

**PERSONHOOD IN A TRANSHUMANIST CONTEXT: AN
AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

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Ademola Kazeem FAYEMI, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Philosophy,
University of Johannesburg
Email: kcaristotle@yahoo.com, ademolaf@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Personhood is an extensively discussed theme in contemporary African philosophy, which has taken metaphysical, epistemological and normative dimensions. In Western philosophical traditions, discourse on personhood is transmuting to debates on transhumanism. Missing in the African philosophical literature is consideration of transhumanism and an explication of the relationship between personhood and transhumanism. In this article, I critically examine the relationship between personhood and transhumanism in an African context. Drawing on Barry Hallen's African metaphysical account of personhood and Thaddeus Metz's Afro-communal normative conception of personhood, I argue that while some transhumanist elements are embedded in African normative and ontological conceptions of personhood, some others are not. In the final analysis, I defend an Afrofuturistic account of personhood that is compatible with some censored essentials of transhumanism in African thoughts.

Keywords: Personhood, Transhumanism, Barry Hallen, Thaddeus Metz, Africa, Yoruba

Introduction

Personhood and transhumanism are essentially contested concepts in philosophical discourse; both concepts are central in the field of bioethics. Transhumanism is a trending philosophical orientation that expresses the possibility and fears, the desirability and justifications, of a more qualitative human nature, through human enhancement technologies that can overcome human natural limitations, in all its ramifications. There are diverse cultural understandings of the concept of personhood. Personhood, broadly construed, is the qualitative status, attributes, and capabilities of being a person; it is the recognition of a being as a person. "Persons are usually accorded higher moral status than other living things" (BEHRENS 2017, 6). This definition pictures personhood as a state of being. But personhood is also seen as a process

of being. It is the “process of forming and becoming a person through time and space in place and culture” (PIDO 2000, 131). As relative as this definition is, within the African intellectual space, conversations on the concept of personhood, have taken metaphysical, epistemological and normative dimensions. Diverse works by Hallen (2000a), Metz (2010, 2012), Gbadegesin (1998), Gyekye (1992), Wiredu (2005, 2009), Kaphagawani, (2000), Menkiti (1984), Matolino (2011, 2014), Behrens (2013), Tshivhase (2013), Oyowe and Yurkivska (2014), and Molefe (2017) are instructive on the idea of personhood in African thought. In Western philosophical traditions, the tempo of the debate on the thematic of personhood has gone far beyond the theoretical compass in African philosophy to a discussion of transhumanism.

Transhumanism, as a philosophical concept is nearly non-existent in African philosophical literature while encyclopedic volumes are sprawling on it in Western philosophical circles. The discourse on transhumanism is raging between two dominant diverse strands: the bioconservatives such as Kass (2001, 2002, 2003), Fukuyama (2002), Sandel (2004), Kekes (1998), Schlag (2016) and Agar (2007, 2013)) and the pro-transhumanists or bioliberals (whose ranks include Bostrom (2003, 2005a, 2005b), Glover (2006), Persson and Savulescu (2010, 2013), Hughes (2007, 2012). Though transhumanism, as an intellectual movement, emerged in the West as a consequence of unprecedented technological advancements and the developments in bioethical studies, the attention on bioethics in the African context is still sub-marginal (FAYEMI 2016, 99). More so, in Africa there is a paucity of innovative biotechnologies that generated the transhumanist waves in the global North.

Given that philosophical thoughts spring from and are marked by the peculiarities of a particular social context, it is excusable to suggest, that the gap in the tenacity of the discourse in Western and African philosophical traditions on personhood and transhumanism have been dictated by the differences in cultural peculiarities. But reasoning such as this is intellectually myopic, hence should be challenged. Contingencies of culture does not necessarily attenuate the intelligibility of concepts having roots in some cultural climes to be understood, recognised and appreciated in other cultural and transcontinental contexts. As a consequence, the suggestive questions are: what theoretical dimension and import can the trend in Western thoughts on transhumanism add to a re-evaluation, reconstruction and better understanding of African conceptions of personhood, and vice versa? Is there consonance between an African understanding of personhood and transhumanism, or are they contradictory in intent, constitution, and possibility? I seek to discuss these fundamental questions in this paper

by using the Yoruba context as a foil on the idea of African personhood that does not discountenance the strengths of transhumanism. Given this scope, I do not intend to discuss the transcendentalist, performance, nonhuman and rights perspectives on personhood in the acrimonious debate on the subject-matter in Western philosophical tradition.

The theoretical frame that underpins this paper is bioethical concerns, which are universal. Contemporary Africans can hardly afford an exclusion from the enormous benefits of bioethical engagements, and the existential imports of African philosophical ruminations. Against this backdrop, this paper proceeds by providing an overview of personhood in African philosophical discourse. In discussing personhood in an African context, the perspectives of Hallen and Metz are largely drawn upon with some comparison. The second section conceptually elucidates the concept of transhumanism with some critical juxtapositions of the debate between the bio-liberalists and the bioconservatives. In the third section, the relationship between personhood and transhumanism in an African context is explored. I contend in this section that while in Western clime, transhumanism uses technology to confer personhood, personhood in Yoruba culture is defined primarily through other persons and other secondary but complementary qualitative capabilities such as will and social functionality. I argue further that some of the basic tenets of transhumanism are incompatible with ontological beliefs and values of personhood in Yoruba culture. However, this is not to weaken the possibility of strengthening and morally fortifying the Yoruba notion of personhood by integrating, circumspectly, some critical elements of transhumanism. Upon a critical evaluation of the nexus between transhumanism and personhood, the paper defends an Afrofuturistic account of personhood that is compatible with some censored essentials of transhumanism in African thoughts. In the concluding part of the article, suggestions for further studies on the subject matter are intimated.

Personhood in African Philosophical Discourse: Hallen and Metz' Perspectives

Without necessarily endorsing a homogenous notion of personhood in African and Western thought, Jackson and Karp (1990, 18) distinguishes between the notions of personhood in cross-cultural contexts. They surmise that personhood conceptions tilt more towards egocentrism in the Western literature while in the African context, personhood tends to be more sociocentric. Discourse on personhood in African philosophy is diverse and complex. Mindful of projecting the varied perspectives in a

uniform whole, a broad but not exhaustive categorization can be made: sociological, normative and ontological dimensions.

Heinz Kimmerle (2008, 508) rightly noted the sociological context of the discourse when he writes that "it is 'communis opinio' in African philosophy that the concept of person is related directly and indissolubly to that of the community." In the African normative context, personhood is the attempt to establish one's humanity through others, through a chain of responsibilities and obligations. Kwasi Wiredu (1992, 199) underscores this point when he writes that "a human person is essentially the center of a thick set of concentric circles of obligations and responsibilities matched by rights and privileges." In the sociological context, the popular view is that the community takes precedence over the individual when defining relationships, the person, and the formation as well as functionality of institutions in Africa.

For instance, "the African spirit of community is concretised in the idea of brotherhood, in the extended family, the clan or the community of the village or the city" (KIMMERLE 2008, 508). As Wiredu notes, the idea of person is a function of the community's norms and make-up:

The communalistic orientation of ... society ... means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself [or herself], not, of course by accident or coincidence but by design. ... an individual who remained content with self-regarding successes [with self-interest] would be viewed as so circumscribed in outlook as not to merit the title of a real person. (WIREDU 1992, 200)

The connection between the individual and community is well established in the famous quotation of John Mbiti (1970, 141), who describes the notion of personhood or an individual's relation to the group as one of "I am because we are."

One contention against this popular communal view of a person in African culture has to do with the idea that the individual is relatively independent and relevant in grasping and describing sociological institutions as he plays crucial roles in the formation and expression of values. This is the liberalist orientation. Barry Hallen articulates the main contention of the liberalist persuasion thus:

.... given the ethical and moral priorities, a communitarian orientation subsumes the individual to the group in a manner that is (morally) repugnant. For them [the liberals], the priority

ought not to be to stipulate what rights the group has over the individual, but rather to stipulate what rights the individual has independently of the group. (HALLEN 2015, 4)

It is pertinent to note that a person is not constituted from the position of extreme individualism in which “the individual is an isolated entity without being essentially linked to the societal and natural environment of influence and impact (KIMMERLE 2008, 508).

At the ontological level, Barry Hallen, an African philosopher of American origin, argues that “any ontological exposition on the concept of person needs to point at the essence of the personality construct” (HALLEN 2000a, 303). His elucidation of the ontological structures in the Yoruba view of person centres on the functions and relations between the manifold of faculties of the individual person. He, together with Sodipo, pointed out *inu* as the centre of personality construct or self-identity among the Yoruba. *Inú* literally means the “inside”; however, the meaning ascribed to it transcends the foregoing. The *inú* is used analogously to the Western notion of psychological self. The psychological self in this context is used to mean the “inner, private, ‘mental’, enduring conscious element or dimension of the person” (HALLEN AND SODIPO 1994, 5). As Hallen and Sodipo (1994, 5) put it, “everything we do begins from the *inú*.” Indeed, *inú* is the source of all thought and action; it has variously specialised faculties, capacities or abilities (*ogbòn* (wisdom), *opolo* (brain), etc.) at its disposal (HALLEN AND SODIPO 1994, 13). The word *okan* is used by Segun Gbadegesin to refer to what Hallen dubbed *inu*. Whereas *inu* accounts for the phenomenon of self-consciousness, *okan* is the “source of conscious thought and emotions” (GBADEGESIN 1998, 157). A distinction can be made between ‘*iyè-inú*’ (inner consciousness) and ‘*ojú-inú*’ (self-consciousness), though both are at the centre of the personality construct:

[*Inu*] is the psychological element responsible for both self-understanding and self-consciousness. It is the conjunct of consciousness and the self. It is the component of the *inú* that in a conscious and deliberate manner monitors and directs the individual, as an individual, through his lifetime. It is the ‘owner’ of the ‘house’. It is the one that chooses to exercise patience (*sùúrù*) and therefore opens that ‘door’, or to exercise wisdom (*ogbòn*) or to undertake the intellectual analysis *opolo* of a particular situation or problem. (HALLEN AND SODIPO 1994, 17)

Hallen (2000b) considers the moral dimension of the Yoruba theory of self. The normative dimension of a person is better associated with a person's character, that is, *iwà*. A person's character can either be good or bad. In Hallen's words, "all of a person's character (*iwà*) and actions (*iṣẹ*) are gathered together [located or originate] inside the innermost self (*inú*)" (HALLEN 2000b, 45). Thus, if a person's character is good, "people will say that the innermost self (*inú*) of such a person is good" (HALLEN 2000b, 45). Hallen sees a causal nexus between character and consciousness. According to him, "my behaviour follows upon thought, and my thought originates from my conscious self, my 'inside' or *inú*" (HALLEN 2000b, 43). The relationship between the *inú* and *iwà* establishes some sort of nexus between the normative and ontological dimensions to the concept of person. The *inú* is responsible for a person's character. Having a good *inú* is reflected in one's character. If the *inú* is however bad, immoral actions will result from a bad *inú*.

To the extent that *inu* is an important part of Hallen's ontological explanation of a person in Yoruba thought, he (together with Olubi Sodipo) pointed out the other components of a person in traditional Yoruba thought, popularly referred to as the tripartite conception "[F]or the Yoruba, the essential element of the person (*eniyan*) when in the world (*aye*) are the body (*ara*), the vital spirits of the body or soul (*emi*) and the destiny (*ori*) that which determines every significant event during the particular life time (HALLEN & SODIPO 1986, 105)."

Both the physical, psychic, and spiritual elements are related with implications for the moral and social status of a person in African thoughts (OYESHILE 2015). The body is understood to consist of both the visible, tangible external parts like the hands, head, legs, etc., and the internal organs such as the brain, kidney, intestine, heart, among others. Not minding the psychic functions of the brain, it is still grouped under the material components of the body. The soul (*emi*), psychological-self (*inu*) and destiny (*ori*) belong to the mental-spiritual component with varying degree of capacity for quasi-physical functions. The *emi* is the force of life believed to be supplied by *Olodumare* (the Supreme Deity). It can be active or passive in a human body; its irreversible cessation means death among the Yoruba. *Ori* is the spiritual component of the body symbolically representing human destiny among the Yoruba, which is understood in deterministic terms by Hallen. On this, he writes, "[A]ll the things we do on earth are according to our destiny (*ipin*). If a person behaves (se) badly, this is what their destiny (*ipin*) wishes....It is the person who has chosen for himself or herself what he or she has come to do (se) on earth" (HALLEN 2000b, 52).

Upon a closer look, Hallen's account portrays a notion that allows for moral responsibility, and this presupposes a sort of freedom and attendant alterable human essence. According to him, "from the time, it is born into the world, the self (*emi*) is said to lose the memory of whatever destiny it thought it chose" (HALLEN 2000b, 54). But the Yoruba cosmological structure allows consultation with a diviner (*babalawo*) in order to "identify the source, the cause of failure and to obtain a prescription that will correct it" (HALLEN 2000b, 57). The import of "reconciling the belief in predestination with the practice of consulting diviners [is that] an individual may exercise some independent control over his or her life once in the world." It can be inferred from the foregoing that the human essence is not fixed, since certain degrees of 'amendment' and thus 'alteration' after divination is possible.

Let us now turn to the normative aspect of personhood construct in African thought focusing on Metz. Just like Hallen, Thaddeus Metz is also an American native with an African scholarly orientation. In several works, he has engaged in a serious discussion of the bioethical implications of a constructed African theory of dignity and personhood. While Metz has not discussed in context, the idea of personhood in Yoruba thought, his interest in providing a broader and common account of personhood in sub-Saharan Africa reflects largely, the Yoruba account as well. Like Hallen (2015, 9), who is of the conviction that communalism is "a worthy alternative to the individualism that continues to be touted by liberal theory as deserving of unquestioned universal acclaim," Metz (2012) sees a modal-relational account of personhood grounded in African communal values as more plausible than the holist and individualist accounts in Western thoughts.

According to Metz (2012, 391), "in typical [Yoruba] African reflection, talk of 'personhood' ... is inherently moralised, such that to be a person is to be virtuous or to exhibit good character. That is, one can be more or less of a person, self or human being, where the more one is, the better." The Yoruba cultural understanding of personhood is not a static conception of some inherent qualities (such as rationality, freedom, autonomy, consciousness, identity, etc.) of qualifying as a person, predominant in Western scholarship. Rather, personhood is a constructive ensemble of virtues of relations of both potential and capable beings in the community. A relationship thus exists between the Yoruba understanding of morality and their conception of who counts as a person. Morality, to a greater extent, is a function of relationship among people in the community with emphasis on sharing a way of life and caring for another's qualitative existence.

Metz brilliantly articulates, broadly speaking, the core difference between the African and Western notions of personhood, thus:

In a sub-Saharan context, ‘personhood’ most often indicates virtue or human excellence, a quality that varies from individual to individual based on her attitudes and decisions. In contrast, Anglo-American bioethicists use the same term to pick out moral status or standing, a feature that is often thought to be invariant among individuals (or at most to vary based on differential capacities, rather than actualizations of them). (METZ 2011a, 11)

Personhood, among the Yoruba, is an unending process of becoming more of a humane person, acquiring virtuous attributes “through associating with others with whom we share a mutual dependence” (BEHRENS 2013, 110). Behrens’ view is in agreement with Metz’s ‘modal relational view of personhood that admits of degrees and broad distinction. Both scholars, indeed, captures the Yoruba understanding of personhood as an ideal we strive to “attain than a status we either possess or do not possess.” It is a social process of self-construction in a relational framework of diverse daily activities. While the process is inseparable from the product, the product remains an ideal.

The principles emerging from this communal relationship, which Metz (2012) identifies as ‘identity’ and ‘solidarity’, are dubbed the principles of *ajowapo* (literally meaning “we exist together”) and *asuwada* (literally meaning sociation) respectively, among the Yoruba (FAYEMI 2014, 247). For Metz, the moral status of a being, which explains his personhood is determined by consideration of the principle that “the more a being is capable of being part of a friendly or loving relationship with normal humans, the greater its moral status” (METZ 2012, 394).

Metz’s construction of an African modal-relational theory of personhood is apt. For him, the capacity of a being to be “part of a communal relationship of a certain kind” determines personhood in degrees. Communal relationship is understood here as “relationships in which people identify with each other [by sharing a way of life] and exhibit solidarity with on another [by caring for one another’s quality of life]” (METZ 2007). In such a relationship, a being can either be a subject or object. To quote Metz at length on this point:

... a being that is capable of being both the subject and object of such a relationship has full moral status, whereas a being that is

capable of being merely the object of such behaviour has partial moral status. Being a subject involves identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them oneself. A being can be a subject of the relevant communal relationship insofar as it can think of himself as a “we”, seek out shared ends, sympathize with others and act for their sake. In contrast, a being can be the object of a friendly relationship insofar as characteristic human beings could think of it as part of a “we”, share its goals, sympathize with it and harm or benefit it. Note that having the capacity to be an object of such a relationship does not imply that a being would or even could respond to any friendly engagement by another. (METZ 2012, 394)

The above construction of personhood is based on a modal relational view that emphasises in principle, the capacity of being part of a relationship either as a subject or an object. The differences in degrees of ability to be either a subject or an object of a communal relationship constitute differences in moral status. The greater the capacity is the greater the degree of personhood. It is important to point out that to the extent Metz’s modal relational view of personhood reflects the traditional Yoruba understanding, it fails to fully capture the necessary synergy which is largely placed on both the agency and the potential capacity of personhood in traditional Yoruba worldview. Polycarp A. Ikuenobe (2016) more correctly captures the Yoruba view of personhood when he writes that:

... [it] involves a combination of capacity and agency that is conceptually tied to communal responsibility and respect for self and others. This indicates that human capacities do not have an inherent moral worth. Capacities are instrumentally good and their worth depends on how they are used to promote the moral good of communal well-being. (IKUENOBE 2016, 437)

Also, it remains a subject of debate whether Metz’s constructed interpretation of personhood in African thought as consisting of both moral patients and agents plausibly enlightens one on the necessary duties and responsibilities involved in what Hallen (2015) called the “transition from pre-personhood to full-blown personhood” in African thought. An enquiry into these issues is not of immediate concern in this paper.

However incontrovertible is the fact that Metz’s modal relational view has some direct implications for grading the personhood of moral patients such as people in vegetative state, the severely

mentally incapacitated, psychopaths, infants, who are capable of objects of communal relationship (FAYEMI 2015). One implication of this personhood parameter is that while adults, who are not considered persons lack virtues of excellences and are considered with opprobrium, severely vulnerable beings, the demented and aged for example, are still seen as having personhood based on their past outstanding contributions to their lineage and community, respectively. Considerations of past actions are, therefore, relevant in partly determining how people ought to be treated in the present (METZ 2011b). But in the absence of such evidential moral uprightness, integrity, communal affection and good human fellowship, the elderly demented remains just at the level of a human being. The most fundamental problem with this relational and communal conception of personhood is that regardless of its gradable ascription of moral status, and the distinction Metz made between the subject and object of communal relationships, full and partial moral status, it remains speciesist to the extent that it does not approve that all non-human animals, non-animal entities, and artificial beings can be persons.

On Transhumanism

Transhumanism is the evolving intellectual, cultural and technological commitment towards making the human species more human by virtue of overcoming and transcending the biological limitations of humans through the use of science and technology. As Huxley defines transhumanism, it is “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of, and for his human nature” (HUXLEY 1957). Transhumanism is often considered the intellectual offspring of humanism. Humanism and the transhumanist movement are both pervaded by similar ideals, by virtue of making similar recourse to an emphasis on the human person rather than some supernatural being. In contrast to supernaturalism, transhumanism employs reason, science, and technology as a means of understanding and improving the human condition. With its intellectual roots in humanism, transhumanism is a “social, technological, political and philosophical movement that advocates the transformation of human nature by means of pharmacology, genetic manipulation, cybernetic modification, nanotechnology, and a host of other technologies” (BAUER 2010, 2).

Much as trans-humanism shares “many elements of humanism including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural ‘afterlife’” (More 1990), it, however, differs in significant regard. Max More points out this distinction thus:

Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in nature and the possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultra-intelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system. (MORE 1990, N.P)

Bauer's (2010, 1) definition of transhumanism emphasises the evolutionary transformation of human nature through an embrace of "pharmacology, genetic manipulation, cybernetic modification, nanotechnology," among others. Such definition implicitly underscores natural challenges such as in the case of aging and impending memory loss, death, sickness as well as diseases. Against the various forms of suffering that humans' experience, transhumanism brings the hope of enhancing human nature in plausible ways that would whittle down experiences of pains, human biological sufferings, and lift the albatross imposed on humans by nature.

Pearce (2001), in his *The Hedonistic Imperative*, makes a case for supplanting biological limitations by the elimination of unnecessary suffering through technology. In his optimism, Pearce outlines,

how nanotechnology and genetic engineering will eliminate aversive experience from the living world. [So as to ensure that] over the next thousand years or so, the biological substrates of suffering will be eradicated completely. "Physical" and "mental" pains alike are destined to disappear into evolutionary history... The biochemistry of everyday discontents will be genetically phased out too. Malaise will be replaced by the biochemistry of bliss. (PEARCE 2001, N.P)

Transhumanism awakens the public sphere to the lofty aspirations of enhancing the different aspects of human lives by direct modification of human traits or capacities. From the use of drugs by athletes to increase strength, to the embrace of cosmetic surgery to improve physical appearance, to the practice of using prescription drugs by students "not just to treat learning difficulties but to enhance their mental abilities" (COLE-TURNER 2011, 1), the transhumanist potential is seemingly inexhaustible. In all these, the common denominator is the use of technology for the purpose of surpassing known biological limitations of humans. In a moral dimension, it involves making humans more humane (PERSSON & SAVULESCU 2010, 1).

Western transhumanist discourse has been subject to a rigorous scrutiny over the rightness and wrongness of enhancing humans by the use of technology. “Positions on the ethics of human enhancement technologies can be (crudely) characterised as ranging from transhumanism to bioconservatism” (BOSTROM 2005b, 202). The advocates of transhumanism support the enhancements of humans in a bid to transcend their natural limitations, while its critics, that is, the bioconservatives, are wary of the implications attached to the use of technology for a more qualitative human life.

Pro-transhumanists, though not in agreement on how ends of the transhumanist project are to be achieved, are however resolved on the desirability and ethicality of applying science for human enhancement to ultimately transcend the current physical pains, cognitive and emotional sufferings associated with human biological limitations. The goal of using technology in human enhancement in arriving at a more qualitative life is to be achieved through the intensification of the use of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, abolitionism, gene enhancement, and cryonics amongst others. The vision of the pro-transhumanist is to arrive at a stage where the enhanced humans or posthumans, as they are referred to, are such that their basic capacities will “radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards” (BOSTROM 2009, 346). [And as such] these posthumans may be “resistant to disease and impervious to aging,” have “unlimited youth and vigour,” and “reach intellectual heights as far above any current human genius as humans are above other primates.” They may have “increased capacity for pleasure, love, artistic appreciation, and serenity” and “experience novel states of consciousness” that current human brains cannot access (CLIQUET & AVRAMOV 2018, 180).

Proponents of transhumanism share the belief that “human nature is a work-in-progress; it is a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. [And as such] current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Nature, and human nature as well, progresses through an evolutionary process, which is yet at its apex.

The major opposing camp to the pro-transhumanist or bio-liberalist grouping is the bioconservatives. Scholars in this category include Leon Kass, Jeremy Rifkin, Francis Fukuyama, and Bill McKibben. Although there are different ways by which they jettison the transhumanist perspective, they, however, identify with a common perspective that technology which enthuses transhumanists is adversely threatening our humanity. Despite the variations in the dimension through which the bioconservatives have articulated their opinions, two major approaches can be discerned in objection to the transhumanist

goals: the ethical implications and the practical ends attached to the use of enhancement technologies.

Fukuyama questions the main idea of transhumanism as the world's most ferocious idea that is insistent in destroying what constitutes human nature. While relating the transhumanist vision with that of the environment, he voices that:

The environmental movement has taught us humility and respect for the integrity of nonhuman nature. We need a similar humility concerning our human nature. If we do not develop it soon, we may unwittingly invite the transhumanists to deface humanity with their genetic bulldozers and psychotropic shopping malls. (FUKUYAMA 2002, N.P)

Bioconservatives choose to emphasise the existential risks associated with the radical use of science and technology. In advancing criticisms from the ethical implication point of view thinkers like Max Dublin (1991) in his book *Futurehype: The Tyranny of Prophecy* argue that transhumanist goals would create a condition of ethical nihilism. He also objects to what he sees as scientism and fanaticism in advancing transhumanist causes. For him, many of the technological predictions of transhumanist may turn-out erroneous in the future.

Bill McKibben (2003) argues against many of the life-extending and enhancing technologies propagated by bioliberals such as germline engineering, artificial intelligence, virtual realities, and nanomedicine. McKibben's objection is on the ground that altering or moving beyond the fundamental universal limits of the human condition or nature – such as aging, life span, biological constraints on cognition and strength – is wrong. Such attempt would not only remove necessary conditions for the experience of meaningful human choice, it will also lead to moral inequalities or a sort of genetic divide. McKibben opines that divisions would ultimately emerge between those that are enhanced through technology and those who are not. Ronald Bailey lends credence to McKibben's concerns in his remarks that:

The new species, or "posthuman," will likely view the old "normal" humans as inferior, even savages, and fit for slavery or slaughter. The normals, on the other hand, may see the posthumans as a threat and if they can, may engage in a preemptive strike by killing the posthumans before they themselves are killed or enslaved by them. (BAILEY 2004, N.P)

Bioconservatives are generally sceptical of the technical feasibility of the transhumanist vision. The idea that “humankind should engineer the next phase of its own evolution, and those human beings should be augmented and altered even to a threshold whereby humans may lose their humanity” (Hook, 2004) or essence is absurd for the bioconservatives. The precautionary principle is often cited and used by the bioconservatives in arguing against the prospects of transhumanism. The principle states that in decision-making on human activities that may lead to morally unacceptable harm, especially in the context of scientific plausibility, extreme uncertainty or ignorance about possible effects, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm (TICKNER, RAFFENSPERGER & MYERS, 1999).

Against the conservative nature of the precautionary principle towards nature and risk-taking, More came up with the proactionary principle that can protect the technological progress envisioned by transhumanism. Guided by “a commitment to scientific inquiry and discovery, technological innovation, and the application of science and technology to the improvement of the human condition,” More writes about the proactionary principle thus:

The freedom to innovate technologically and to engage in new forms of productivity is valuable to humanity and essential to our future... The Principle is an inclusive, structured process for maximizing technological progress for human benefit while heightening awareness of potential side-effects and risks. (MORE 2005, 265)

More’s proactionary principle entails pro-actions such as being objective and comprehensive; assessing risks and opportunities by prioritizing natural and human risks; favouring measures, responses that are proportionate to the magnitude of impacts; accounting for diverse inputs such as restriction costs and opportunities foregone.

Without prejudice to the structural wisdom of proactionary principle as a pivot for technologically progressive future, critical objections have mounted against the transhumanist ideals in some fundamental and weighty respects. For instance, it is argued that transhumanism is anchored on a neo-liberalist capitalist framework such that only the elite class who can afford the resulting biotechnologies would be transhumans. The implications of this on respect for diversity and equality are enormous. Transhumans with enhanced capacities and traits would be viewed as super humans lording it over the normal, non-transhumans. There is so much structural inequality existing in the world’s socio-economic order already; mounting biotechnological

differences on the prevailing system of inequality may worsen the situation between the enhanced and those unenhanced. Also, the idea of human diversity may suffer serious setback as there would be more homogenous albeit problematic conception of biological abilities. A transhumanist future signals a society where the dichotomy between ableism and disableism would be more reinforced with stigmatisation, instead of being managed in a live and let live world. Ableism expresses the assumption that physically and psychiatrically challenged people have lesser social and moral worth than other humans supposedly categorised as normal.

Some aspects of the above criticisms against the cogency of transhumanism can be arguably countered. The issue of inequality suffices as technological inequality seems the greatest threat to transhumanism and its potentials. Inequality, as Hruy Tsegaye (2013) correctly noted, is the “underlying motive for the countless ills of our society and the archenemy of existence in harmony.” Transhumanism is now being used as a platform by some self-centred individuals and clandestine groups to sabotage the hope provided to enhance human abilities through their false representations of the transhumanist ideals as a eugenic exercise. In Seymour Itzkoff’s (2006) estimation, such staunch critique of transhumanism are intellectual frontiers of the political class that “benefits from the present futile redistributionist social policies that [promote pathological inequalities and] feed into the demographic explosion of the destitute and the vulnerable.” A counter narrative needs to be established against the anti-transhumanist conspiracy on the transhumanist potential of worsening the inequality space between the most economically privileged and the poor, between the Global North and South.

Egalitarian concerns about biotechnological inequality, as legitimate as it is, is a conflation of unequal relations resulting from political and economic structures with techno-inequalities. Historical and current experiences of inequality across spaces have not been a function of human biology. Prior transhumanist interventions, social, political and economic inequalities have been questionable features of human societies. Through leveraging on safe biotechnologies, transhumanism is a strategic attempt to ameliorate and reduce the spate of human inequality across societies. Though it is not fiction to think of the potential of human exploitation of transhumanist technologies to further orchestrate unequal relations and create disharmony in human social arrangements, such possibilities are better averted through sound moral and political principles of governance. Much as today societies continue to fine-tune such principles, there is no a priori reason to suggest that a transhumanist future would be resistant to extant

regulations that would promote human equality. It is, therefore, apt that technology becomes serviceable in the process of addressing the fundamental root of unequal capabilities. The attempt to appropriate transhumanist ideas ought to involve a critical conceptual revision of our socio-political arrangement and ideals so as to avoid greater inequalities.

Personhood and transhumanism in an African Context

Following the above conceptual and critical expositions of personhood in African thoughts, and transhumanism in mainstream Western thought, the question is: how do we best understand African view of personhood in a transhumanist context? Are there fresh theoretical insights that the trend in transhumanism can add to a re-evaluation and better understanding of African conceptions of personhood? Are there converging and diverging tendencies in personhood in an African context and person in Western transhumanist discourses? If there are parallels, of what philosophical relevance is Hallen's formulations to appropriating transhumanist ideas? How can the transhumanist vision of human enhancement be applied to the various features of the personality construct that Hallen and Metz adumbrate? What are the philosophical implications of Hallen's ontology of personhood and Metz's normative construction of personhood in the advocacy for a transhumanist movement in Africa? Given the existential conditions of living in Africa, would the appropriation of the transhumanist ideal make or mar the trajectory of development amongst the African people? Though transhumanist concerns and issues are foreign to African philosophical discourse, providing plausible answers to the foregoing questions is necessary not only because of the theoretical exigency but it is also worth courting because of the possible practical implications.

Part of the reasons why there is less discussion on personhood in the transhumanist context in African philosophy is that the concept of person is often discussed using oral traditions and everyday opinions in ordinary language as the signpost of critical analysis. Such discussions are rarely carried out within the prism of the natural sciences nor take into cognizance developments in biotechnology. Part of the reason for this lacuna could be due to the socio-cultural peculiarities of Africa as well as the level of scientific and technological development in Africa. Such limitation notwithstanding, a critical juxtaposition of the concept of person in African culture and transhumanism is imperative and intellectually revealing.

Cornel Du Toit (2005, 829-860) in an article entitled, "Implications of a Technoscientific Culture on Personhood in Africa and in the West," explores the possible benefits of Africans being

transhumanists. He thinks that the discourse on what it means to be a person in Western transhumanist discourse "is a search for personhood in a technoscientific environment." Personhood is best achievable through unalloyed patronage of biotechnologies. Like him, some scholars have also called for the development of African states in technological, economic, scientific and educational aspects. Hountondji's (1976) advocacy of scientism is prominent in this regard. Such advocacy are without justification of how the transhumanist universal quest of supra-human technological enhancement will not occasion a fundamental impediment to the African appreciation of personhood.

The discourse on the concept of "person" in the African philosophical tradition has not witnessed an examination of the plausibility of the proactive and censored use of biotechnologies to make the human species more "humanly humane" by overcoming universally known biological limitations. The use of inductive and applied reason, which science and technology promotes, has formed the point of departure for the transhumanist project of overcoming human biological bounds. In the global North, biotechnology is now being deployed in the service of enhancing the existential conditions of humans; the dais of discussing personhood is now under scientific and technology inclined lens. Need Africa tread this path?

Without prejudice to the contentions in Western intellectual circles on the appropriateness as well as the justification of the transhumanist project as evident in the altercation between the bio-conservatives and the bio-liberals, there are ontological and normative grounds for a plausible defense of transhumanism in African philosophical space. At the ontological level, let us suppose that the psychological-self and its components could be technologically enhanced. The psychological-self (*inú*), as Hallen pointed out, is responsible for the proper functioning of (good) character. Should the moral sensibilities, dispositions and ethical motivations of an average Yoruba, by extension African, be technologically enhanced, it is unlikely that an average contemporary Yoruba would choose to remain a bioconservative on the ground of being protective against fundamental intrusions of the people's cultural and metaphysical systems. Without an attenuation of environmental and social influences, genes not only mold the bodies of organisms but also shape their behaviour (BAILEY 2004, N.P). Genes affect the brain and the human person by extension. While certain genetic defects are the cause of moral disorder, the enhancement of genes responsible for conduct can engender a better moral disposition at the individual level and social structure at societal level. Political corruption which may be rightly deemed an offshoot of our moral

disposition is thus curable through the deployment of genetic engineering and other biotechnological advancements in tackling the genes responsible for our moral disposition and biases. The moral and political implication of genetic enhancement is to ultimately enhance our moral sensibilities, dispositions and ethical motivations as individuals. The use of technology may be radically different from the employment of divination to modify human essence and enhance the source of our moral disposition which Hallen rightly identifies with the psychological self (*inu*). Given this scenario, the possibility is high that the psychological-self (*inu*), the internal structure of a person, when enhanced, would promote the self, and by extension, the common good through improvement in moral personhood paradigms rather than making human personality ignoble.

The above hypothesis presupposes the cogency of genetic enhancement on consciousness and moral dispositions. In *From Chance to Choice*, Allen Buchanan, Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler (2000) discuss the moral implications of genetic technological advancements on our conception of values, rights and obligations. Such advancements, they argue, would affect the reproductive rights and obligations of parents; would redefine our conception of human nature and disability; would greatly influence our conception and recognition of justice, equality, equity and dignity. Along with this line of reasoning, the enhancement of genes responsible for good character can engender a better social structure in contemporary society in a therapeutic sense rather than engendering radical alteration of human nature.

Hallen's theory of the person coincides with one of the basic assumptions of transhumanism – human nature as dynamic and a work in progress. The Yoruba soft-deterministic conception of a person, which Hallen presents, does reflect the basic assumption in transhumanism that human essence is alterable. The metaphysical component of the Yoruba conception of personhood does not hold human essence to be particularly fixed but allows for modifications. A consequence of this dynamic human essence, therefore, is that ontological personhood squares firmly within the transhumanist vision of eliminating, more or less, the natural limitations of humans. While transhumanism seeks a radical and progressive transformation of human nature in consonance with evolutionary thoughts, an explicit belief in an evolutionary process is lacking in Hallen's account of person. This would probably have implications for the extent of transformation and erasure of defective limitations of human biology that the Yoruba would approve using science and technology. While transhumanism supports limitless evolution of human life and capacities beyond the currently known forms, Hallen's account of personhood suggests a dynamic

transformation of human essence guided not only by life-promoting technologies but also by non-evolutionary ontological values of existence. The implication of this is that conflict may perhaps ensue between the transhumanist evolutionary drive and the creationist narrative of personhood in Hallen's account. A viable way of seeking harmony between the transhumanist vision and the religio-ontologically constituted idea of person is an embrace of Afrofuturism. Through such an embrace, the prospect of transhumanism in contemporary Africa is bright. Afrofuturism is about critical African imaginations of a posthuman future taking cognizance of African history, culture, religion and philosophy in the light of shifting dynamics in scientific, technological and power relations in the evolving world order. An Afrofuturistic account of personhood recognises the normative, ontological and the communal dimensions of personhood but it is neither consumed by the idiosyncrasies of African uniqueness nor the supernatural/ontological embeddedness of personhood.

Africa and the rest of the developing world might openly embrace transhumanism if the evolving technologies speak directly to the major issues that constitute the harsh reality of daily struggle for the majority of Africa's population. Due to the existing socioeconomic conditions in Africa, therapeutic and enhancement technologies such as animal-human hybrids, computer-human hybrids, robots and cybernetic neuroprotheses, improving intelligence with brain implants, synthetic wombs and genetically modified babies as well as other features of transhumanism might seem somewhat economically unrealistic and morally problematic as a public health policy. But such intuitive inclinations ought not to warrant a total knocking-off of all transhumanist interventions in Africa. Considering how to protect African personhood and enhance our humanity in the future is noble; but nobler is cautiously proceeding piecemeal, on appropriating life-impacting technologies to improve and enhance the existing precarious conditions in Africa and the rest of the developing world.

An Afrofuturistic account of personhood imagines the existence of biotechnologies, pharmacological, neurobehavioural enhancing drugs capable of enriching moral personhood in the African *weltanschauung*. Such technologies that can be deployed to alter and cure negative temperament and relational dispositions of a person would unlikely fail the moral litmus test of Metzian account of African ethics. Metz's modal relational understanding of personhood commonly found in African societies, sub-Sahara, is not necessarily contradictory to the core values of transhumanism. Such normative construction of personhood entails the possibility of expanding the capacity frontiers of humans as social and relational beings. Suppose such transhumanist interventions

completely change an individual's psycho-social and moral nature, say from a sadist to a masochist. Does this suggest that the being in question has lost or gained personhood in the African context? To the contrary, the individual is still exercising the capacity of modal relationality to become a full person, a subject rather than object of personhood.

The safe use of transhumanist interventions in conquering human minds and liberating putatively held biological limitations of humans may not negatively affect the human existential condition and personhood criteria in the African context. Given that transhumanism is about overcoming the natural limitations of humans through an embrace of science and technology, it is a vehicle of realising personhood by providing platforms for increased capacity of appreciating life in all its dimensions.

Some of the basic tenets of transhumanism such as dynamism and capacity -enriching are congruent with some ontological beliefs and values of personhood in an African culture. Instead of defending an exclusive and rigid conception of personhood that stands true only to the logic of cultural essentialism about human nature, it is more instructive to begin to navigate ways by which an African notion of personhood can be fortified by integrating, circumspectly, some safe and humane elements of transhumanism. However, upon a critical evaluation of transhumanism, it is not an idea to entirely discard. Much as it (transhumanism) can learn most importantly from the African moral and metaphysical conceptions of personhood, the African understanding of personhood ought to accommodate some censored essentials of transhumanism in Afrofuturistic studies.

Conclusion

From the foregoing critical discussions on African conceptions of personhood and transhumanism, I have shown that both the metaphysical and normative components of personhood in Yoruba-African thoughts are not antithetical to the transhumanist vision. Just like any new innovation, the possibility of a transhumanist scepter can hardly be entirely dispelled in African culture as some of the interventions in transhumanist wave make in-road in the African space. The foreseeable rise and manifestation of transhumanist interventions on the African soil will occasion less fundamental intrusion in the people's cultural and metaphysical beliefs. Given the Yoruba-African context of personhood explored in this paper, it is apt to hypothesise that the Yoruba, and some other African cultures sharing similar worldviews about personhood, would be better predisposed to adopting transhumanist values, rather than become outright bioconservatives in the emerging transhumanist age.

Any possible antinomy between traditional African conceptions of personhood and transhumanism is a consequence of the false understanding of personhood as a fixed, immanent state and recognition of being a person. However, an Afrofuturistic concept of personhood is better construed as a function of dynamic socio-cultural, economic and techno-scientific histories rather than a fixed and an immutable attribute and manifestation of human nature. Understood in this sense, the metaphysical and moral qualities of grounding personhood in an African context will be amenable to historical vibes and technological necessity. As an evolving order in the historical evolution of ideas on how best to create a better humanity through the embrace of cutting edge and safe technologies that would transform previous limitations of human nature, transhumanism also needs to be influenced by significant values, regardless of provenance, for it to be essentially global. One of such values to tap into is the modal relational norms of personhood dominant in Black African cultures.

Africa, in the face of its mountainous challenges, needs to key into the transhumanist scheme. In appropriating transhumanist ideas and products in Africa, Africans can rarely afford to be mere end-users of therapeutic and enhancement technologies of the world; efforts should be stepped-up in being active participants in the production of ideas and knowledge in the transhumanist age. African states can, and do have a duty to, transform the human condition for the better by embracing technologies that not only promote personhood but also have potentials of making humans more humane. While harnessing the strengths of transhumanism in Africa raises its own moral and technical challenges, especially in the light of bioconservative criticisms and the low level of technological development in contemporary African states, the feasibility and consequent desirability of safe transhumanist interventions is not necessarily foreclosed. Afrofuturistic studies have the task of integrating diverse insights from African studies on how best to promote censored essentials of transhumanism in Africa for the utmost transformation of the human condition in Africa.

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