claim to fame is his bold statement that in African thinking, personhood is the sort of thing that one can be better at, worse at, or fail at* (2011, 24, emphasis mine).

We disagree with how Matolino characterizes Menkiti’s use of personhood in light of Kaphagawani’s analysis. For starters, a correct reading of Kaphagawani will immediately reveal that he is after a purely ontological concept of a person i.e., he is interested in philosophical analysis of theories of human nature in an African tradition. So, Matolino is mistaken to suggest that the difference is conceptual; the difference between these three ‘schools of thought’ is not conceptual but substantive. They all agree on the concept of a person *qua* a human being (P_1), but where they differ is in terms of their conceptions or interpretations (theories) of what constitutes a human being. These thinkers posit different ontological categories for what constitutes a

person *qua* a human being. But this categorization of Menkiti as a communalist is problematic since it confuses various concepts of a person, as we indicated them above: P₁, P₂ and P₃. Matolino locates Menkiti within Kaphagawani's discussion of the notion of a *person* that is ontological whereas it is abundantly clear that Menkiti is after the normative notion of a person. This conceptual distinction should be clear to Matolino precisely because he asserts that Menkiti's '*claim to fame is his bold statement that in African thinking, personhood is the sort of thing that one can be better at, worse at, or fail at*'. So, it is clear that Menkiti is concerned with a different notion of a person than the one under consideration by Kaphagawani.

Further, it is also crucial to note that Kaphagawani in his discussion of the notion of a person with regards to the so called 'communalist school' of thought makes no specific or explicit reference to Menkiti at all; in fact, he limits his comments to Mbiti and others (2004, 336 – 338). This omission on the part of Kaphagawani is deliberate, we suggest, given that Menkiti's paper was published in 1984. And we can account for the apparent omission of Menkiti by simply recognizing that Kaphagawani was aware that Menkiti was discussing a different sense of a *person* than the one he was pursuing. Kaphagawani does not cite Menkiti in his discussion of a communalist school within which Matolino locates him; instead, he simply adds him in the list of 'Further Reading' at the end of paper. This is done, we suppose, to suggest that he recognizes that his project of ontological personhood is distinct from that of Menkiti that is concerned about normative personhood. The key concern with Matolino's lack of conceptual sensitivity with regards to claims that are ontological and those that are normative is what lies at the heart of his lack of charity with his criticism of Menkiti. And, as such, the many mistaken claims that Menkiti makes that are ontological become subjected to a serious scrutiny by Matolino; and, this conceptual confusion on the part of Menkiti should have just been put aside and due attention given to the essence of Menkiti's contribution, which is normative.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that there are two senses in which Menkiti could be referred to as a 'communitarian'³. The first sense is more relevant to Menkiti's project of discussing the notion of personhood. On the one hand, his conception of personhood is communitarian insofar as it prescribes some relationships or communal engagement as a necessary means for achieving personhood. In other words, the idea is that one cannot be moral all alone; a good character is

³We use the notions of communalism and communitarianism interchangeably.

a function of positively relating to others. For example, Augustine Shutte observes that:

(T)he moral life is seen as a process of personal growth... Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded. (2001, 14)

And, it is interesting to note that Metz informs us that “This is probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature. Many thinkers take the maxim “a person is a person through other persons” to be a call for an agent to develop her personhood” (2007, 331). So, in this sense, personhood is communitarian insofar as it makes some relationships (in a communal context) with others a basis for moral achievement.

Secondly, Menkiti could be construed as a communitarian insofar as he appears to hold a political theory that makes duties and responsibilities to others primary and rights secondary. Typically, individualist political systems posit rights as the primary good (WIREDU 2008, 336). Menkiti (1984, 181) does not deny nor disregard rights as wrongly accused by Gyekye; instead, whatever these may be, their place in the African tradition is secondary since duties are considered primary. Insofar as he offers a system that is community centered *qua* duty-based moral scheme and it is correct to say that his account is communitarian.

Matolino appears to be aware of this sense of being communitarian but does not take it seriously insofar as it could have helped him to realize some ontological confusions and mistakes on the part of Menkiti. The second sense does not occur in Matolino’s paper, but it would have helped him to defend Menkiti from the accusation that his view of personhood “has now come to represent what Gyekye calls “radical/extreme/unrestricted” communitarianism. Radical communitarianism, as defended by Menkiti, claims that it is the sole authentic view of African thinking on personhood” (Matolino 2011, 24). Menkiti would have, once and for all, been cleared of these charges of radical communitarianism (Molefe 2016).

‘Its’ and Moral Neutrality and Moral Status

We have already considered what we take to be the most promising, if not plausible, interpretations of Menkiti with regards to the reference to infants as ‘its’ above. In the first instance, this could be a claim about the moral status of infants to the effect that since, they are potential

moral agents, we owe them some moral regard. A claim Matolino appears to support [2011: 29]. In our deliberations and actions towards infants we should treat them with some respect. On the other hand, we observe that a talk of ‘it’ could, more closely related to Menkiti’s project, can be construed to amount to the claim that human beings, at the beginning of life, are morally neutral. We also observed that this idea is more consistent with an ethics that construes morality, largely, in terms of (a good or bad) character. At the beginning of life, since one has no lived record, she has a clean slate; then, as she grows, she builds either a good or bad record.

Matolino considers the use the reference of ‘it’ to refer to infants as problematic. Many of his arguments focus on the references to ancestors as ‘its’; this article limits its focus to the young. With regards to the infants Matolino states:

The first problem with Menkiti’s argument is his attempt to ground the normative difference between babies and adults, in African thinking, through his alleged evidence of the usage of the English word “it” as an indicator of the ontological difference between babies and adults. (2011, 28)

In the first instance, we agree with Matolino that the use of a foreign language to derive conclusions about issues in African philosophy may be problematic. Menkiti’s argument would have been more accessible had he appealed to a local language. But, following this line of reason has been exhausted by Gyekye already. Matolino is not telling us anything we do not know already (GYEKYE 1992, 105). To take issues forward, we suggest that we reconsider what Menkiti was aiming for when he postulated this argument drawing from a foreign language. Menkiti wanted to support his main claim that personhood is acquired:

The temptation might be strong in some quarters to retort that either an entity is a person or it is not; that there can be no two ways about it. In response to this misgiving let me *note that the notion of an acquisition of personhood is supported by the natural tendency in many languages, English included, of referring: to children and new-borns as It.* (1984, 173, emphasis ours).

It appears that in this instance, Menkiti is appealing to the English language, ‘the reference to infants as ‘its’, to make a claim about a child’s lack of moral excellence or the fact that she has not acquired personhood. He appeals to some languages to support, or, as evidence to

lend credence to the claim that personhood is something acquired. Firstly, it is clear that what is at issue is not the fact that infants are human beings, an ontological claim. Secondly, it seems that there is no dispute about the nature of personhood as something acquired. What is at issue is Menkiti's appeal to foreign languages to support this claim. So, the main proposition that personhood is acquired is not controversial; in fact, we believe it is true. What is problematic is the quality of the evidence offered to sustain this view – the use of 'it' in the English language to indicate that infants have no moral content.

We further observe the problematic nature of the argument or evidence proffered by Menkiti does not reside (so much) in the use of the English word 'it' per se, as we have argued above already; but, on how the word is used. The reason for this is because, as argued above, there are two meaningful ways one can use the reference 'it' in a way that is philosophically robust. We observe that a (true) proposition supported by a bad argument is better than a bad argument for a problematic proposition. The notion of personhood as a moral acquisition is considered by African philosophers as a defining thought of African moral philosophy (See, Behrens 2013)⁴. We believe that Matolino's argument about the use of 'it' is generally correct insofar as it does not provide convincing evidence for the claim that infants are not persons; but insofar as he did not imagine more plausible ways to salvage what is not a controversial claim about the acquisition of personhood, we consider his argument to be uncharitable.

So, we may also lump Menkiti's appeal to anthropological reports about a lack of extensive grieving and mourning over a dead child than an adult as evidence for the notion of personhood as acquired, implausible. What is implausible is not the proposition that personhood is acquired but it is the evidence offered to justify such a claim. The ability to refer to infants as 'its' or lack of extensive grieving for them does not yet say anything about their personhood (in the three senses adumbrated above). One, however, can offer an argument that supports Menkiti's claim about personhood with regards to the original condition of infants.

Intuitively, when a human being who can be truly considered a morally exemplar has passed on, usually their house before the funeral and during the funeral is attended by a lot of people. People, in this instance, are moved by the quality of her humanity and the impact she

⁴Behrens, in this article distinguishes two senses of moral personhood and he shows that one is African and the other is Western. The one defended by Menkiti is represented as so crucial that it is considered to be definitive of African moral thought.

had on the community at large. What is at issue here is not ontological considerations. When a human being dies, whether young or old, we are touched somehow and we feel a sense of a loss merely because they are human. But when a *person* dies there is a deeper sense of loss and we feel we owe it to them to pay our (last) regards to them in a way we do not usually do for any other human being. But this difference in grieving or mourning, has nothing to do with the difference in terms of the status of personhood given to an adult and that of a child (1984, 174). It has everything with a stronger normative pull to honor a life of virtue in a way we usual do not feel over a life of lesser virtue or a non-virtuous life.

Matolino may legitimately question the claim that what we find to be problematic is not so much the use of the English word 'it' but how it is used. This concern may be understood as two-in-one. In the first instance, it may be questioning the very legitimacy of appealing to a foreign language; and on the other, it may be questioning the claim we make that the issue is not the language per se but how it is used. We respond to these concerns, respectively.

We may ask, can we appeal to a foreign language to discuss issues in African philosophy? The resounding answer is: it depends. There are justified uses of a foreign language to discuss African issues and there are ones that are not. So, the key issue is whether our use of the word 'it' is justified in this instance. It will be difficult, we can imagine, for one to come with a principle that will explain all circumstances under which it is permissible and impermissible to use a foreign language to discuss some African issues. But to advance a discourse in one's own tradition one can borrow from resources from other languages. In this instance, we think it is justified insofar as our re-interpretation of the reference 'it', is uncontroversial and does not take away anything from the African tradition; and insofar as it contributes to our discussions of personhood with regards to issues pertaining to how we think about the young. Insofar as language, at the very least is a tool, a means to clarify our thoughts; we do not see how this use of 'it' is not justified. Further, this re-interpretation of 'it', as offered here, does not appear to contradict any of the intuitions held about the young as both having moral status and also being thought to be morally neutral in the African tradition. We think it is silly that one must always appeal to African languages to make a point; cultural borrowing is useful in certain instances since it can extend our thinking in ways some local tools may not. I am deliberately saying nothing about the fact that this discussion is itself in English.

We think Menkiti is right to use the reference 'it' to convey the idea that there is a qualitative difference between an adult and a child,

though this is a banal claim. What is wrong however is his use of this word as if it naturally conveys or signifies moral grades or levels or absence thereof. However, one can use this word, ‘it’, to capture ideas of moral-neutrality and the idea of moral status. So, when we make a claim that one, in the beginning of life, is an ‘it’; we are making a claim about their relation to personhood that they do not have it, that they are morally-neutral (P_3). Or, that they are worthy of moral consideration (P_2).

Ontological or Moral Progression?

Matolino rightly criticizes Menkiti for confusing ontological and moral issues when he talks about a person’s moral growth or acquisition of personhood as an *ontological* progression. Matolino observes – “Firstly, it appears as if there is no justification for this gradation to be seen as ontological progression that bears on the status of personhood” (2011, 34). Yes, as one grows from being a morally-neutral human being to the status of being morally virtuous; he remains, ontologically, a human being; change occurs in his character, either being good or bad. The issue, however, with this criticism is that it is uncharitable. If Menkiti’s main claim is about personhood being a moral acquisition; and it is acquired, in part, by appeal to some social process, would it not be more charitable to construe Menkiti as simply mistaken about categories? He should actually be talking about a process of incorporation as a *moral* progression. If this observation had been made by Matolino, it would have rendered Menkiti’s main proposition more justifiable and plausible.

Conclusion

In this article, we reconstructed Menkiti’s contribution to African moral thought with regards to his account of normative personhood, which is concerned about the question; what is a virtuous human being? If it is correct that Menkiti is making a moral claim, then it should follow that his talk should be understood within a moral terrain and not an ontological one. As such, Menkiti is mistaken to conceive of moral development in terms of ontological progression. We further noted that there are more creative ways to make sense of reference to infants as ‘its’ in terms of either moral status and/or moral neutrality. Finally, we emphasize that much work still needs to be done in the African moral tradition with regards to the moral status of the young (unborn and infants). We further note, that Menkiti’s contribution with regards to his political theory that de-emphasizes rights and emphasizes duties and responsibilities has not received the philosophical attention it deserves.

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