

University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Personhood and Human Rights: A Critical Study of the African
Communitarian and Normative Conception of the Self**

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**Submitted in Fulfillment of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Pietermaritzburg.**

Declaration

I declare that the content of this dissertation, unless specifically indicated to the contrary, is my own work and that it has not been submitted simultaneously for another degree or diploma to any other University.

Where use has been made of the work of others, I have duly acknowledged such use in the text and by reference to the relevant bibliographic details.

Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe

(Student No.: 208509630)

Sign...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe', written over a circular stamp or mark.

DEDICATION

To the Memory of my Dad

John A Oyowe
(Oma-iwe)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am especially grateful to God.

I am grateful to my mum Mabel Eloko Oyowe. And to my sisters Helen, Dora, Tonia and Comie.

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Introduction

Much of the interest in post-colonial African philosophy has focused on debates about its status vis-à-vis the practice of philosophy as manifested in continental Europe and in the Anglo-American tradition. Not only was there a generally acknowledged problem of demonstrating the existence of African Philosophy as well as conceptualizing it, there were debates as to the methodology by which it should be investigated. The theoretical wrangling over what constitutes the right conception of African philosophy owes largely to the publication of *Bantu Philosophy* (1959) by Placide Tempels and various other works that followed, including those of Alexis Kagame (1956) and John Mbiti (1970). A number of trends, or what might more aptly be called ‘approaches,’ have since emerged—each with a claim to importance. From the notoriously labeled ‘ethnophilosophy,’ roundly criticized by Aime Césaire (1962), Paulin Hountondji (1983) and Theophilous Okere (1983), the nationalistic/ideological, artistic/literary trends to philosophic sagacity, the professional philosophical and hermeneutic approaches, a rich tradition of modern philosophizing in Africa has taken root.¹ In recent years, however, attention has been turned directly to doing rather than talking about African philosophy and this shift has come about as recommended and in the manner undertaken by one of the most prominent and articulate African philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu (1980).²

¹This classification of approaches is due to Odera Oruka (2003).

²I have in mind Wiredu’s submission that it is important that African philosophers begin to *do* rather than merely talk about African philosophy. The manner of doing philosophy he recommends, and which reflects his entire philosophical endeavor, involves understanding the traditional thought worlds in which Africans live in order to contribute solutions to real problems. He writes, ‘The test of a contemporary African philosopher’s conception of African philosophy is whether it enables him to engage fruitfully in the activity of modern philosophising with an African conscience’ (1980:x).

Some of the central areas around which recent African philosophical interests have converged and in which, consequently, the mark of modern philosophical thinking is discernible are the debate over the right conception of personhood, communitarianism and the discourse on human rights.³ The standard practice involves exploring these themes through the prism of traditional culture in order to arrive at what philosophers working in these areas take to be a conception that reflects in some way their loyalty to indigenous modes of thought.⁴ In this connection, African communitarianism which is thought to mirror the communal orientation of African traditional societies takes centre stage. It is within this framework that some African philosophers engage with the self. Consequently, the debate on the self rather than polarizing African philosophers working in that field betrays a predilection for what has come to be widely accepted and celebrated as the normative conception of personhood with its communitarian underpinnings.

While a metaphysical view of personhood, which broadly construes the constitutive features internal to the makeup of a person, has been variously and extensively discussed (Wiredu 2004; Masolo 2004b; Gbadegesin 2003), it is the communitarian and normative one that is held by many to be germane to African traditional modes of thought. A communitarian and

³Throughout, I use the terms personhood and selfhood interchangeably. In addition, by communitarianism I shall mean a theory according to which the community or collective is taken to be ontologically, morally or epistemologically basic and the definitive feature of all aspects of social life. Masolo (2006) distinguishes between African and Western communitarianism—my interest is specifically in the former. I use the term collectivism to refer to the feature of communitarianism that assigns priority to the group over individual goals. Communalism refers to how this emphasis on the community or collective is manifested in social and political organization.

⁴Some notable philosophers whose approach to African philosophy reflect this modus operandi include Kwasi Wiredu, who is quite strident on the need for Africans to philosophize with an African conscience (1980); Dismas Masolo (2004b), who, as an instance, negotiates the question of personhood by conferring with traditional Luo sources on personhood; and Menkiti (2004), who, in his ‘Physical and Metaphysical Understanding’, attempts to make sense of agency and causation by reflecting on traditional African thinking on these subjects.

normative view conceives the self ‘as *wholly* constituted by social relationships’ (Gyekye 2003:298), ‘a person-in-relation-to-others’ (Okolo 2003:213), as metaphysically derived from the reality of community (Mbiti 1970:141)⁵ with the corollary that personhood is something to be achieved, acquired ‘in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations’ (Menkiti 1984:176). This normative view is even said (for instance, by Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006) and Dismas Masolo (2010)) to find support in fiction, particularly in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1994).

This conception of self is inspired by an idea of community conceptually sited in the communalism of African traditional societies, according to which the collective enjoys a certain prominence over the individuals that constitute it (Kenyatta 1965 and Senghor 1964a).⁶ The notion of community as collectivity is believed to be opposed to one which is merely an aggregate of individuals and its strongest formulation is given in Menkiti (1984). He writes, ‘...the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be’ (Menkiti 1984:171). This apparent metaphysical priority and independence of the community in relation to the individual implicates a communitarian view of person and by extension a normative one. For proponents of the normative conception of personhood, like Menkiti, it is not enough that

⁵John Mbiti’s widely cited statement ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ points to the fact that being a person obtains in virtue of membership in a metaphysically independent community. It is for this reason Menkiti finds it appealing and takes it as a starting point in his defense of the communitarian and normative view of personhood.

⁶See Wiredu (2005 and 2009), who arrives at the same conception by exploring Akan socio-linguistic conventions that point to the view that personhood is something to be acquired. Somewhat cautiously Wiredu observes that ‘one soon *begins* to see oneself as presupposing the group’ (2005 my emphasis).

one is constituted wholly by one's relations to others; to be a person is to have attained a status and the community is both the arbiter and conferrer of that status.

What is central to the discourse on personhood is the communitarianism which motivates it. This idea of communitarianism is ostensibly unique to African culture. However, the doctrine of communitarianism is formulated under a number of metaphysical presuppositions that have not been thoroughly analyzed. In a recent contribution, Masolo has drawn attention to the fact that the pervading assumption among many African philosophers of a metaphysical collective self—the claim that individuals derive from a metaphysical collective or that Africans are by nature communitarian—has not been sufficiently substantiated. He notes that 'it is perhaps due to this assumption that they saw no need to give an analytical account of their claim that African societies were communitarian in their social-political ethic. Instead, it is merely asserted as an abiding truth...' (Masolo 2004a:490). Similarly, Lesiba Teffo and Abraham Roux have observed that 'it is not enough for Africans to state that their perspective is a social or communitarian one; the views have to be explained, substantiated, and the implications for metaphysical thinking of such an approach have to be worked out' (Teffo & Roux 2003:173). Elsewhere, van den Berg insists that 'embracing a communitarian ethos ...needs a critical rethinking to give substance to claims made by philosophers' (van den Berg 1999:14-15).

The discussions that follow in the chapters of this thesis seek to address in some depth this largely ignored analytical work through a critical study of the underlying assumptions of African communitarianism with particular focus on the communitarian and normative

conception of the self. Also, the study seeks to engage with the question of whether a system that assigns priority to the community can adequately ground individual human rights.

In a short and incisive article, Chukwudum Okolo (2003) has argued that the problem of communitarian selfhood in African philosophy is that the individual as an independent self-consciousness is not accounted for within the communitarian framework. It is the claim that, whatever its appeal, the widely accepted view is defective. In support of this claim, Gyekye argues that that view has been overstated: since communitarianism fails to accord individual rights a central place, it may 'be said to be radical, excessive, and unrestricted', a view he finds 'unsupportable' (2003:299).⁷ Likewise, Wiredu cautions against the 'authoritarianism' entwined with the communitarian vision while calling for its elimination (1980:5), although he has been criticized for adopting a view of community that reeks of a 'form of tyranny' (Wingo 2008:7). On his part, Nze (1989: 22) speaks of an individual 'swallowed' by the community.⁸

Thus, there is reason to believe that the traditional view—the communitarian and normative conception—which is usually taken to typify traditional thinking on the self tends to disregard autonomy, freedom, self-determination and more importantly individual human

⁷See also Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu & Gyekye (1992)

⁸Other worries also extend to the normative conception. For instance, Brown (2004:168) finds fault with it because 'it infuses a normative feature into ontological concerns' and Gyekye argues further that personhood is not acquired since a person is in fact the *subject* of acquisition (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992: 22).

rights—all of which individuals highly value as individuals (Okolo 2003) and are pivotal to a robust conception of personhood.⁹

There is a rich and fascinating literature on the subject of human rights. A great deal of important recent work in this area has focused extensively on providing a general understanding of the concept in terms of its broad features rather than articulating a specific set of rights. It is, however, difficult to pinpoint a single definition that captures the whole range of intuitions concerning what these rights are. The proposed study restricts its articulation of the concept to those broad features by which the concept may be characterized.

Ordinarily, the term ‘human rights’ denotes entitlements that individuals are owed in virtue of the fact that they are humans (MacFarlane 1985:3). In general, they are thought to be universal claims for non-interference (in the case of negative rights) or for certain provisions to be made in order to ensure access to these entitlements (in the case of positive rights) (Waldron 1984:6). Further, these entitlements are fundamental means to securing certain freedoms and protection from abuses. Thus Nickel (2007) articulates a conception of human rights with an emphasis on their practical import. In his view, human rights ensure the protection of individuals from abuses whether political, social or legal. Other representative definitions equally capture the idea that human rights constitute a specific set

⁹It is instructive to observe that this disregard for human rights legitimized in a system where priority is given to community as opposed to the individual is not a distinctive African communitarian trend; one also observes in Western philosophy the charge against, in Charles Taylor’s words, the ‘primacy of rights’ (1985).

of entitlements that seek to protect and advance the interests of human beings while enabling the exercise of freedom (See Dershowitz 2004, Shue 1996 and Talbott 2005).

Importantly, and this is a central idea in virtually all articulations of the term, the bare concept of a right admits of an agent as well as entitlements that the relevant rights seek to protect. In this connection, it is hard to miss the analytical link between debates on personhood and human rights. The link lies in the recognition that persons are primary holders or agents of such rights and, as would be expected, a robust conception of personhood should incorporate not only the basic interests that are to be protected in the formulation of those rights but also the metaphysical features of the self that permit the recognition and grounding of such rights. In this sense, all conceptions of right presuppose a conception of the person taken to be the subject of those rights, which crucially are held as representative of the interests of persons. If protecting these basic human and individual rights is a basic moral goal, then the question of whether the rights of individual persons can be pushed aside for the sake of communal good, in the event of a conflict, becomes central.

In the African literature, Kwasi Wiredu's (2003) work on traditional philosophical thinking on human rights, especially his illuminating reference to a number of human rights that cover the basic needs and interests of all human beings is informative. To a large extent, his position on this issue, which will be discussed in some of the chapters of this thesis, is informed by his intellectual leanings to African communitarianism and in particular, his espousal of the communitarian and normative conception of the self, which unavoidably serves as his starting point. Since what one finds notable in the communitarian conception

of self is the claim that the community is prior to the individual, it is therefore no surprise that when it comes to the question of those rights to which the individual is entitled, proponents of the African communitarian and normative conception of the self maintain that they are secondary and can be overridden by the collective good.

This feature of the debate over the status of rights in African philosophy has received further attention. Gyekye (1997), for instance, indicts 'extreme' communitarians for downplaying the importance of individual rights, autonomy and other personal attributes in favour of communal good and values. He sees these individual values as essential to modernity and Africa's post-colonial development. Even so, he concludes that communal good should override these claims to rights and autonomy (36) as 'moderate communitarianism cannot be expected to be obsessed with rights' (65). By so doing, he fails to show how his moderate view differs from the extreme one. Famakinwa (2010:153) has rightly suggested that in the individual rights/communitarianism controversy the real issue is about primacy: that is, whether or not communal values enjoy primacy over individual ones and not whether those rights are recognized. Gyekye seems to have missed this point in thinking that merely recognizing rights is sufficient to distinguish between moderate and extreme communitarianism. More importantly, however, the debate has not adequately focused on the metaphysical issues underlying the communitarian perspective on rights. In particular, the assumption that the collective should be prized over the individual (rights) has not received sufficient critical attention.

The chapters in this dissertation explore these foregoing themes, by examining critical issues emerging at the points where African communitarianism, personhood and individual rights intersect. Each chapter is written as a stand-alone piece dealing with a specific issue and with a distinctive emphasis. Although many of the issues overlap, a great deal of effort has been made to avoid unnecessary repetitions. Each chapter pursues a sufficiently distinct line of argumentation. Throughout, the contention is that when held up to the question of individual human rights (as well as the autonomy and equality of persons), the communitarian and normative account of personhood comes out lacking. The expectation is that clearing up some of the confusions in the discourse on the self will allow for a more robust conception of personhood and, consequently, of human rights.

The first three chapters are about personhood in African thought. In Chapter One, *Person and Person in African Thought*, I explore the idea, due to Ajume Wingo's (2008) description, of the two-tiered conception of personhood in African thought. Besides delineating the central aspects of the prevailing belief in a two-tiered conception of personhood, the chapter teases out the varied intuitions that underlie the two-tiered conception of personhood. It argues that the intuitions that emerge are fundamentally conflicting, which conflict is a function of combining the relevant tiers of personhood. I go on to explore the analytical and normative relationship between personhood and human rights. The exploration is premised on the idea that two distinct ways of conceptualizing personhood in African thought yield conflicting judgments about how best to ground basic human rights. I then advance the view that a certain way of thinking about persons, in particular the communitarian and normative model, which constitutes the second arm of

the two-tiered conception, imperils the development and proper grounding of a comprehensive and coherent theory of individual rights and autonomy in African thought. I attempt to supply conclusive reasons why adopting a two-tiered conception of personhood, one arm of which is inimical to the full recognition of human rights as non-instrumental goods, is unacceptable.

I should add that the motivation for Chapter One is to characterize and critically analyze the two-tiered conception of personhood in the African literature. Ultimately, I argue that conceptualizing personhood in African thought across two tiers is unwarranted as the intuition that the second tier seeks to capture may be explained in terms of the first.

Chapter Two, *Personhood and Social Power in African Thought*, is based on the hypothesis that received meanings of personhood in any social context are almost always associated with notions of power. Drawing on some interesting insights from the quite recent history of African philosophy as a counter-colonial practice as well as from available evidence in social anthropology, I investigate the link between the communitarian and normative conception of personhood and power. Two central claims are advanced. First, I illustrate how the search for and the articulation of a distinctive African conception of personhood are strongly motivated by a non-epistemic motive, which I identify as a struggle for power. Second, I argue, drawing from available evidence in social anthropology, that on the communitarian and normative conception, personhood is deeply contingent upon social power differentials among individuals in community. As a corollary, I contend that this feature of socially engendered personhood undercuts the often

assumed egalitarian nature of the communitarian societies. Ultimately, my aim is to show that it is a strong point against the communitarian and normative conception that it cannot adequately capture what it is about persons that makes them equal morally (principally because it is, as I argue, based on the actual inequalities that characterize the social lives of persons).

One way I try to establish that communitarian and normative conception of personhood is based on the social power differentials among individuals in community is by appeal to its relation to gender (amongst other features) as a social category around which communal life is organized. As I indicate shortly, this is a theme that I pursue further in Chapter Three. While in Chapter Two I show that this idea of personhood depends on the differences in social power made possible by gender differences, in Chapter Three I take the claim further by arguing that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is a fundamentally gendered phenomenon. Although the discussion on the relation between gender and the communitarian and normative conception of personhood appears in chapters two and three, the points made about this relation in each chapter are intended to serve the specific aims of the relevant chapter and, taken as a whole, I believe these points are mutually reinforcing.

In Chapter Three, *Fiction, Culture and the Concept of a Person*, I explore the attempt to ground in fiction the intuition that personhood is something that is culturally and communally acquired—in particular, I examine Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In this chapter I advance three central claims. First, I argue that it is quite unappealing to

ground a conception of personhood in a parochial conception of the good life or in the contingencies of culture. In particular, I argue that such a conception hinders alternative forms of human flourishing that is at the heart of a contemporary democratic and liberal culture. Second, it is not at all clear that personhood is a theme Achebe explores in *Things Fall Apart*. As such, no support for the communitarian/normative view of personhood may be gleaned from *Things Fall Apart*. Third, a certain amount of suspicion remains that what is often flaunted as the normative view of personhood may be no more than a theory of how individuals come to acquire gendered identities.

This last claim relies on what I take to be an uncontroversial assumption viz. that personhood and gender are quite distinct concepts and, as such, a plausible theory of personhood must reflect this distinction. By arguing that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is at bottom a gendered notion, I aim to show that it fails to honour this distinction. Accordingly, the chapter concludes that by entailing an inseparable link between gender identity and personhood, the normative view of personhood veers in the wrong direction—something, I maintain, that casts major doubt on the status of this conception as a conception of personhood. More specifically, I argue that because personhood in this sense is fundamentally gendered, and because gender is a social category that highlights gender inequality as a feature of society, the communitarian and normative conception of personhood yields the rather unsavoury consequence that female-personhood is inferior to male-personhood.

Along the way, I try to justify why *Things Fall Apart*¹⁰ is a useful text in analyzing the issue of personhood. In particular, I point out that fiction quite generally has been a useful resource for philosophical analysis; that, as noted by literary critics, TFA describes a fictional culture that comes as close as anything to what a traditional African culture pre-colonialism would have looked like; and that given the literary acclaim that it has received, TFA appears to be an authoritative text such that appeal to it may turn out to be a way of justifying particular claims inferred from it. At least, this is how I explain Ikuenobe's and, more recently, Masolo's appeal to the novel in their expository accounts of personhood in African thought.

Chapter Four examines Gyekye's account of the relationship between individual and community, which informs the most dominant moral-political philosophy in contemporary Africa—moderate communitarianism. The relationship between the individual and community forms the crux of the debate over whether or not personhood should be understood primarily as a collective fact and the question of whether individual rights can be adequately grounded. Taking Gyekye as my starting point, I reflect on several answers to the question of what the appropriate relationship should be between individual and community. In this chapter, I specifically contend that (1) there are some tensions internal to the logic of Gyekye's account, which doesn't distinguish between individual and community in terms of which is basic or prior. More specifically, I argue that Gyekye's proposal that we equally regard individual and communal interests fails to qualify as a

¹⁰Henceforth, I shall be using the less cumbersome TFA to denote *Things Fall Apart*.

solution to the individual-community dilemma; instead it merely repeats the dilemma it sought to address.

I further argue that (2) the moral-political philosophy that derives from his account of the relationship between individual and community is inadequate as it cannot provide any real guidance to moral agents and legislators without substantial modification to its original principle of equal regard. Ultimately, I maintain that (3) an adequate account of the relationship between individual and community should be premised on the notion of a priority relation that takes the individual as basic as this position holds better promise in terms of grounding individual human rights as non-instrumental goods and accounting for some pressing human rights issues in contemporary Africa. Once again, my aim remains the same: to shift attention away from a communitarian understanding of personhood and, as will become clear, towards human rights.

The main thrust of Chapter Five, *An African Conception of Human Rights?* is to reject the position that a conception of human rights is culture-relative by way of contesting the claim that there is an African case in point. I see this aim as a continuation of my criticism of the communitarianism underlying the idea of personhood under scrutiny. The idea that there is a uniquely African conception of human rights is the upshot of a communitarian approach to personhood. This is so because that idea of human rights is grounded in a communitarian conception of personhood and is said to be African to the extent that it shows high regard for the premium African societies quite generally place on community. By contesting the idea of an African conception of human rights, I believe I shall be

reinforcing some of my earlier attempts to cast doubt on the communitarian idea of personhood.

The chapter considers three different African conceptions of human nature and/or dignity that purport to provide a philosophical *cum* African cultural foundation for human rights. There are three central claims advanced viz. that the available conceptions of human rights either (1) have little or nothing to do with human rights, (2) are not African in the sense at issue in a culture relativist perspective or (3) are simply inadequate. I do not, however, deny that traditional African cultures recognized and upheld basic human rights. Instead the central claim I defend is that an adequate conception of human rights cannot be grounded in a conception that takes, as the relevant conceptions of human rights do, community to be the axiomatic principle around which all other values revolve. Thus, to the extent that proponents of these conceptions define this community principle as definitive of African culture, I contest the possibility that these conceptions can adequately ground human rights. I conclude by observing that some of the tensions that have been noted in the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* are ultimately a function of attempts to make central the role of the collective in a conception of human rights.

In Chapter Six, I continue the exploration of the question of how best to ground human rights. In particular, I wonder whether an African communitarian moral theory can adequately ground individual freedom and human rights. Although variants of *ubuntu* moral theory answer in the negative asserting that the duties individuals owe the collective are prior to individual rights (since priority is assigned to the collective), Thad Metz's

recent articulation of an African *ubuntu* moral theory promises to ground the liberal ideal of individual liberty. In this chapter, which I have titled *Strange Bedfellows: Ubuntu and Human Rights in Africa*, I pursue three distinct lines of argumentation in establishing the claim that Metz's project, as one expression of African communitarian morality, fails to convince. In particular, I argue that individual freedom and rights cannot be successfully grounded in a moral theory that already regards some extrinsic value (i.e. communal harmony) as the most fundamental moral value.

First, I suggest that Metz's attempt to ground human rights in his *ubuntu* moral theory raises the problem of where the fundamental value is in his theory. That is, in seeking to integrate two potentially conflicting and non-instrumental values in his theory, Metz substantially modifies his original *ubuntu* ethical principle in such a way that he undercuts the communitarian/*ubuntu* status of his theory. Second, I argue that even if Metz's theory were sufficiently communitarian/*ubuntu*-ish, it couldn't possibly ground individual freedom as a non-instrumental value. Third, I argue that Metz employs a tendentious reading of the concept of human rights. In particular, that he erroneously construes rights as duties. Since this last argument rests on a subtle distinction between individual rights and duties, I try to suggest how the distinction can be made in spite of the fact that these concepts are strongly related.

Although I do not directly address Metz's treatment of specific human rights issues in South Africa, throughout this chapter I contend that the detected theoretical lapses cast doubts on his overall project of developing an African moral theory that honours the liberal

ideals of individual rights and autonomy. Once again, my aim is to show that we could not fully recognize and respect human rights within a communitarian framework or, more appropriately, if we conceptualize self through the prism of African communitarianism.

The seventh chapter, *Towards a Metaphysic of the Individual Self*, is largely expository. Even so, I suggest by way of that exposition that there are rational pressures compelling us towards a metaphysic of the self that is grounded on the individual as opposed to the community as the primary basis of social and political organization, the fundamental object of moral concern and the basis of fundamental moral value. This metaphysic of the self promises a more plausible grounding for human rights than its immediate rival, which takes community to be fundamental. I navigate through some key discourses in the history of African philosophy, in particular Appiah's discussion of the issue of an African identity and the Hountondji-led attack on ethnophilosophical reason, with the aim of making a strong case for moving towards a conception of self in African thought that is more individualist than the prevailing, communalistic one.¹¹

Ultimately, my intention in this final chapter is to take my contentions in the preceding chapters—i.e., my protestations against the communitarian idea of personhood and human rights—to what I see as their logical conclusion. That is, a conception of self and human rights that is focused around the individual. Although I do not propose any substantive or

¹¹I use the term 'individualistic' with some caution. I merely intend to say a conception of personhood that takes the individual as opposed to the community as basic. It is not my aim to suggest advance individualism as a trait that people ought to maximize and neither am I against the idea that the community can play a role in this alternative conception of personhood; my contention is that the community is derivative vis-à-vis the individual and that this point must be reflected in whatever role the community plays in a conception of personhood. In addition, I sometimes interchange the use of the term 'individualistic' with 'individualist' as evident in the latter part of this thesis—see especially chapter 7.

complete conception of self, I argue that adopting this alternative individualist model of self entails dispensing with the notion of a communal self metaphysically construed as well as the assumption that the community is the bearer of ultimate moral value, the sole prescriber of norms and the metric for evaluating the moral status of the individual.

Chapter One

1. Person and Person in African Thought¹²

1.1. Introduction

Within the field of what has come to be known in the last few decades as African philosophy, there is a certain easiness with and almost dutiful acquiescence to the idea that the word person has some sort of ambiguity. Quite simply, the idea is that the word ‘person’ has double referents since it at once refers to a metaphysical entity in possession of certain attributes and a status that is acquired as one gets along with others in a typically communally-oriented setting (Wiredu 1996:160).¹³ This feature of the term ‘person’ has subsequently given rise to a trend that may be characterized broadly as belief among many African philosophers in a two-tiered conception of personhood. I shall delineate the main aspects of this belief in section 1.2, frequently drawing on available accounts in the literature to illuminate it. I should point out that ultimately the purpose of the exercise is to

¹²The title of this chapter may strike some as somewhat odd. Let me quickly explain the idea behind the title in order to eliminate any oddness about it and to shed some light on its purpose. The title *Person and Person* is intended to capture the idea that in African thought the term ‘person’ captures two different facts. These two meanings of ‘person’ are usually combined in what ultimately is a two-tiered conception of personhood. The emphasis on ‘person’ and ‘person’ is to highlight the idea that there are more than one meaning of personhood. And since the point of the chapter is to question the need for a second tier of personhood, the emphasis in the title enables me to show that the second tier in that two-tiered conception is somewhat gratuitous and that ‘person’ in the first sense would suffice as a complete conception of personhood.

¹³The suggestion that the word person is ambiguous was first made by Kwasi Wiredu. He writes, ‘The word person in Akan is Onipa. This carries an ambiguity. In one sense it means simply a human being; in another it refers to a human being of a certain moral and social status’ (2005). Although Wiredu notes this feature of personhood in relation to the Akans, there is good reason to think that it is applicable to African thought quite generally. As Wiredu (2009) points out, this feature of personhood is common to the Bembas in Zambia. Masolo (2004b) makes a similar point about the Luos in Kenya. Gbadegesin (2003) highlights this feature in his discussion of Yoruba concept of person and this feature of person is part of Menkiti’s (1984) account as well. Kaphagawani notes this as a feature of personhood common to the Yorubas and the Bantus (2004:333–334).

facilitate a critical assessment of that conception of personhood. The main thrust of this chapter, however, is revisionary, since it aims to correct some of the underlying confusions ensuing from that belief, and especially as it impacts on our thinking on human rights.

One such confusion has to do with the fact that the two-tiered conception of personhood integrates a range of conflicting intuitions about personhood and value. In section 1.3, I examine the suspect inference that the fundamental value of personhood is at once intrinsic and extrinsic relative to persons and that this obviously controversial claim can be plausibly captured in a two-tiered account of personhood. Another way to express the confusion is to problematize the issue of where fundamental value really lies in a two-tiered conception of personhood. An attempt to provide a plausible answer betrays deep tensions in that conception. In order to establish these claims, I try to make sense of the relation between personhood and value, and subsequently argue that the two-tiered conception integrates two diametrically opposed intuitions about what that relation consists in. I next suggest a number of alternatives to resolve the dilemma. In section 1.4, I argue further that if we are to fully value human rights as basic and non-instrumental, then there are rational and practical pressures necessitated by concern for human rights requiring contemporary African thinking on personhood to shift attention directly away from belief in the second tier, or the communitarian and normative conception, of personhood.

In general, African conceptions of personhood, like their Western counterparts, are distinctly practical in significance. Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that although the considerations here are primarily conceptual, the study proceeds on the basis of the

hypothesis that personhood has some practical significance that is cashed out in terms of value. In particular, I have in mind the values of human dignity and rights. Accordingly, I explore the related metaphysical and moral quandaries of African theorizing about personhood through the prism of rights, restricting myself to the specific question of how best to ground individual rights in African thought.

Additionally, African philosophers have frequently observed that in a two-tiered conception of personhood, the second tier captures by way of relevance what it is to be a person in African thought. In section 1.5, I tackle this slightly different issue. I advance a number of considerations against the conception of personhood as a moral and social status that is acquired in community—that is, the communitarian and normative conception. These considerations range from the charge that fallacious reasoning of a circular kind underpins that conception to an argument about its redundancy. On this latter point, I suggest that the basic intuition motivating the communitarian and normative conception of personhood can be adequately captured by the metaphysical view (i.e. the first tier), and so we have one less reason for proposing a second tier of personhood. All these would lead me to canvass the twin conclusion that the metaphysical view captures what really matters about personhood and that consequently, we ought to reject the two-tiered conception.

1.2. The Two-Tiered Conception of Personhood

My aim in this section is straightforward. I wish to briefly demonstrate that the literature on personhood in African thought evinces two distinct levels of personhood, resulting in what I have been calling the two-tiered conception. I do this by drawing on the most

widely cited accounts of personhood, with special attention to those of Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwasi Wiredu as two of the foremost exponents on the subject.

One very useful way of characterizing this conception of personhood is to think of the term ‘person’ as picking out points in a continuum. At one end of the continuum is an entity in possession of all or some of the following metaphysical attributes: consciousness, rationality, the capacity to will, desire, *okra*, *emi* or a soul etc.¹⁴ Call this entity a human being—in African thought, the word for person describes any such entity.¹⁵ This may be broadly labeled the metaphysical or ontological view.¹⁶ Further along the continuum we should arrive at some point in which this metaphysical entity, now well on in society and having acquired those ‘excellencies’ definitive of personhood and which can only be acquired through membership and positive participation in community, has earned a special status, which the community alone can confer. In African thought, the term person also refers to this special, communally recognized status acquired by individuals who have demonstrated a ‘widened ethical sense’ and can consequently fulfill and be expected to fulfill their responsibilities to kith and kin. Call this second level of personhood the communitarian and normative view.¹⁷

¹⁴The list is by no means exhaustive; indeed, for my present purposes it matters less what metaphysical attributes an entity must possess to be regarded as a person in the ontological sense. The central point is that that attribute is internal to the constitution of a person.

¹⁵Although it may be the case that the term ‘person’ in this sense may apply to all beings (human or otherwise) that have the relevant attributes; it is worth noting that in the African literature on personhood, the term is typically reserved for human beings who are held to possess the relevant attributes (*emi*, *okra* or perhaps a soul).

¹⁶For representative examples of the ontological view in the literature, see Gyekye (1984); Gbadegesin (2003); Masolo (2004b) and Wiredu (2005).

¹⁷Along the way, I may have to denote this view with the less cumbersome ‘normative view’ or ‘communitarian view’, for purposes of simplicity.

Characterized in terms of a personhood-continuum, this view should now bear striking resemblance to Menkiti's widely cited exposition on the African conception of personhood. He thinks that we start out as entities about whom certain biological or metaphysical facts are true (i.e. first-tier personhood), but over time we acquire in community the status of personhood (i.e. second-tier), corresponding to the degree to which we fulfill familial and communal obligations 'The various societies found in traditional Africa', says Menkiti, 'routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations' (Menkiti 1984:176).

Menkiti is often represented as defending the normative view, so it is worth pointing out that he doesn't at all deny that an entity that possesses a soul, will or has the capacity for rationality is a person in some sense. It seems to me that his main contention is both that 'person' in this sense is 'minimal' and not distinctively African. Neither does he deny knowledge of the minimal account to the African mind. Indeed, he acknowledges that in the distinctively African account of personhood there is recognition that something is first metaphysically given and that the same appropriately situated in community acquires 'full personhood' over time—i.e. becomes a person in the maximal sense. According to Menkiti, '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... become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the

term.’ (1984:173). Indeed, Menkiti leaves us in no doubt as to the two-tiered nature of his conception of personhood when he asserts that ‘...*persons* become *persons* only after a process of incorporation’ (Menkiti 1984:172, my emphasis).

In calling attention to the processual nature of personhood in African thought, it seems to me that Menkiti is claiming not only that the word person applies in two different ways, but also that these different applications of the word can fit seamlessly into a coherent theory of personhood that is also distinctively African. This latter point, implicit in Menkiti’s account, is crucial and would be subsequently explored further and more explicitly by other African philosophers. Take, for instance, Ikuenobe who clearly sees that ‘there are two conceptions of personhood in African thought’ and then proceeds to establish a relation between what he calls the ‘descriptive’ and the ‘normative’ views of personhood, corresponding in that order to Menkiti’s ‘minimal’ and ‘maximal’ accounts of personhood. Ikuenobe’s approach to combining these two accounts into a single theory of personhood is to point to a relation of dependency between the two. After having quoted Menkiti approvingly, he notes that, ‘Although the African communalistic conception of personhood is primarily normative, it is also dependent on a descriptive metaphysical view of personhood’ (2006:118). Similarly, Wiredu may be read as establishing a relation between the two by appealing to the notions of necessity and sufficiency, implying that the descriptive or minimal view is necessary, though not sufficient, for personhood in African thought (1992).¹⁸

¹⁸See also Ajume Wingo’s ‘Akan Philosophy of the Person’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008).

The need to combine the two distinct views into a single coherent theory of personhood is what induces a two-tiered conception of personhood in African thought. Elsewhere, this is how Wiredu makes the point: ‘Not only is there what might be called an ontological basis for this identity in terms of the constituents of personhood, but there is also a distinct normative layer of a profound social significance in that concept’ (1992:198). And Ajume Wingo is even more explicit, stating in his own reflection on Wiredu’s version of the Akan philosophy on personhood that there is indeed a ‘two-tiered view of personhood’ borne out by ‘the two-levels of personhood (one discrete, the other continuous)’ detectable in Wiredu’s exposition of that philosophy (2008). So, just as Menkiti did, Ikuenobe and Wiredu rope in the core idea that an African conception of personhood is essentially two-tiered.

It is principally because it refers doubly that the word person is said to carry with it a certain degree of ambiguity—albeit a benign one if we are to believe Wiredu, who, in his own discussion of the matter, suggests right away that proper knowledge of the relevant vernacular will reveal which meaning applies, thus eliminating any potential confusion.¹⁹ Yet, although any likely confusion may be eliminated at the linguistic level, the suspicion still remains that combining the ostensibly contrasting intuitions underpinning the distinct views in a two-tiered conception holds the potential for enormous confusion. I explore this suspicion further in what follows.

¹⁹Wiredu says that ‘Even the most elementary sense of context, however, suffices to disambiguate’ (2005). See also his (2009:16–17).

1.3. Personhood and Value

I should indicate straightaway that I have two related aims in this section. First, I build upon the brief exposition of the received theory of personhood adumbrated in the previous section by shedding some light on the idea that any plausible theory of personhood must either implicitly or explicitly articulate its relation to value. I do so by highlighting two general approaches in the history of philosophizing about personhood. Next, I show how the two distinct views of personhood that are integrated in the two-tiered conception yield conflicting judgments about the relation between personhood and value—I make clear why this presents unique challenges for the two-tiered conception.

Why does personhood matter at all? To my mind, one possible answer is that persons are the basic building block of any society. How we theorize about personhood would have significant practical and normative implications for social organization and the institutions we set up. Yet, while this sheds some light on the relative importance of persons vis-à-vis society, it doesn't adequately capture the intuition underlying our treatment of persons as ends in themselves. The reason why personhood matters is that persons are such that the recognition of them imposes at once obligations of a moral kind, on the part of those who recognize them as such.²⁰ In short, persons matter primarily because they are proper objects of value. To be exact, the appropriate kind of response to the fact of personhood in any individual is one of valuing. It is consequent upon this connection to value that personhood becomes a subject matter of utmost importance. Indeed, it seems impossible to

²⁰Notice that this doesn't imply, as proponents of the communitarian and normative conception hold, that fulfilling obligations is what makes one a person. On the view I articulate here, such obligations are *subsequent* to the recognition of personhood.

provide a complete account of personhood without a corresponding reference to value, where this involves, at a minimum, considerations on the moral worth of persons.

The idea that any useful theory of personhood must incorporate either explicitly or by inference at least a statement about why persons matter at all or more specifically about value is not novel, but perhaps is worth illuminating further. Two general approaches to making this connection can be detected in the history of philosophy. The first approach construes persons as bearers of ultimate value, with the implication that fundamental value is an intrinsic quality of persons. Another way to express the same point is to claim that some item in the constitution of persons is the basis of assigning ultimate value. Examples of this sort of approach to establishing the link between personhood and value abound in the literature. In Western philosophy, for instance, the relation between personhood and value is commonplace. Immanuel Kant famously articulates in one of his formulations of the categorical imperative, the humanity principle—the view that persons are valuable in themselves, where such value is expressed in terms of dignity, which is a function of the capacity for rational deliberation and autonomy.²¹ Also, Western theories of personhood, like Descartes', that identify the essence of a person with the soul point directly to facts about the inviolability of the person, thus implying that value is integral to personhood.²²

²¹See Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (1965:96) in which he says, 'every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as means for arbitrary use by this or that will... he must in all his actions... be viewed at the same time as an end'. This way of thinking gives rise to the humanity principle which is stated thus: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, in your person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but at the same as an end.'

²²In particular, the concept of 'ensoulment', which refers to the moment a fetus receives a soul, is used to establish the person-status of the fetus, particularly in the Catholic Christian tradition. This comes with the implication that fetuses cannot be aborted since the possession of souls suggests their inviolability. See Pope John Paul II's 'Evangelium Vitae' (1995).

Moreover, the link between person and value is not foreign to the African theorizing about personhood. Whether it is the descriptive metaphysical or normative conception, African philosophers implicitly or explicitly infer this correlation. For instance, in any culture-specific variant of the descriptive metaphysical view of personhood, one of the constituent elements (e.g. *emi*, *okra* etc.) is said to proceed directly from a divine source and thus constitutes the basis for claims to dignity.²³ To the extent that being a person involves having dignity, it can be claimed that persons are bearers of fundamental value. To see this more clearly, consider any African conception of what it means for something to be a person at the level of ontology. What is obvious is that part of the constitutive elements of personhood is some entity taken to be not just the basis of life but also the grounding for basic dignity, which persons qua persons have in equal measure. This constituent of personhood is usually attributed to some divine being as its primary source.

Among the Akans, for instance, the *okra*, which is described as an ‘aspect’ of God, is understood to constitute the essence of the individual while at the same time providing the grounding for the intrinsic value that each individual person possesses. Gyekye’s description is illuminating. A person is described as ‘having in his/her nature an aspect of God’ and this ‘aspect’, which is the ‘*okra*’ is held as constituting the innermost self, the essence of the individual person’.²⁴ Further, in virtue of possessing something of the divine, a person ‘must be held as of intrinsic value, an end in himself, worthy of dignity and respect’ (1992:114). Here, Gyekye leaves us in no doubt whatsoever that the basis for

²³Gbadegesin (1985), Ikuenobe (2006) and Okere (1983) are examples of African philosophers who hold this view. Below I focus on Wiredu and Gyekye as representative examples.

²⁴Gyekye, K. ‘Person and Community in African Thought’ <http://www.galerie-inter.de/kimmerle/frameText9.htm>

considering persons as ends and thus intrinsically valuable is the okra. Wiredu is even more strident: ‘A person consists of three elements. One of these comes *directly* from God and is, in fact, a speck of the divine substance’. Elsewhere, he adds that ‘being begotten of a direct gift of God... He or she... is deserving of the basic respect and sympathy’ (1992:199).

The upshot of all these is that the ontological arm of the two-tiered conception clearly captures a certain relation between personhood and value namely, that persons are the *bearers* of the most basic and fundamental moral value—that is, human dignity, upon which certain natural rights and entitlements are subsequently grounded. It is this fact, the possession of dignity that makes a person an end, the subject of right and autonomy and ultimately deserving of respect. ‘Any human being’, writes Wiredu ‘contains an element of divinity and is, on that ground alone, entitled to life, liberty, and an ample dispensation of natural rights’ (2005).²⁵

As you would expect, a number of implications follow from this approach to correlating personhood and value. First, the most fundamental value, upon which the recognition of the moral worth of persons rest is intrinsic—that is, it is internal to the constitution of persons. In this case, the okra, which is an essential constituent of personhood in Akan thought, is the basis for allocating inherent value, in the shape of a dignity, to persons. Second, this intrinsic value is non-instrumental—that is to say, persons are of such value that they cannot, in Kantian parlance, be used merely as a means to some further end.

²⁵Wiredu (2005) *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*.

Quite unlike the first, however, the alternative approach to correlating personhood and value construes persons as standing in some appropriate relation, typically of dependence, to that which is taken to be the bearer of ultimate value. This dependence relation is characterized in terms of notions like ‘communal belonging’, ‘communal participation’, ‘communal recognition’ and ‘status-acquisition’. In each case, the individual is supposed to be dependent on the community for her existence as well as moral and social flourishing. This explains Mbiti’s dictum ‘I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am’(1969:109) and Menkiti’s insistence that ‘as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be’(Menkiti 1984:171). This results in the communal definition of person.

On this approach to theorizing about personhood, any identity-constituting features about individual persons depend on facts about communal belonging, participation and recognition, so that persons are properly thought of as socially and communally produced rather than metaphysically specified. This alleged priority of the community is not without further consequence on our judgment about personhood and its relation to value. The implication is that whatever it is that is valuable about persons derives from something else namely, the community, which is the bearer of ultimate value. Here Wiredu’s claim is instructive: ‘the greatest value is attached to communal belonging’ (1992:199).

All of this points to a substantial modification on our initial judgments about personhood and value—since by locating ultimate value in something external to the individual person, it seems that the true value of personhood is extrinsic rather than intrinsic.

Let me now sum up the relevant deductions. First, the two-tiered conception of personhood incorporates two distinct accounts of personhood, each of which gives rise to different judgments as to where fundamental value lies. Second, the differences in judgments are not merely trivial; indeed the judgments are deeply conflicting, implying that persons are at once the bearers of ultimate value and not the bearers of ultimate value (insofar as ultimate value is thought of as inhering in community). Put differently, the two-tiered conception of personhood in essence combines the diametrically opposed intuitions that fundamental moral value is both intrinsic and extrinsic relative to persons. Third, and relatedly, since they conflict, the intuitions that underpin the distinct views of personhood in the two-tiered conception are constantly pulling us in different directions regarding our treatment of persons as objects of value. That is, this conflict of intuition yields two different ways of responding to persons as objects of moral value. On the one hand, the first tier of personhood seems to imply that since ultimate value inheres in persons, we should never treat persons as means to some further end. On the other, the second tier implies that since ultimate value resides in communal relationships and other similar facts, persons, being merely derivative in value, may be treated merely as means to the ultimate end, which relates to the community. All these strike me as deeply confused.

Thus far, the analysis of the widely received two-tiered conception of personhood has led to the uncovering of the problem of where fundamental value really lies. Regarding the question of where to locate value, two options have suggested themselves. These may be formulated as propositions: (P1) Fundamental value is intrinsic to persons and (P2) Fundamental value is extrinsic to persons (i.e. it inheres in communal belonging or similarly construed facts). The two-tiered conception of personhood is an attempt to wed both propositions. It seems to me that there are four possibilities if the two propositions are to be made intelligibly integrated within a single conception of personhood, such as the one under scrutiny.

Possibility #1: Only P1 is true

Possibility #2: Only P2 is true

Possibility #3: P1 and P2 are both false

Possibility #4: P1 and P2 are equally true

Each option is worth examining separately. The fourth possibility strikes me as independently implausible, since fundamental value cannot be at once intrinsic and extrinsic to persons. At the level of simple logic the claim seems to me deeply incoherent, violating the principle of non-contradiction. To my mind this rules out the fourth possibility. I find suspect the insight captured in possibility #3. The reason is that, because it denies that value is either intrinsic or extrinsic to a person, and by implication damages whatever link there is between personhood and value, it cannot explain the practical significance that attaches to personhood or why facts about personhood matter to us at all.

Yet, as pointed out earlier on, personhood is a concept with immense practical import. And one way to capture its practical import is by correlating the concept to value.²⁶ Another reason why option three strikes me as unconvincing is that it implies rather oddly that the two arms of the two-tiered conception of personhood are equally false, since what each tier of personhood claims is what option three categorically denies. If I am right, then the live options are #1 and #2.

Consider, then, the first possibility, (P1) is true—that is, it is the case that fundamental value is internal to persons. This may entail both that fundamental value is not extrinsic (i.e. P2 is false) and the corollary that whatever value attaches to the community is merely derivative. That is, since individual persons are the source of fundamental value, the value we attach to communal life and belonging depends upon the value of persons as such. One likely challenge for a conception of personhood that incorporates at its core the proposition ‘P1 is true’ is that it would be unable to account for the ‘community priority thesis’, which is the claim that in African thought the community is metaphysically, morally and epistemologically prior to the individual. So, to the extent that adducing to the insight captured in that thesis is crucial in making a conception of personhood distinctively African, it may be further claimed that the resulting conception of personhood that makes

²⁶African theorizing on personhood obviously has significant practical implications as has been shown in the discussion thus far. Ajume Wingo clearly articulates this point in his reflection on Akan philosophy of personhood by suggesting that the discourse on personhood is not merely of academic interest (2008). In Western philosophy of personal identity, contributions from McMahan (2002) and De Grazia (2003) have illustrated clearly the practical significance of personhood in relation to end of life dilemmas including Abortion, Advance Directives etc.

communal value dependent on the value inherent in the individual person is not distinctively African.²⁷

Now consider the second possibility, (P2) is true—that is, fundamental value is extrinsic to persons, insofar as it inheres in community. To this may be added the corollaries that fundamental value is not intrinsic (i.e. (P1 is false) and that whatever value persons may have is merely derivative from the community to which greatest value attaches. There is one obvious drawback with this option. However, before discussing that problem let me quickly point out that this option dovetails nicely with the second tier of the two-tiered conception of personhood since the communitarian and normative conception uses as its springboard the claim that community takes precedence over individual facts and is the basis of ultimate value.

Now to the problem—it would be impossible for any African conception of personhood that upholds (P2) to justify why it is the case that individual persons are ends in themselves and the subjects of dignity and inalienable rights or entitlements, seeing that this fact was grounded in the first place as something worth pursuing by appeal to the *okra*, or its metaphysical analogues, which is internal to the constitution of the person. It is important not to miss the point, which is that if dignity, rights or any such value is grounded in something extrinsic to the individual person, then it is hard for persons to be regarded as

²⁷I should point out straightaway that I happen not to share this intuition about the importance of that thesis in shaping an African theory of personhood. Although it is not my interest to articulate the reasons here, I shall later on explain why I think an African theory of personhood need not incorporate belief in the metaphysical, moral or epistemological priority of the community over the individual.

ends in themselves. As such, whatever rights or entitlements persons may have in virtue of possessing a dignity would be merely derivative and secondary in value relative to facts about communal belonging.

In conclusion, then, each of the four options poses a dilemma—i.e. there are costs associated with opting for any one of them. Even so, my proposal is that there are rational pressures, arising from contemporary concerns about grounding individual liberties and rights, prompting us in the direction of possibility #1 above. In other words, a theory of personhood that upholds the proposition that fundamental value is intrinsic rather than extrinsic to persons holds enormous promise with regards to the possibility of grounding dignity as well as basic rights and entitlements as non-instrumental goods, worth pursuing for their own sakes.

1.4. Implications for Human Rights

Much philosophical and political attention has been paid to the question of human rights in Africa. My aim is not to canvass the various perspectives that have been advanced but to simply make good on my initial claim that a certain way of conceptualizing personhood, namely the communitarian and normative approach, is inimical to attempts at providing a plausible philosophical grounding for human rights as non-instrumental goods in contemporary African thought. In the end, I suggest that this deep-rooted inability exposed in a thoroughgoing analysis of the communitarian conception of personhood supplies a motive for shelving it altogether—and with it the idea of a two-tiered conception of personhood.

I begin with the observation that concern for human rights is a matter of urgency in contemporary Africa.²⁸ This is in part because human violations are still widespread. Despite the contribution of colonialism to the rupturing of belief in the value of collectivity in the consciousness of Africans, the suspicion remained that because African societies were communally oriented and African scholars were unwavering in their resolve to return to traditional values in a bid to forge a prosperous future, widespread human rights violations would prevail. The solution was to remain faithful to the positive aspects of traditional values in a manner that is responsive to the challenges of modern times. Thus Wiredu asserts that human rights violations cannot be ‘rationalized by appeal to any authentic aspect of African traditional politics.... How to devise a system of politics that, while being responsive to the developments of the modern world, will reflect the best traditional thinking about human rights (and other values) is one of the profoundest challenges facing modern Africa’ (1990:257, 260). To my mind, however, one of the main contributors to human rights violations in Africa comes from the ‘authentic aspect’ of tradition.

There is a reason why this insight has been lost in the discourse on rights in Africa. In part, it has to do with the fact that many African philosophers who have reflected on the challenge of human rights in African thought have focused attention on the wrong question—the question of whether traditional African culture being communally

²⁸Francis Deng makes the point clearly when he states that ‘with the centralization of power in the modern state system, the need to protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses became urgent’ (2004:502).

constituted had recognized human rights at all. This led to a number of demonstrations that economic, political and civil rights were recognized in traditional African cultures.²⁹ However, this question and the subsequent demonstrations were entirely unnecessary since the real issue was not whether rights were part of African traditions, for the indications are that there were. What is at issue is the normative status of such rights. And as far as this question was concerned, there was an apparent unanimity that rights were of secondary value relative to facts about the collective.³⁰ This is how Menkiti makes the point, 'In the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and *their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties*' (1984:180, my emphasis). And Gyekye, presenting a similar idea, is emphatic: 'in the communitarian political morality, priority will *not be given to rights* if doing so will stand in the way of attaining *a more highly ranked value* or a *more preferable goal of the community*' (1992:116, my emphasis)

All along the central point I have been advancing is that this secondary, lowly ranked, less preferred normative status of human rights is a function of a certain of conceptualization personhood—the normative and communitarian one. Because this conception of person gives priority to community vis-à-vis the individual, and because human rights are basic entitlements of individuals, the implication is that such rights whatever they are, to use Gyekye's dismissive description, can be overridden by a 'highly ranked' and 'more

²⁹See Wiredu (1996), in particular chap. 12; Francis Deng (2004); and Kwame Gyekye (1997), chap. 2 and (1992:115), all of which attempts to demonstrate that rights were recognized in traditional African societies.

³⁰Here, I include Gyekye's moderate communitarian response, which is essentially is a project aimed at paying lip service to the subject of rights in African thought since although it claimed that rights are recognized moderate communitarianism nevertheless is basically the theory that 'will expectably give priority to duties rather than rights' (1992:116).

preferable' value—community. This way of thinking about human rights is the result of a conception of person that locates ultimate value in the community. This ultimately informs a socio-political ethic in which conflicts between individual rights and communal values are invariably decided in favour of the latter. And because individual rights would invariably be sacrificed in favour of communal values, the resulting socio-political ethic would engender a culture of widespread human rights violations.³¹

But that's not all. The contemporary urgency about human rights in modern African states is premised upon a certain way of grounding rights. Since these basic rights embody goods and entitlements that are worth pursuing for their sake, an adequate philosophy of human rights must competently explain why it is the case that such rights are non-instrumentally valuable—that is, why such rights do not derive their value from something else or serve merely to promote a more preferable value namely, community or communal relationships. A communitarian and normative theory of personhood in virtue of assigning greatest value to something other than that on which human dignity and rights are based cannot explain and justify why it is the case that human rights are non-instrumentally valuable. However, a metaphysical view (i.e. the first tier of the so-called two-tiered conception) can. Because on this view, ultimate value resides in something constitutive of the person, and upon which dignity and human rights are grounded, it can explain why it is the case that human rights are fundamentally and non-instrumentally good.

³¹I pursue this point in more detail in chapters five and six.

In sum, we have arrived at the end of what is akin to a cost-benefit analysis of the two levels of personhood. The cost of embracing the second level is quite high and potentially detrimental to contemporary efforts at grounding human rights as protections of fundamental and non-instrumental goods. I suggest that this may be a good reason why an African theory of personhood need not initiate a second level.

1.5. Why We Should Reject the Two-tiered Conception

Quite apart from its inability to sufficiently ground contemporary concerns about human dignity and rights, as shown in the previous section, there are other independent reasons that should pull us away from acquiescing to the second arm of the two-tiered conception of personhood, and in the direction of a conception of personhood according to which what's fundamentally valuable about persons is intrinsic.³² I examine these other reasons against the backdrop of the tendency in African theorizing about personhood to give prominence, or assign relevance and priority to the communitarian and normative level of personhood. In what follows, I briefly illustrate the deference towards this second level of personhood in the literature and then provide what I think are conclusive reasons for rejecting it, and by extension, the two-tiered conception of personhood.

I begin with the observation that although proponents of the two-tiered conception weave together two distinct conceptions of personhood; it is the communitarian and normative

³²Here I am supposing that insofar as there are legitimate grounds for rejecting the second arm of the two-tiered conception, we are logically required to reject the two-tiered conception. Although, it is not my primary aim to discuss in any further detail the first arm of the two-tiered conception, I shall gesture towards that direction and throughout advance the view that all the important practical implications of personhood are best accounted for by appeal to the ontological aspects of personhood alone.

one they take to be apposite to African thought. In Wiredu's estimation, although the 'African mind is not oblivious to ontological aspects of a person...' it is normative concerns that are 'more dominant' (2009:13) and Ikuenobe is firm in his insistence that 'it is the normative and not the metaphysical idea of personhood that is germane to African communal traditions' (2006:117). Additional endorsement of this idea comes from cultural anthropological studies. Gail Presbey, following her study of the Maasai (and some other African groups') concepts of 'personhood', submits that personhood in African thought is 'not to be understood *primarily* as metaphysical stances on the nature of the self, but rather as descriptions of intragroup recognition' (2002:57). It is worth pointing out that the position of these authors is in line with that of Menkiti, who explicitly downplays the significance of the individualist features (or 'ontological aspects') of personhood when he claims that 'the African view... denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual'. The methodological approach of the first level of the two-tiered conception is also downplayed in affirming a definition of person in terms of 'the envioning community' (1984:171).³³

The suggestion that the second tier of personhood is more relevant to African thought is perplexing, initially—surely, the two distinct views integrated into the two-tiered conception are equally African. Even so, for these philosophers one major piece of evidence tips the balance in favour of describing communitarian and normative personhood as relevantly African. They may be read as claiming that available empirical

³³ See also Placide Tempels, 'The concept of separate being... entirely independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought. Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship... For the Bantu there is interaction of being, that is to say, of force with force' (1959:58).

data points to the fact that African societies are predominantly communalistic in orientation and that it is a natural consequence of this fact that the view of personhood germane to African thought is the one that gives accent to community as the foundational principle about which other facts revolve. Here's Wiredu's (2005) position in direct response to the question of what accounts for this conception of personhood among Africans,

The answer is quite simple. African societies are, famously, communalistic. The individual is brought up, from the beginning, with a sense of belonging and solidarity with an extensive circle of kith and kin... This is the mainspring of the normative conception of a person (2005).³⁴

Elsewhere, Wiredu reiterates the point that in a communalistic setting, '...the corresponding idea of person would be of a morally sound adult who has demonstrated in practice a sense of responsibility to household, lineage and society at large' (2009:16).

But Wiredu is not alone in thinking that there is a certain correspondence between the African communalistic worldview and the conception of person worthy of the description 'African'. Reinforcing the same point, DA Masolo reckons that any contribution to personal identity in African thought must draw from and be positioned within the communal worldview, since '...the idea that the metaphysics of individual identity is

³⁴Wiredu, Kwasi (2005) *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*.

almost unimaginable without a community to make it possible is a crucial and distinguishing point of contrast between African and other philosophical traditions, especially the Western variety' (2010:134). In a similar vein, Ikuenobe claims that 'this conception of personhood is plausible only because of the notion of community and its place in people's normative and conceptual scheme' (2006:118).³⁵

Given the huge influence of this worldview in determining what counts as an African theory of personhood, it is worth assessing the independent plausibility of the claim that the African worldview is indeed communalistic.³⁶ In line with Teffo and Roux, 'it is not enough for Africans to state that their perspective is a social or communitarian one; the views have to be explained, substantiated, and the implications for metaphysical thinking of such an approach have to be worked out' (2003:173). Quite surprisingly, there is a distinct lack of critical material by way of defense of the claim. What one finds in the literature, however, is a mere appeal to the communal nature of persons as a way of both explaining and substantiating the idea that the worldview of Africans is communalistic.

This is done by appealing strongly to the fact that persons are naturally social, which natural sociality is manifested in a shared way of life characterized by the ideology of mutual aid, voluntary and cooperative labour, generosity, reciprocity, and the fulfillment of

³⁵See also Dzobo (1992:132). As far as I am aware, Gyekye (1992) and (1997) champions the distinctive and somewhat obscure view that the communalistic orientation of the African worldview engenders a concept of person that is only *partly* communal, whatever this may mean. I contest this view in Chapter Four where I examine the question of what should be the appropriate relationship between individual and community.

³⁶This is even more pressing since Masolo has suggested out that African philosophers tend not to provide a rational defense of the view that the African worldview is indeed communitarian in its orientation (2004a: 490). See also Didier Kaphagawani (2004) who argues that the communal priority thesis as expressed by Mbiti lacks validity.

assigned duties etc. All these are then taken as evidence and given enormous emphasis in a bid to drive home the point that the African worldview is indeed communalistic. Representative examples of this approach to establishing the claim that African worldview is communalistic are Wiredu (1992:193–206) and Dzobo (1992:132). Elsewhere, Wiredu’s answer to the question of whether traditional African societies were communitarian is that ‘In terms of feeling and sentiment, people are brought up to develop a sense of bonding with large groups of relatives at home and outside it from very early childhood’ (2008:333). In fact, Wiredu explicitly states that the communitarianism of ‘traditional African society can be read off the traditional conception of personhood. Masolo (2009:45) refers with approval to Julius Nyerere’s suggestion that belief in the African communal worldview can be grounded by appeal to the *attitudes* of African peoples and in a comparable fashion Jomo Kenyatta declares that ‘The Spirit of collectivism was much ingrained in the *mind of the people*’ (1965:180, my emphasis). Elsewhere, Kenyatta stressed the ‘Gikuyu ways of thinking’ on his way to claiming that individual ‘uniqueness is a secondary fact’ relative to the fact that an individual is ‘first and foremost... other people’s relative and several people’s contemporary’ (Kenyatta 1965:297).³⁷

But herein lies the rub—the communitarian and normative view of personhood is explained and justified by reference to a communal worldview, which is itself explained and justified in terms of the communitarian account of personhood or the nature and

³⁷Menkiti’s defense of the thesis that the African worldview is communalistic takes a different approach and so it is not guilty of the charge of circularity leveled here. I address Menkiti’s case shortly. Alternatively, it is possible to attempt to establish that the African worldview is communalistic by appealing to proverbs as Gyekye (1997:37–38) does. But I do not engage this approach further since as Gyekye’s own analysis shows there are many other proverbs that suggest the opposite.

attitudes of persons. This reasoning seems to me to be circular. By circular reasoning, I mean a kind of reasoning that tries to reach a conclusion that is based upon a premise in which that very conclusion is contained. The justification for the African communalistic worldview is viciously circular precisely because it tries to defend the plausibility of that worldview by appeal to facts about the nature of persons that already presume that worldview. By attempting to establish belief in that worldview on the basis of the communal nature of persons, this method of justification relies on the very fact it is supposed to establish. This sort of method cannot provide appropriate grounding because it merely restates what it presumes, whereas acceptable forms of reasoning should be informative proceeding as it were from what is known to what is unknown. But because it presumes what it is seeks to establish, substantiating the truth of that worldview by appealing to the communitarian nature of persons, this form of reasoning like all forms of circular reasoning, is uninformative and adds no new knowledge whatsoever.³⁸

An alternative strategy adopted in the attempt to explain and justify the communalistic worldview proceeds by way of appeal to supposedly independent collective facts like a ‘communal gene pool’, ‘common language’ and ‘genealogy’. These collective facts are held to explain the reality of the individual person, thus seemingly making good the claim that a collective or communalistic worldview is what informs any credible African theory of the individual person. This approach is given expression in Menkiti’s defense of the

³⁸Another way to express the point being made here is by stating that the reasoning underlying the supposed justification of communalistic orientation of African worldview is question-begging. To beg the question is to assume in one’s response the very answer that is sought. To claim that the communalistic orientation of African worldview is based on the communal nature of persons, which is said to be a consequence of that worldview, is to assume the very fact that required justification in the first place.

normative conception of personhood. In his view, ‘What is more, the sense of self-identity which the individual comes to possess cannot be made sense of except by reference to these collective facts’. He then adds that ‘just as the navel points men to umbilical linkage with generations preceding them, so also does language and its associated social rules point them to a mental commonwealth with others whose life histories encompass the past, present, and future’ (1984:172).

Notice that these so-called collective facts are invoked to explain the reality of individual persons, and as such their existence must be independent of persons. It is only if they are taken to be independently existing facts that they can adequately explain the derivative nature of individual persons. But on closer inspection, it becomes clear that these alleged collective facts are logically and constitutively dependent on individual persons. It is impossible to make sense of a common language, a communal gene pool and genealogy without positing individual persons as both the originators and primary contributors to them. Doing so, however, makes the reality of individual persons antecedent to these facts. Put differently, how can we really make intelligible the claim that a common language, gene pool and a genealogy precede and exist independently of individual persons—having, as it were, lives of their own? It is hard to believe that these facts exist prior to and independently of persons, who by necessity are the originators and primary contributors to the evolution of any human language, a genealogy and the constitution of a collective gene pool. Gyekye has made expressed this point powerfully. He argues that

The possibility of reevaluation means, surely, that the individual is not absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus but can to some extent wriggle out of it, distance herself from it, and thus be in a position to take a critical look at it... The creation and historical development of human culture result from the exercise by individuals of this capacity for self-assertion; it is this capacity that makes possible the intelligibility of the autonomous individual choice of goals and life plans ... That is, changes in culture often reflect, or at least begin in, the self-assertive enterprise. The capacity for self-assertion that the individual can exercise presupposes, and in fact derives from, the autonomous nature of the person (1997:54).

Clearly, Gyekye's point is that the individual's role in the continuous shaping and development of the community and its culture suggests that the latter are not prior to the individual. Such collective facts, in other words, are rendered intelligible by positing the autonomous individual and her capacity for self-assertion, as he calls it, at their origins.

Thus, if I am right that the logic underlying the explanation and defense of communalistic orientation of the African worldview is viciously circular, and that the other alternative (notably by Menkiti) that attempts to establish that claim fail, then it seems to follow that the adequacy of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood, which relies heavily on the credibility of that worldview, is not a foregone conclusion. There is a further reason why we should be less optimistic of whatever utility this conception of personhood

may be said to have. This has to do with the question whether it is warranted at all—I wish to argue that the second arm of the two-tiered conception of personhood is redundant and thus should be dispensed with.

It seems to me that *the* foundational intuition that an acceptable African (or otherwise) theory of personhood ought to capture is the insight that the concept of person necessarily generates a set of entitlements and obligations applicable to all those to whom the concept appropriately designates. The reason I think this intuition is foundational is that all the exponents of the varied African conceptions of personhood are agreed on this point. This is why they are all keen to integrate the idea of a sense of accountability in the assortment of definitions of person they propose. But more importantly, all the evidence suggests that the second tier of personhood was proposed primarily to explain why it is the case that individual persons in a communal setting have obligations towards others. This emphasis on obligations that attach to personhood was in turn meant to reinforce the communal structure.³⁹ If this is correct, then the question that immediately arises is this: do we really need to initiate a second level of communitarian and normative personhood with all its assumptions and implications in order to ground a view of personhood that adequately captures the intuition that facts about personhood create obligations for persons? I think not—I believe that we can explain and justify this intuition by relying solely on the first tier (i.e. metaphysical view) of the two-tiered conception. To the extent that we can

³⁹See the discussion of this point in Ajume Wingo's (2008) Akan philosophy of personhood.

achieve this, we would have shown that it is indeed excessive to posit a second level of personhood.⁴⁰

Recall that the central claim in any view which falls under the designation of ‘metaphysical view’ as employed in this discussion, is that any entity that counts as a person in this sense possesses some property on the basis of which fundamental value in the form of dignity is attributed to that entity. Persons, in this sense, are the bearers of intrinsic value and the subjects of basic inalienable rights and entitlements in virtue of possessing the *okra*, *emi* or some other metaphysical equivalent. What emerges from these general observations is a range of negative and positive duties attached to the definition of person as the subject of basic rights and entitlements. For if persons are the subjects of basic inalienable rights, then by inference they are agents with full moral status. An implication of having full moral status is that persons are to be treated with the respect demanded by their special status as agents. In this way, we can make sense of a range of obligations owed to persons in virtue of being agents, which agency is explained in terms of the metaphysical features I have been pointing to.

On the pain of presupposing a collective to whom the individual person owes specific duties, we may express the obligation that attaches to personhood counterfactually: *if there were other entities to whom the value of dignity attaches inherently, an entity so endowed*

⁴⁰At best, this second level has some other function. In Chapter Three, I suggest that this second level of personhood is about *manhood/womanhood* rather than personhood. That is, it may be that the second tier imposes further gender-specific obligations on individuals but it fails to capture how it is that individuals are persons.

would be prohibited from violating the dignity of an entity of comparable worth.

Expressing the point this way means that we need not assume the independent reality of a collective in order to explain why it is the case that moral obligations can proceed from the fact of personhood. Unlike in the communitarian and normative conception of personhood, flouting this basic ‘obligation of personhood’ doesn’t result in a loss of personhood, even if it may permit certain ways of restricting the freedom of the violator.

This way of thinking about persons employs the same logic that underlies Kant’s construal of the person as the subject of reason and autonomy, to whom basic dignity attaches and thus cannot be treated as a means merely to some predefined end. In essence, Kant derives the humanity principle which places a basic obligation of respect for all persons, simply because they are persons. It is not at all surprising, then, that Gyekye’s rendition of the Akan metaphysical view of the person favourably employs Kant’s notion of person as ends, ensuring that a definition of person could at once not presuppose the priority of the community while also sufficiently capturing our intuitions about how the concept of personhood generates obligations for persons.⁴¹ Similarly, this way of thinking about persons bears some resemblance to Mill’s insight that we need not ground social obligations on a presumed hypothetical social contract, since they can be generated

⁴¹It is important to reiterate that I am simply putting forward the basic contours of a theory of personhood that precludes the second-tier in what I have been describing as the two-tiered conception. On this view, the community, if it plays any role at all, is merely secondary since its value derives from the ultimate value intrinsic to the nature of individual persons.

immediately by appeal to the harm principle, which principle is grounded on facts about the dignity and inherent value of persons.⁴²

Advocates of the communitarian and normative conception of African thought may not find the foregoing appealing for several reasons, not least because it accords a secondary and derivative role to facts about the community and thus eliminates the sharp divide they seek to establish between African and Western approaches to construing personhood. By way of response, let me make two related points quickly. First, any such discontent would rely in part on the assumption that what is distinctively African must be consistent with a communalistic worldview and be sufficiently opposed to whatever is deemed Western. But these assumptions are untenable. Second, the onus is on the supporters of the view of personhood under scrutiny to show that there is an independently plausible basis for supposing that whatever is truly African is by virtue of that also communalistic in orientation, that the communitarian and normative conception captures some significant intuition, besides the contested assumption that the community is prior to the individual, that cannot be explained by the metaphysical one.

In the meantime, what I propose here is that if it is indeed the case that the intuition that personhood is a term that imposes specific obligations on individual persons that the communitarian and normative conception of person seeks to make sense of is well

⁴²If the social contract is seen as the theoretical analogue of the community, then it becomes quite easy to see the parallels between the strategy of Mill's rejection of the social contract and my proposal that we need not initiate a second level of personhood to explain and justify intuitions that are sufficiently catered for by this first level of personhood.

established among Africans (and perhaps non-Africans as well), and if it is the case that we can account for this intuition in our conceptual scheme without any positing a second level of personhood, then doing just that and proposing a two-tiered conception of personhood strikes me as excessive and unwarranted.

1.6. Conclusion

In general, I have advanced a basic underlying claim—that is, a certain way of thinking about personhood, embodied in the communitarian and normative conception, which is the second arm of the two-tiered conception, imperils the development and grounding of a comprehensive and coherent theory of individual rights in African thought. This way of thinking about personhood is captured by the second tier of the two-tiered conception that I have been examining. Because it takes as basic the communal principle in the definition of personhood, it could not possibly explain why rights are entitlements of individuals and why such entitlements may not be overridden for reason of collective interest. I suggested that the inability of the relevant conception of personhood to ground rights properly constitutes a good reason why we should dispense with it. Additionally, I pointed out that the intuition that this second tier of personhood seeks to capture—the intuition that personhood is a forensic concept generating entitlements and corresponding obligation for entities designated as persons—can be adequately accounted for by reference to the first tier of the two-tiered account of personhood. For these reasons, I concluded that the second tier of personhood appears to be gratuitous.

Another central aspect of the case I have advanced relates to what I have already described as the communal priority thesis. In this connection, I argued that the basic idea that underpins the second tier of personhood namely, the view that African cultures are communalistic has not been sufficiently motivated. Consequently, the status of the claim is somewhat suspect. And so also the claim that the appropriate conception of personhood in African thought is the one that is communalistic. Throughout, I maintained that a theory of personhood does not fail to be properly African simply because it doesn't integrate something about communalism or assigns secondary importance to it.⁴³

In what follows, I examine further the communitarian and normative idea of personhood with a different emphasis in mind. In particular, I (1) wonder whether the motivation for the communitarian and normative idea of personhood is more a matter of a power struggle than a search for a plausible conception and (2) contend that the fact that communitarian and normative personhood depends heavily on the social power differentials among individuals in community crucially undercuts the communitarian supposition that traditional communal societies are egalitarian.

⁴³I advance what I see as a similar point in chapter 5 of this dissertation. There, I argue against the supposition that a conception of right is properly African *if* it takes the community principle to be basic in the definition of human rights.

Chapter Two

2. Personhood and Social Power in African Thought⁴⁴

2.1. Introduction

Anthropologist Paul Riesman has noted that ‘the creation of meaning in a society—including the meanings of womanhood, manhood, personhood, etc.—may usually or even always involve a power struggle.’ (1996:91). In making this observation, it is not entirely clear that Riesman was offering a criticism of the emerging conceptions of personhood, womanhood and manhood. What is clear is that that observation is borne out by the available anthropological evidence he samples. The evidence unambiguously points very broadly to the deep connections between ‘the creation of meaning’ and power. My aim is to explore one aspect of this connection—specifically the relationship between a widely received conception of personhood and power. I have in mind the idea that personhood is socially acquired or that it is something that can be had in concert with others. This idea of personhood is the upshot of the communitarian valuation of community as ontologically, morally and epistemologically prior to the individual.⁴⁵

⁴⁴A slightly modified version of this chapter has been published in *AlterNation* (Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa) (2013a), 20(1): 203–228. I am grateful to two anonymous referees for their critical comments on an earlier version of the article.

⁴⁵The claim is powerfully expressed by Menkiti who asserts that in African thought ‘...the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be’ (Menkiti 1984:171). See also, Kenyatta 1965:180 and Senghor 1964a:49, 93–94. Many other African philosophers subscribe quite generally to the view that community, rather than individual, is the axiomatic principle around which all other facts revolve.

The communitarian conception of personhood has received substantial treatment by African philosophers. Although significant contributions have been made by way of illuminating this idea of personhood, its connection to power remains underexplored. I intend, by means of a careful application of philosophy to anthropology, to make sense of Riesman's observation and thereby attempt to repair this obvious lack.

I pursue two distinct lines of exploration in order to establish the connection between personhood and power. In section 2.2, I suggest that a non-epistemic motivation, which I identify as a struggle for power, underlies the search for and articulation of a distinctive African conception of personhood. I try to achieve this by showing that when examined through the prism of African philosophy as a 'counter-colonial practice', theorizing about a distinctively African (community based) view of personhood betrays a struggle for power. Or, alternatively, a struggle to reaffirm a distinctive African meaning of what it means to be a person against colonial definitions. I illustrate this struggle for power by examining ethnophilosophy as a theoretical approach born out of resistance against Western imperialism. I then suggest that this sort of desire is what seems to underpin the search for a distinctive African conception of personhood.

In section 2.3, I provide details of the relevant conception of personhood and then show that it is contingent upon social power differentials among individuals along familiar lines of social class, seniority and gender. Throughout this section, I make clear the communitarian assumption that personhood cannot be abstracted from the actual social relations that constitute the social space in which individuals evolve into persons. Having

shown that gender is one of the categories upon which the idea of personhood as socially generated depends, I consider, in section 2.4, some potential objections to the idea that gender is a social category on the basis of which conclusions about differences in access to social power can be established. In particular, I examine Oyeronke Oyewumi's objection that gender is not a principle of social organization in Africa and Ifi Amadiume's objection that the existence of gender as a social category doesn't support the claim that gender inequality was part of African culture. These theorists enter the debate by examining the Yoruba culture and Nnobi society respectively. By contesting their positions, I attempt to reinforce my claim in the previous section that the social category of gender is one of the sources of unequal power distributions among individuals.

I argue in section 2.5 that recognizing the deep connections between power and personhood, especially the fact that the relevant conception of personhood is contingent on unequal power relations, shouldn't leave unaffected our judgment about that conception of personhood. Accordingly, I draw attention to something I find paradoxical in the attempt to define personhood as socially conditioned. More specifically, I argue that the view of personhood as contingent upon social power differentials among individuals in community flies in the face of the tacit assumption, by proponents of the relevant conception of personhood, of an egalitarian social context in which individuals acquire personhood. In the end, I suggest that equality is a basic moral ideal that cannot be plausibly grounded on a conception that takes empirical facts about the status of individuals in community to be definitive of personhood. In other words, if what matters for personhood are facts about social class, seniority and gender—all of which are categories that highlight differences in

individual access to social power—then it is hard for such a conception to account for how and why it is the case that persons are morally equal.

2.2. A Non-Epistemic Basis for Communal Selfhood

Rosalind Shaw has pointed out that African notions of personhood have often been used as foils for Western notions of personhood (2002:25).⁴⁶ The primary motivation for this is in part couched in the long history of Western denigration of African modes of thought. As a reaction, African intellectuals rallied around the idea of difference in giving content to the theories and philosophies that emerge in the period ushering in independence and beyond. One subject matter in which this assertion of difference is especially noticeable is in the theorization of self.

One widely received conception of personhood is the communitarian/normative conception. It has indeed often been used as a foil against Western notions of personhood. Descartes' attempt to locate personhood in some static quality, namely the capacity for thought, has frequently been chosen as representative of the Western conception of personhood. What's important, though, is not so much the content of Descartes' conception of personhood as such but the methodological approach within which it figures. That approach to the question of personhood follows an easily recognizable pattern. This involves the identification of some isolated quality of which the human being is in

⁴⁶Similarly, Kaphagawani, commenting on the communitarian conception of self, observes that the 'the communalist thesis thus sets itself up as the antithesis to the Cartesian individualist notions of self...' (2000:74). I should point out that even individualist conceptions of personhood may be driven by a non-epistemic agenda. My claim here that the communitarian idea of personhood is so motivated turns not just on the suggestion that it is non-epistemically motivated but also that it is questionable on other grounds.

possession. This quality is taken to be definitive of what it means to be a person, such that an entity lacking the said characteristic is, by virtue of that lack, excluded from the community of persons. Take, for instance, Harry Frankfurt's (1971) view of person as an entity with the capacity for second-order volition or the capacity to form effective second-order desires. An entity lacking this specific capacity is not a person, in Frankfurt's view, since it lacks the essential feature that matters for personhood. Many African communitarian thinkers believe that this methodological approach to accounting for personhood stands in sharp contrast to the African one, which they insist focuses not intrinsic facts about personal constitution but on extrinsic facts, like the quality of one's relationships with others.

In this connection, Placide Tempels' project, which aimed at articulating a distinctive theory of personhood on behalf of the Baluba, marks the beginning of a major shift away from the Western approach to personhood. The motivation for the project has been called into question by several philosophers; in particular, some take it to be fundamentally aligned to the colonialist agenda.⁴⁷ Beyond these concerns, however, Tempels' *Bantu* philosophy remains historically relevant, being crucial to the emergence of contemporary African philosophy, and the content of the philosophy he articulates has provoked several exciting philosophical debates. At the end of this section, I shall briefly discuss some of the very lively protestations against Tempels' Bantu philosophy, which, along with other similar philosophical approaches, has been condescendingly branded ethnophilosophy by Paulin Hountondji. In the meantime, it is worth noting that Tempels interpreted the Baluba

⁴⁷See, for instance, Aime Cesaire's political criticism of Ethnophilosophy as an attempt to create a diversion away from the real political issues that confronted Africans.

as holding the belief that personhood depends on the possession of vital force and that the measure of one's vital force ultimately depends on the quality of relationships one has with others. On this approach, then, personhood isn't merely the result of possessing some specific quality, as is the case in Western philosophy, particularly the Cartesian variety, but is defined essentially in reference to others.

Notice, then, the substantial modification to the Western approach. The value of personhood no longer depends on the mere possession of some characteristic internal to the constitution of the individual; the basis of personhood is ultimately located in something extrinsic viz. the quality of one's relationships with others. On the idea that being a person is at bottom a function of the quality of relationships the person maintains with others, Tempels writes,

The concept of separate being... entirely independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought. Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship... For the Bantu there is interaction of being, that is to say, of force with force (1959:58).

But Tempels is not alone in thinking that the African meaning of personhood differs substantially from the Western one or that in contrast to the latter, personhood in African thought is defined in reference to others. Perhaps, the clearest expression of that idea is Mbiti's widely cited play on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). Since personhood is not dependent on the mere possession of the capacity for thought but is a

function of maintaining vital relationships with others in community, the individual, according to Mbiti, must say ‘I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am’(1969:109). In this way, he locates the individual person, contra Descartes, not in the isolated occurrence of thought, but in dynamic relationships with others thus reinforcing the view that personhood is something that can only be had in concert with others—that is to say, in community.

But Mbiti’s rather captivating phrase would be believable if only it were plausible. As far as I am aware, it was the Malawian philosopher Didier Kaphagawani who first stumbled upon the incoherence of Mbiti’s claim. Holding it up to its Cartesian counterpart, Kaphagawani ingeniously observed that although the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* retains a certain pretence to logical validity, since a supporting premiss can be plausibly constructed to establish its conclusion, the same cannot be said of Mbiti’s claim. The point is that Mbiti’s widely cited claim fails the simple test of validity since there couldn’t possibly be a coherent helping premise to establish the conclusion the argument seeks to reach.⁴⁸ Kaphagawani writes that ‘[a]lthough the *cogito* argument could have pretensions of validity when provided ‘Whatever thinks exists’ as a suppressed premiss, I find it difficult to imagine quite what suppressed premiss would render Mbiti’s argument valid’. (2004:337–8).

⁴⁸The point being made here should be readily available to those who already understand the basics of logic. For those who may not fully grasp the point, it is crucial to closely consider Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, to clearly illustrate the point. The proposition, ‘I think therefore I am’ is a valid (as opposed to sound) argument when a helping premise is added to it. That helping premise is, ‘whatever thinks exists’. It is the truth of the claims, ‘I think’ and ‘whatever thinks exists’ that makes possible the conclusion ‘I am’ or ‘I exist’. Kaphagawani’s criticism of Mbiti is that unlike Descartes’ there is no coherent helping premise that can be added to give validity to Mbiti’s claim.

It should go without saying that Kaphagawani's criticism of Mbiti's claim is a very powerful one. Yet, my interest is not so much in Mbiti's incoherent claim as such but rather in the implication of that incoherence for the idea that personhood is ultimately a function of individual dependence on community—something which Mbiti's claim sought to capture. For if Kaphagawani is right, then the least one would expect from proponents of this view of personhood is an attempt to rescue the thesis from the apparent illogicality. Anything short of rescue would imply a total rejection of the thesis. What we notice, however, is a total disregard of the problematic captured in Kaphagawani's criticism. Subsequent defenders of Tempels' and Mbiti's original idea have conveniently sidestepped the problem of establishing the validity of the thesis, preferring instead to expatiate on the logically dubious claim.⁴⁹ Perhaps, this is what Masolo had in mind when he pointed out that African philosophers do not 'give an analytical account of their claim that African societies were communitarian in their social-political ethic. Instead, it is merely asserted as an abiding truth...' (2004:490). Although the claim fails the simplest test of logic (i.e. validity), and in spite of its obvious illogic, it is uncritically embraced and still widely employed. The claim 'I am because we are' is bandied everywhere as a distinctive African contribution to knowledge.⁵⁰

⁴⁹For some examples of African philosophers and thinkers who have drawn on Mbiti's thesis or who in general endorse the position that the collective is ontologically, epistemologically and morally prior to the individual see Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984 and 2006); Kwame Nkrumah (1966); Julius Nyerere (1968b); Leopold Senghor (1998); Augustine Shutte (2001); Desmond Tutu (1999); Tsenay Serequeberhan (1991) and Yusufu Turaki (2006).

⁵⁰The maxim 'I am because we are', which also sometimes goes under the name of *ubuntu*, has been applied in management, spirituality, journalism and arts. See, for example, Wilson Maina (2008); Augustine Shutte (2001); David Lutz (2009); Heinz Kimmerle (2006); Patrick Kalilombe (1994); Musa Dube (2009) and Thaddeus Metz & Joseph Gaie (2010).

But why is this so in spite of its failure to stand the test of logic? I diagnose this apparent indifference to the logical status of the claim as facilitated by a non-epistemic motivation. I begin from what I deem to be an uncontroversial premise that what has come to be known as African philosophy, at least in its contemporary and written form, is situated within the historically strained relationship between Africa and the West—a relationship that is characterized by various unpleasant moments, including especially colonialism, which typifies the encounter between the two.⁵¹ As a result, then, contemporary African philosophy, which is a product of this encounter, exists first and foremost as a ‘counter colonial practice’ since it is in part the response by the colonized to the negative effects of colonialism. This idea is firmly rooted in Emmanuel Eze’s view on African philosophy:

The idea of “African philosophy” as a field of inquiry thus has its contemporary roots in the effort of African thinkers to combat political and economic exploitations, and to examine, question, and contest identities imposed upon them by Europeans. The claims and counter-claims, justifications and alienations that characterize such historical and conceptual protests and contestations indelibly mark the discipline of African philosophy (1998:217).

If African philosophy is born out of these protestations and contestations, then negritude as a philosophical movement typifies this feature of African philosophy, for not only does it

⁵¹I am by no means claiming that African philosophy in its present form is always an expression of resistance, in the sense of defining itself against the other—typically the West. Instead, the point I am making is that these two approaches—negritude and ethnophilosophy typify that aspect of African philosophy.

elevate to the status of philosophy the quest of the once subjugated to free themselves completely from the grips of imperialism, but more importantly, it opens up an avenue for its proponents to sustain the resistance against the metaphysical and cultural misidentification to which Africa and Africans have been subjected by the forces of imperialism.⁵² In other words, negritude addresses itself at once as an ideology of difference and resistance, albeit one that implicitly accepts the very Eurocentric assumptions to which it is opposed⁵³. Similar remarks apply to the practice of what has come to be known as ethnophilosophy, which reflects a retreat, a 'return to the source' as a way of validating and reaffirming the African identity. In both cases, it is hard to miss the fact that these ideologies are not merely driven by a search for truth but instead by a powerful desire to resist and assert difference. Unsurprisingly, then, those who champion Mbiti's claim as definitive of African personhood are less likely to substantiate it since the primary function of that assertion is merely to relocate the African in a perceived power struggle between Africa and the West.

But if the motive behind these movements (negritude and ethnophilosophy) had their justification in history, their philosophical status remained suspect as shown by the varied

⁵²I should point out that my primary aim is not to offer an extensive discussion on the content of Senghor's theory of negritude, which may be read as constitutive of several layers including an account on the collective character of race, especially the African race, a conception of knowledge, in which African epistemology is characterized in terms of 'Emotions' and radically distinguished from Western ways of knowing, which Senghor characterizes in terms of 'Reason'. Senghor explicitly states that 'The reason of classical Europe is analytic ... the reason of African negro, intuitive...' (1995:121). See also Senghor (1964b and 1967). My primary aim is to identify the motivation of Senghor's negritude, which bears important parallels with what I shall be describing as a non-epistemic motive underlying the search for a distinctive, African communitarian notion of personhood. Abiola Irele's own remarks lead us close to what that motive is: 'The very terms [Senghor] employs reflect his motivation, for they amount, in fact, to an elucidation of African difference and its passionate justification' (1996:18).

⁵³This latter point has been made by Irele (1996).

criticisms leveled against them. What this reveals, of course, is that the creation of meaning is not always at the service of truth; it can sometimes draw its force from non-epistemic sources, particularly, as in this case, the motive of resistance and cultural reaffirmation. I should note that in drawing attention to negritude and ethnophilosophy, my interest is not necessarily to affirm or negate these philosophical movements but to merely illustrate how a non-epistemic motive can provide the undercurrent for an ideology.

The point I making here is that if the history and practice of African philosophy itself reflects a struggle for power, and if that philosophy was largely sustained, at least in its early stages, by this non-epistemic motive, then it seems likely that even the content of that philosophy should also reflect this struggle for power. Indeed, my submission is that the search for a unique and distinctive theory of African personhood and the overall preoccupation with difference that characterizes the often strident defense of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood betrays the same kind of motivation that spurred the articulation and defense of negritude and ethnophilosophy. There is good reason to think that it is the need for cultural reaffirmation of the African identity and a power struggle against the forces of imperialism, which once had a powerful hold on meaning, are what underlie at least in part the view of personhood as culturally and communally engendered. And although this motive may have acquired its legitimacy in history, it is nevertheless true that its utility in contemporary discourse has diminished.

I have been arguing that proponents of the communitarian conception of self endorsed their assertions not by appealing to the epistemic validity of the claim (e.g. Mbiti's

communitarian dictum ‘I am because we are’) underlying the view that selfhood is socially engendered, but by appealing to the need to reassert the African identity, which had been thoroughly decimated by the intellectual forces of imperialism. But it is worth adding that much of the protestations against ethnophilosophy, which, as I indicated earlier, was precipitated by Tempels’ Bantu Philosophy, mirror my central point—that is, that the notion of a communal self (or alternatively, the communalism that underlies that notion of selfhood) lacked theoretical justification, but was propelled almost entirely by a non-epistemic motive, which I have identified as a struggle for power. Let me briefly review some of the critical comments on ethnophilosophy with the aim of showing that the denunciation of ethnophilosophical method was in part due to the fact that some of its assumptions lacked epistemic validity. One such assumption involves the idea of collectivity upon which ethnophilosophy hinges.

Consider, for instance, Hountondji’s theoretical criticism of ethnophilosophy, which at bottom is a refutation of the unanimity that underlay it. If ethnophilosophy, as Appiah intimated, was founded on two central assumptions—the factual one, which attributes ‘some central body of ideas that is shared by Black Africans quite generally’ and the evaluative one, which is the view that ‘the recovery of this tradition is worthwhile’ (Appiah 1992:95), then Hountondji’s seemingly uncompromising theoretical censure of ethnophilosophy may be described as a repudiation of these two assumptions. A good part of Hountondji’s dissatisfaction targets the first assumption—the assumption of unanimity. He was keen to register the point that ethnophilosophy employed a vulgar use of the term philosophy, as indicating a collective, implicit and even unconscious belief system, and

that behind this meaning of philosophy ‘there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in ‘primitive societies’... everyone always agrees with everyone else’ (Hountondji 1983:60). For Hountondji, philosophy in its true sense cannot be found in the collective consciousness of a people, as an established body of truisms but in the discursive activity of individuals. In ethnophilosophical unanimism, Hountondji detected a certain acquiescence to a reified notion of the collective, the quite absurd inference that philosophy was a function of a collective consciousness or whole communities and a subsequent relegation of individual consciousness, which, on his view, should be the springboard for the emergence of a responsible discourse and of authentic philosophizing.

Importantly, Hountondji’s attack on the foundations of ethnophilosophical reason leaves us in no doubt whatsoever as to the underlying motive compelling the idea of a collective, unanimous philosophy. In his view, the motive was primarily non-epistemic and it explains why ‘so many African authors, in various tones and moods, struck up the Tempelsian theme...’ (1983: 48). Here is Hountondji,

We have already identified this desire: African intellectuals wanted at all costs to rehabilitate themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of Europe. To do so, they were prepared to leave no stone unturned, and they were only too happy to discover, through Tempels’ notorious Bantu Philosophy, a type of argumentation that

could, despite its ambiguities (or, rather, thanks to them), serve as one way of ensuring this rehabilitation. (1983: 48)

Hountondji's reference to ambiguities is worth noting. For, despite its theoretical inadequacies or ambiguities, which Hountondji locates in its assumption of unanimism, ethnophilosophical reason survived propelled by this non-epistemic motive: the desire to rehabilitate. Yet, Hountondji is not alone in holding ethnophilosophy up to scrutiny.

In his recent book, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010), DA Masolo devotes considerable attention to the same subject. His contribution to the debate on the status of ethnophilosophy is chiefly mediated through his interest in the role of indigenous knowledge systems in the global project of knowledge production. He shares this interest with Hountondji, who over the years has been the target of criticisms regarding what his critics perceived to be his refusal to accord any significance to local knowledge forms, which they believed ethnophilosophy exemplified. For the most part, Masolo and Hountondji are in agreement about the indispensability of indigenous knowledge forms as the basis for authentic development. Consequently, Masolo shows a deep appreciation for the idea that ethnophilosophical data provides an interesting starting point for philosophical analysis, while spurning the idea that that body of ideas constitutes a philosophy. Hountondji's more recent clarification in his *Struggle for Meaning* (2002) comes very close to Masolo's position, which, I believe, is also shared by Kwasi Wiredu (1980) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992). The latter notes that 'if philosophers are to contribute—at the conceptual level—to the solution of Africa's real problems, then

they need to begin with a deep understanding of the traditional conceptual worlds the vast majority of their fellow nationals inhabit ...what is wrong with the ethnophilosophers is that they have never gone beyond this essentially preliminary step' (1992:106).

Further, these scholars, in particular Masolo and Appiah, argue that the core assumption of an African world construed as a metaphysical entity upon which claims of unanimity are advanced represents a 'myth', an impulse that should be rejected. Masolo, recounting this aspect of Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy, argues that 'because it is unlikely that a whole community or nation will desire the same thing or desire any one thing for the same reason and goals, the notion of development as driven by unanimity about the objects of desire can only be [an] ideal at best' (2010:27). If the assumption of unanimity was a problematic feature in ethnophilosophical thought, and if, as we find in Hountondji and Appiah, that assumption derives from the belief in a collective consciousness or an African world metaphysically construed, then it seems to follow that the protestations against ethnophilosophy were in part protestations against not just unanimism but more importantly the idea of collectivity that engenders it. My contention is that this idea of collectivity undergirds the African communitarian conception of personhood under consideration. Put differently, Mbiti's dictum can best be understood as applying an idea of the collective as a metaphysical aggregate on which individual persons depend. And just as this idea in the context of personhood is not advanced on the basis of its epistemic merit but on what I have been calling a non-epistemic motive, so also the unanimism of ethnophilosophical thought.

By way of summary, then, there are two reasons motivating the hypothesis that the widely received communitarian notion of personhood is in part a reflection of a struggle for power. First, that conception of personhood hinges on a philosophically disputed claim about the ontological dependence of the individual on the community. Mbiti's claim, I have suggested, fails the test of validity and so its plausibility couldn't be the motivation behind the defense of the resulting communitarian and normative conception of personhood. I have tried to corroborate this claim by drawing attention to some of the vigorous criticisms of ethnophilosophical reason, in particular that strand of the trend that revolves around the idea of collective unanimism. Second, the need to assert difference and to reaffirm African culture emerges as a strong motive-candidate for the communitarian and normative conception of personhood. Combining these two insights, we arrive at the conclusion that the primary motivation of that conception of personhood is non-epistemic—a struggle for power and the need for cultural reaffirmation. It seems to me that this is one way we may make sense of Riesman's assertion that the creation of meaning, in this case the meaning of personhood, almost always involves a struggle for power.

2.3. The Social Basis of Personhood

Proponents of the communitarian and normative conception hold that personhood is socially engendered. This idea operates on the basic assumption that personhood, whatever it is, cannot be abstracted from social or communal facts. In other words, personhood cannot be conceived as separable from certain facts about how the social world of individuals is constituted. I intend to examine some of these social facts that are held to be person-determining with the aim of pointing out their direct link to social power. I take this

as an alternative way of establishing the link between the relevant notion of personhood and power; it will require examining closely the content of that conception.

If Placide Tempels and John Mbiti set out the metaphysical groundwork for the conception of personhood as socially engendered, then it was the Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti who provided the essential details regarding its content. His seminal paper 'Person and Community in African Thought' (1984) may be regarded as a *locus classicus* in the African literature on personhood. In this widely cited work, Menkiti laid out in remarkable clarity and some detail not only the worldview that gives metaphysical prop to the communitarian and normative conception of personhood but also the processes of how individuals are held to come to acquire and ultimately lose personhood.

Taking Mbiti's claim as his starting point, Menkiti distinguishes between African and Western conceptions of personhood, broadly labeling the latter as minimal and the former as maximal. The terminologies he employs in articulating the distinction are quite appropriate given what he has to say about the two approaches to personhood. Western conceptions are minimal precisely because they identify personhood with some static and isolated characteristic of which the human being is in possession. By definition, then, personhood in Western thought is a metaphysical given and the idea of its later acquisition makes little or no sense. It appears that Menkiti takes this possession criterion for determining personhood to be minimal because it sets the bar for personhood rather low by giving short shrift to the role community plays in shaping personal identity. By contrast, Menkiti believes that the African conception of personhood offers a maximal criterion

insofar as it does not merely assert that personhood is something that is metaphysically given but instead locates the criterion for full personhood in the active role the community plays in evolving individuals into persons.

This leads Menkiti to the conclusion that the African conception corresponds to the social production of persons: individuals start out as non-persons presumably and through prescribed processes of induction into society and socialization through various stages of development become persons. And Menkiti makes light work of the point arguing that ‘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 excellencies seen as truly definitive of [a person]’ (1984:172). The mere possession of some metaphysically given attribute doesn’t automatically qualify one as a member of the community of persons—a point Menkiti labours for most of the paper by alluding to the status of children as non-persons who through various predefined social processes come to attain the status of person. All these lead to the question of what transpires in the intervening points in the personhood continuum.

Menkiti’s paper may be read as a direct response to the question—indeed, what is particularly fascinating about the paper is the manner in which he details the process by which individuals make the transition to personhood. To my mind, and for my present purposes, it is this aspect of Menkiti’s undertaking that elicits philosophical interest as it opens up opportunities for exploring from a different angle the connection between this

notion of personhood and power. For in detailing the route to acquiring personhood in community, Menkiti may have inadvertently revealed not only the conditions of individuals in community but more importantly the nature of the social space in which individuals through established cultural practices come to acquire personhood. Exploring the structure of that social space, which ostensibly engenders personhood, as well as the various processes involved in the acquisition of personhood in the sense at issue, is the key to working out the interplay between personhood and power.

I should reiterate that my aim in this section is merely to demonstrate that the view of personhood as socially engendered rests heavily on the social power differentials among individuals in community. In demonstrating this hypothesis, my strategy is to identify various constitutive elements of social space and to establish the varied relations each one bears to the notion of personhood under consideration.

Take, for instance, the connection Menkiti draws between personhood and seniority, which, coupled with epistemic access, is a necessary condition for acquiring maximal personhood. In his view, it is impossible to make the transition from the status of non-person to person without having epistemic access to the values and overall knowledge base of one's culture: '[t]hat 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. As an Igbo proverb has it, "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up"' (1984:173). It is worth noting that this alleged link between age (and/or seniority) and

personhood has been questioned, particularly by Gyekye (1997:49). Yet, my immediate aim is not to develop a criticism of the conception of personhood but rather to point out how that conception of personhood depends on the differentials in social power among individuals.

The point here is related to Kaphagawani's suggestion that the conception of personhood as socially engendered relies heavily on the 'epistemological monopoly' of the old over the young (2004:338). For if knowledge is power in the sense that possessing it affords individuals epistemic access to culture as the ultimate prescriber of norms, then individuals who have knowledge occupy a position of power relative to individuals who don't (i.e. lack epistemic access). This means that personhood, which is dependent on seniority, which is itself necessary for acquiring social power in the form of epistemic access, must ultimately depend on the differentials of social power. The point is that the more access to knowledge one has, the more of a person one is. Or, alternatively, the more elderly one is, the more of a person one is. But while this observation doesn't by itself raise specific difficulties for this conception of personhood, it is enough to demonstrate that the relevant conception of personhood is contingent on the differential in social power—in this case, the social determinant being seniority and epistemic access.

Another aspect of culture that is causally linked to personhood is an individual's social standing, since according to Menkiti one's station in community plays a crucial role in the notion of personhood as socially acquired (1984:172). This connection is borne out by the evidence put forward by social anthropologists. Riesman points out that among the

Lugbara, for instance, the title of personhood is determined by social standing, the determining factor being whether or not individuals occupy social positions that will allow them to transit into ancestorhood after death. Similarly, among the Songhay an individual's social standing determines the set of standards to which that individual must comply and consequently the expectations society has of that individual. Thus, as Riesman notes, the 'stereotypically "noble," "dignified" behaviour of the master, and the "shameless" behaviour of the captive are thus understood as an expression of their different social statuses' (1996:100). Accordingly, the degree of personhood individuals possess is a function of their social status.

But there are other ways in which individual social standing in community can be cashed out. I have in mind the particular socio-economic class to which individuals belong. For example, people who are wealthy or are so perceived would naturally be more powerful than those who are not. Since personhood is contingent upon intragroup recognition, and wealth and position are more likely to attract social recognition, those in the esteemed social class are more likely to attain higher degrees of personhood. A slave is less likely than his master to receive social recognition and affirmation because of his social standing in the community, and if these factors are constitutive of social structure, then a view of personhood as socially engendered must be contingent upon them.⁵⁴ The point here is that if personhood is a function of individual standing in society and if that social space reflects deep differences in the social standing of individuals, whether economic or otherwise, then

⁵⁴See Gail Presbey's 'Maasai Concepts of Personhood: the Roles of Recognition, Community, and Individuality' (2002) for a detailed discussion of the point that personhood in African thought is fundamentally a matter of intragroup recognition.

the resulting conception of personhood must be grounded on such differences. In other words, unequal personhood should be the consequence of unequal socio-economic standing.

One final relation worth considering is that between ritual/socialization practices and personhood—a relation Menkiti suggests is necessary, if not sufficient, for personhood in the maximal sense. He claims that ‘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 ... become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term’ (1984:173). He is even more strident when making the point that, ‘Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere dangles to whom the description ‘person’ does not fully apply’ (172). All this implies that one couldn’t possibly be a person without undergoing certain prescribed processes of induction, through rites of initiation and other socialization processes, into some actual community. But not only is the relation between rituals/socialization practices and personhood a necessary one, according to Menkiti, it is also causal since these processes *can* transform the individual as it were from the status of non-person to person, thus executing a qualitative change in the individual.

Yet, the received wisdom in social anthropology is that even these processes of ritual incorporation and socialization cannot be easily cast simply in gender-neutral terms. Consider, for example, Herbert’s suggestion that rites of initiation are structured with a special sensitivity to gender. She suggests that in general various rites of passage are

typically overseen by full-fledged members of community of comparable gender. Thus, the ritualistic passage from boyhood to manhood falls primarily within the province of the men in the community. It is under their tutelage that a young boy learns the requisite social skills and rules of behavior befitting a man as his culture defines it. According to Herbert, this is also true in the case of 'girl's initiation, which as a rebirth into adult womanhood, orchestrated by women, falls entirely within their natural domain' (1993:229). The practice of ritual incorporation and the on-going socialization processes in community are not gender neutral, and so being necessarily related to these social determinants, personhood must also be contingent on them. Moreover, the structure of social space also reveals other forms of distinctions along the lines of gender.

As Riesman recounts, '[I]n Nuer social life, men and women observe not only a strict division of labour in connection with cattle and religion but also a differentiated code of behaviour in which the man is always supposed to show greater self-mastery than woman' (1996:98). What this clearly implies is that rules of behaviour and social expectations, and by extension individual responsibilities that are expressive of them, are couched in a language that is sensitive to gender.⁵⁵ Yet, if compliance to these gendered social rules of behaviour and expectations constitute a necessary condition for acquiring personhood in community, as Menkiti suggests, then it seems to follow once again that this notion of

⁵⁵As I discuss in some detail in the next chapter, Achebe's portrayal of a fictional African culture shows that it is socially organized mainly on the basis of gender, such that individual responsibilities are correspondingly gendered. For instance, in one passage we are informed that in the depicted Umuofia culture the responsibility of carrying a man's stool is the male preserve of a son (Achebe 1994:31). While I argue in this chapter that gender is one of the categories upon which the communitarian idea of personhood depends, in Chapter Three I argue more forcefully that that idea of personhood is a fundamentally gendered phenomenon.

personhood depends on the distinctions between the genders. In other words, to be a person, a boy must conform to social rules appropriate to his gender.⁵⁶

Another way to express the role of gender in the formation of social personhood is to indicate that the practice of acquiring personhood takes place in the public domain of ritualistic induction into community, socialization, compliance to social rules of behaviour and communal recognition of success and accomplishments. Although, the view may not categorically rule out private efforts towards the acquisition of personhood, it is clear that intra-group recognition is crucial. However, intra-group recognition is a public practice and therefore a feature not of the private world of individuals but of the public domain. But if personhood is essentially acquired in the public sphere, and if individuals in community are identified by their roles, then it seems to follow straightforwardly that those individuals whose roles are predominantly suited to the private domain, and as such are not active players in the public domain, are *ipso facto* constrained, or shall we say deprived, in terms of their capacity to attain maximal personhood.

The point I wish to emphasize is that when considered from a normative point of view, gendered relations connote a hierarchy of some sort indicating that power relations are implicit in gender relations. In particular, individuals gendered as male are usually seen as having more access to social power or other social benefits than their female counterparts

⁵⁶In Chapter Three of this thesis, I argue that conformity to gender-specific rules of behaviour should lead to the attainment of the relevant gender identity (i.e., manhood), not personhood. This, I maintain, shows up the communitarian and normative conception of personhood as a conception of gender.

(1987:69).⁵⁷ Thus what is implied is not the mere observation that the distinctive African view of personhood as socially acquired is necessarily gendered, but more importantly that that conception of personhood necessarily depends on a hierarchical ordering and distribution of social power facilitated by gender. The point should now be obvious. Since these cultural practices bear a necessary and causal relation to acquired personhood, it must be the case that the ensuing notion of personhood is contingent upon the social power differentials instantiated by these gendered practices. In particular, if social power is favourably distributed to individuals who are implicitly or explicitly gendered as male, then it appears that the resulting notion of personhood must be equally sensitive to the consequence that members of that gender category positioned to attain higher degrees of personhood.

In summary, the manner in which social space is organized plays a critical role in the emergence of the differentiation in individual access to power. That is to say, the nature of social space impacts heavily on individual access to intra-group recognition, thus conditioning the possibilities of individuals for attaining social personhood. Since the organization of social space conditions the possibilities of individual chances of acquiring maximal personhood and since gendered spaces are integral to organizing social space, then it seems that an individual's gender grouping can substantially impact that individual's success as a person-candidate, or so I maintain. Indeed, women and men as representatives of two broad gender categories are often identified by their roles, the latter

⁵⁷Ifi Amadiume mentions is specific about the ways women as a social category are disadvantaged including, limitations on their economic possibilities, lack of sexual freedom, non-recognition of their rights to control their fertility and children, as well as being disadvantaged in terms of inheritance (1987:36, 71, 82).

being predominantly identified by roles and responsibilities that figure in the private and domestic sphere. This constrains active participation in the public domain, thus significantly impacting unfavourably on the chances of success at maximal personhood they may have had. In addition, individual social standing and epistemic access which privileges the elderly also constrain individuals as far as acquiring personhood is concerned.

All these—seniority, social class and gender—represent distinct modes by which power relations are constituted. Importantly, each one seems to bear a necessary relation to the idea of personhood as socially acquired—i.e. the communitarian/normative conception of personhood. Since this is the case, it should follow that a theoretical interpretation of how persons are socially produced cannot be divorced from the actual power relations that constitute the social structure on which the production of persons take place. To attain a certain degree of personhood is a matter of one's age or epistemic access, social standing and gender. To attain full personhood would mean that one is most likely male, rich and powerful, and well on in age and knowledge. Thus this conception of personhood treads dangerously on the actual differences in social power distribution among individuals in community.

2.4. Gender and Social Power Differentials

I have already suggested that the social space in which persons are produced is, on the conception under consideration, constituted by power relations, thus indicating that study in concepts of socially engendered personhood will need to consider power differentials

among individuals. Along the way, I argued that gender, alongside seniority and social standing, is a principle of social organization that plays a crucial role in determining individual access to social power and so is a useful tool in analyzing the differentials of power that characterize social context in which personhood is believed to be acquired. One probable objection to this submission would be to undercut the connection I make between gender relations and social power differentials among individuals as a constitutive feature of communitarian and normative personhood.

The objection may be formulated in two distinct ways. First, it could be framed in terms of a total rejection of the thesis that gender constitutes a principle around which African communities are organized. This rejection would imply that in traditional African societies, individual access to power was not determined on the basis of gender, precisely because the category of gender was non-existent and as such never the primary organizing social principle. On this possible objection, then, any attempt to establish a connection between personhood and social power distribution on the basis of gender is highly speculative. I take this to be Oyeronke Oyewumi's (1997) response to the suggestion that inequalities in power, facilitated by gender distinctions, were deeply entrenched in traditional African societies. Beginning with an examination of the structure of Yoruba language, she reaches the conclusion that the concept of gender is entirely foreign to the Yoruba social system. In her view, gender is a category that was imported to Africa through colonialism. The absence of gender in language, she maintains, should indicate straightaway the absence of actual power differentials along the lines of gender. She writes, "There are no gender-specific words denoting son, daughter, brother, or sister. Yoruba names are not gender-

specific; neither are *oko* and *aya*—two categories translated as the English husband and wife, respectively’ (Oyewumi 1997:28).⁵⁸ Instead, it is the principle of seniority that determines how social life is organized. If this is right, then it seems that my claim that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood rests on gendered disparities in access to power is mistaken precisely because there were no such inequalities.

The argument seems persuasive enough. However, it quickly begins to lose its initial appeal as soon as it is pointed out that it must rely heavily on a number of dubious assumptions. This line of attack is due to Bisi Bakare-Yusuf (2003). I read his critical response as succeeding in establishing two principal points viz. that the manner in which Oyewumi justifies her claim that gender is not a principle of social organization in Yoruba traditional culture is questionable and that in articulating the ways in which Yoruba traditional societies were organized around the principle of seniority, Oyewumi implicitly concedes that gender was in fact an ever-present social category by which women were disadvantaged in terms of access to social power. Let me quickly outline the central aspects of his argument. The purpose of this is to enable me to reinforce my point that the category of gender, which is one of the constitutive elements of communitarian and normative personhood, was a basis of unequal social power distribution among individuals and that as a consequence the relevant conception of personhood depends on the inequalities of social power among individuals.

⁵⁸I do not have the space to discuss the various layers of her argument here. In any case, the core of her claim is that gender is not a feature of Yoruba culture and its absence in language is one of the crucial reasons motivating her stance.

Bakare-Yusuf's first point is that there are obvious limitations to relying on a 'purely linguistic approach to assessing cultural norms' (2003:126). The limitation he refers to relate to Oyewumi's use of the 'etymological method'—i.e. her reliance on the structural meaning of words in a language to establish facts about cultural practices, social institutions and cultural norms. According to Bakare-Yusuf, by employing this method Oyewumi makes a mistaken assumption 'that words have an 'original' meaning that can be assessed in some way or other' (2003:126). In other words, in order for her to claim that Yoruba language reveals conclusive facts about Yoruba social reality, she must assume that the meanings of words in a language are static, unchanging and fixed and that theorists can retrieve these original meanings in their unaffected states to interpret the whole range social experience. In fact, Bakare-Yusuf buttresses his point by stating that even if such retrieval were possible in literate cultures, expecting words to have fixed and retrievable meanings is particularly 'more difficult in historically oral cultures like the Yoruba' as we would be uncertain about original meanings (126–127).

He concludes that Oyewumi's analysis fails to appreciate that 'linguistic meaning changes according to usage, intonation, gestural patterns, intersubjective encounters and across time' and that 'language is not an inert, closed system, but a dynamic and evolving field of possibilities...' (127). Instead, she 'claims to have uncovered a pristine repository of Yoruba meaning that transcends space and time. She relies on there being an *essence* or *pure form* to the Yoruba culture, social system and language that is unaffected by changing socio-cultural forces and time' (128). It is the idea that Oyewumi's project rides on a

mistaken assumption about language that leads Bakare-Yusuf to question the method by which she establishes her denial that gender is a structuring principle in Yoruba culture.

Next, Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyewumi again mistakenly assumes that ‘the prevalent meanings of words can completely capture social reality’ (2003:128).⁵⁹ And she does this by failing to distinguish ‘between what happens at the level of a formal, linguistic understanding of grammatical norms on the one hand, and what happens in language use, practice and everyday lived experience on the other’ (129). Bakare-Yusuf’s contention is that Oyewumi wrongly infers from the analysis of the gender-neutrality of Yoruba language that gender-based inequalities are not a feature of Yoruba social life. In his words, ‘simply because gender difference is not inscribed within discourse or marked within language does not mean that it is absent in social relations’ (129). In order to substantiate the point that formal analysis of Yoruba language cannot completely capture social reality, Bakare-Yusuf points out that the *use* of Yoruba language, particularly in proverbs, which are part of everyday speech and conversations, does indicate gender inequalities by positioning women unfavourably relative to men. One of the proverbs he examines is ‘Bi iyawo ole badagba, olowoniyoogble e’ (When the wife of a lazy man grows up, the wealthy man acquires her).⁶⁰ He reasons that in the proverb, ‘the woman is reduced to the status of transferable property, to be dropped and acquired when the

⁵⁹This point must be expressed with some caution. It doesn’t seem to me that Bakare-Yusuf’s point is the denial that a philosophy may be extracted from an analysis of the structure of a language as Alexis Kagame (1956) argues or the denial that language limits the domain of what can be rendered intelligible as I understand Wittgenstein’s (1922) project. Instead, his main contention is that there is a gap between what a formal analysis of the structure of a language reveals and what an analysis of its uses in everyday speech reveals about social reality. More specifically, the absence of word gender in the formal structure of a language does not show that what are described as gender inequalities are non-existent in language use and social reality quite generally.

⁶⁰The translation is taken directly from Bakare-Yusuf’s discussion.

situation changes' (130). The point is that the gender-neutrality of language doesn't reflect the whole truth about actual social practices, just as the ideal embodied in law may not completely capture actual everyday practices; in fact, the two may be at odds.⁶¹ As a result, 'Oyewumi's claim about gender-neutrality therefore falls apart, in the face of an analysis of Yoruba that extends beyond formal semantics' (130).

In addition, Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyewumi's insistence that seniority is the principle around which Yoruba culture was organized implicitly shows that gender category and gender hierarchy was a pervasive feature of Yoruba culture. Contrary to Oyewumi's insistence that people who marry out, becoming an 'outsider' in a new family and therefore a 'junior' relative to existing members of that family do not occupy the position they do because they are women but because they are 'outsiders', Bakare-Yusuf argues:

...statistically, Oyo-Yoruba is a patrifocal (father-focused) society and, as such, it is the *ana-female* as *aya*/wife who generally has to 'marry out', becoming an outsider and therefore subordinate to anyone already in her spouse's lineage, and not the *ana-male*. Over time, even the husband's sisters will effectively lose their rank as they marry out, and will never again rank over men of the household. It is only with advancing age that

⁶¹For example, the ideal of non-discrimination and equal respect for dignity may be embodied in our constitution but this doesn't establish that discrimination and disrespect for human dignity is not a feature of social reality. As Bakare-Yusuf writes, 'Once we start to recognise modes of oppression that exist below the threshold of discursive analysis ... we then need to account for the difference between words, representations and laws on the one hand and social reality on the other' (2003:131).

the woman's status rises, but this is only in relation to her children and latter-arriving wives of her husband or his sibling's children (2003:131).

Bakare-Yusuf concludes that the fact that it is the woman in Yoruba culture who is the perpetual outsider, and therefore junior relative to other members of the family she joins, shows that even 'the logic of seniority', which Oyewumi appeals to, implicitly 'suggests a fairly strict gender hierarchy in practice, but, one which is, as Oyewumi rightly claims, absent within the Yoruba linguistic 'universe' (131).

A more plausible claim can be made it seems, and this is the second way to formulate the objection, that a gendered social structure does not straightforwardly entail inequalities in social power between members of the relevant gendered groups. That is to say, even if it is conceded that gendered spaces are a pervasive feature of social structure, this fact doesn't by itself establish that there are inequalities and power differentials structured along the lines of gender. Perhaps, the gender divisions are more fluid, permitting individuals to assume roles across gender. This way of formulating the objection comes very close to the point Ifi Amadiume makes in her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. There she maintains that gender is a pervasive feature of Nnobi society but nevertheless insists on a certain degree of flexibility that ensured that social power wasn't necessarily distributed on the basis of maleness or femaleness. Employing the concepts of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands', she attempts to establish how social roles and the benefits attached to them can be available to individuals irrespective of gender. Consider, for instance, the practice of 'female husbands', which allowed women who are economically able to

assume the role, traditionally associated with men, of marrying a woman or paying for her fertility in cases where they are barren and cannot fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood (1987:72). Accordingly, one was opposed to the idea that the communitarian and normative account of personhood rests on unequal gendered relations can argue, along with Amadiume, that gendered relations do not necessarily connote unequal power relations.

There are two possible replies that can be furnished. First, the position defended here doesn't rely solely on gender in establishing the unequal distribution of social power among individuals. Other modes of power relations have been explored including those generated by social standing and the ideology of seniority. So, even if it were conceded that the category of gender is not a particularly useful tool for exploring these differentials in social power, it could still be maintained that other forms of power relations exist within social space. These other forms of power can provide as it were a substructure upon which the concept of socially engendered personhood depends, thus leaving the central claim of this chapter impervious to Amadiume's contentions.

Yet, I do not make that concession. This leads me to the second point, which is that Amadiume's attempt to show the flexible nature of gender relations ultimately leads her to counterintuitively support the thesis that social power distribution is in fact a function of both gender and social class. This is so because of the twofold reason that (1) Amadiume already explicitly claimed that there is evidence of asymmetry between the genders in Nnobi society and (2) she implicitly suggested that the so-called 'female husbands' are

represented as powerful not merely because they are women but because they fit into a particular social class (i.e. they are rich). This means that Amadiume's argument does not succeed in denying that there is asymmetry of power between male and female genders in Nnobi society and that she affirms the point that that social class is one of the important ways in which social power is mediated in that society.

As it turns out, then, gender, seniority and social class represent multiple forms of power relations that constitute social structure. Consequently, the concept of personhood as socially engendered must rest on these modes of power relations. Indeed, it seems impossible to construe this notion of personhood otherwise. Yet, this is merely an observation that finds support in social anthropology; it doesn't yet constitute a criticism of the relevant conception of personhood. In what follows, I suggest what I think are philosophical reasons for adopting an epistemic posture of suspicion about the idea that personhood is socially engendered.

2.5. Personhood and the Ideal of Equality

A plausible theory of personhood should be able to explain why it is the case that we intuitively believe that all persons are *morally* equal.⁶² This intuition is one I deem to be uncontroversial—that is, in spite of the obvious differences among individuals it seems true that morally we can assert a basic equality among persons. My suspicion is that a conception of personhood that is grounded on contingent facts about the ideology of seniority and epistemic access, the specifics of ritual incorporation and socialization

⁶²I take this to be an uncontroversial claim. As I shall not be defending it further here, those who do not already share this intuition should take me as making this assumption.

processes, which I argue are almost always gendered, and social standing, cannot adequately explain what it is about persons that makes them equal morally.

One reason for holding the position that the communitarian and normative conception cannot account for the moral equality of persons is that it is based entirely on the actual social power differentials and inequalities that constitute the actual lives of individuals in community. On this view, what makes an individual a person are facts about the individual's age, epistemic access, social standing and gender, all of which constitute the basis of inequalities and social power differentials among individuals. That is to say, on the basis of these categories individuals are clearly unequal and to ground personhood on them is to suggest that persons are as a matter of fact unequal. Indeed, factual equality is impossible to establish. The only meaningful sense of equality is moral equality, by which I mean equality with respect to how we treat persons because they possess intrinsic value. But since the communitarian and normative conception depends heavily on these factual differences in articulating personhood, it appears that it cannot explain why it is the case that persons are morally equal.

Another way to express the point being made here is to observe that if personhood were based on some intrinsic quality which persons possess and share, it would provide a ground for asserting and demanding equal treatment morally. Such intrinsic quality common to all persons would constitute the basis for moral respect and equality. However, since the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is based on facts that individuals approximate to varying degrees, the demand for moral respect and equality due

to persons would apply to varying degrees as well. It seems to me somewhat unacceptable that this consequence of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood—that some persons deserve more respect as persons than others or that some are more equal than others—and the considerations motivating this unequal treatment are linked to one’s age or epistemic access, social standing and gender.

Additionally, proponents of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood run the risk of glossing over these inequalities in social power when employing the concept of person. Although they are happy to explain that personhood in African thought is a matter of degrees, when the concept person is used to describe individuals in ordinary usage this fact is often blurred.⁶³ But if it is a feature of social space that individuals gendered as female have little access to social power and it is true that personhood as a social phenomenon must be sensitive to actual differences in social power, then the degree of personhood a female member of community can acquire is socially conditioned by her gender.⁶⁴ Conversely, an individual male member of community should enjoy a higher degree of personhood since his gender gives him more access to power and intra-group recognition.

⁶³See, for instance, Wiredu (1992:104) for an explanation on how former Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda explains the idea of degrees of personhood and Wiredu’s own explication based on the Akan culture.

⁶⁴Indeed, if we press the issue of the gendered nature of social personhood what we find is that the person-status of women vis-à-vis men in a social context is suspect—although proponents of this conception of person fail to acknowledge it. One way this is clear is the near, if not total absence of women in the world of ancestors. But if personhood is a phase in the continuum of human development according to the relevant conception of personhood and ancestorhood represents the apogee of the human career, as Menkiti claims, then it seems the absence of women in the world of ancestors in African thought may have something to do with their lower person-status vis-à-vis men who populate the ancestral world. This is so because one must be a full person in the sense being considered in this chapter in order to be an ancestor, but if women are not members of the ancestral world, then perhaps they do not enjoy the status of full personhood.

The point I wish to make here is that proponents of the view that personhood is socially determined run the risk of employing ‘person’ as a blanket term that is applicable to all individuals in society, thus giving short shrift to their primary supposition, which is that personhood must be grounded on the actual social conditions in which individuals find themselves. This is so because the term personhood indicates something all individuals share or have in common—either in its actuality or, as in the case of personhood as acquired, its potentiality. That is, it is a common feature about individuals like you and me that we have the potential to become persons in a social context, if we are not already so. In this sense, the capacity for acquiring personhood is a distinctive mark of human individuals as opposed to other kinds of individual existences.⁶⁵ Therefore, theorizing about personhood turns out to be a way conceptualizing what we all have in common. But in theorizing about what we all as human individuals share, proponents of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood run the risk of glossing over the actual differences in social power that characterize the actual lives of individuals in social space—the facts that they take to be constitutive of personhood.

Defenders of the thesis that personhood is socially determined must take the idea to its logical conclusion by explicitly affirming not only that older members of community have a higher degree of personhood relative to younger members of the community (as Menkiti claims) but also that individuals gendered as male and those in highly recognized social ranks (e.g. the rich) have by virtue of their genders and social position have a higher degree of personhood relative to other individuals in social context who are not similarly placed.

⁶⁵Perhaps not all human individuals can acquire personhood. More carefully, then, the capacity for personhood is one that at least all *normal* human individuals can acquire.

Yet, if 'person' picks out the ultimate bearer of moral value, such a distinction in degrees of personhood based on gender (seniority or social class) is particularly troubling from a moral point of view, since it could justify unequal treatment of individuals depending on the degree of personhood they have acquired. That is, a person who is judged to possess lower degrees of personhood may become subject to ill-treatment.⁶⁶

Even so, it is worth asking whether proponents of the communitarian and normative view of personhood are concerned about the equality of persons. It may be the case that they do not believe that persons are equal in any interesting sense after all as I indicated a little earlier, they usually hold that personhood is a matter of degree. In spite of their commitment to the idea that the degree of personhood varies from individual to individual, communitarians are strongly committed to the equality of all persons. This commitment is sometimes explicit. Commenting on the value of equality in relation to his *Ujamaa* philosophy, Julius Nyerere, one of the proponents of the communitarian idea, observes that 'it does not matter why people accept the equality of man(sic) as the basis of social organization; all that matters is that they do accept it' (Nyerere 1968a:12). Elsewhere, he writes that inequality is 'inconsistent with our socialist conception of the equality of all human beings...' (1996:312). On his part, Kwame Nkrumah reasons from the natural sociality of man to the conclusion that 'his (sic) metaphysical principle amounted to an assertion of the fundamental equality and brotherhood of men' (1970:97). And Gyekye

⁶⁶I should note that Wiredu (1992) has argued that the basis for respect and equality on the communitarian and normative conception rests on the fact that all persons possess the *okra* or element of the divine. In his words, '...being begotten of a direct gift of God... He or she... is deserving of basic respect and sympathy' (1992:199). But as I argue in Chapter Three of this thesis, this force of this claim is undermined by another one Wiredu, and proponents of the communitarian view, hold—the claim that it is the social facts constitutive of the communitarian and normative conception that is germane and holds ultimate value in the African conception of personhood. See Wiredu (1992:199) and Ikuenobe (2006:117).

expresses the same point emphasizing the need ‘...to recognize the other person as a fellow human being, which, in turn, means to acknowledge that her worth as a human being is equal to our own ...’ (1997:259).⁶⁷

This leads me to a second and related point, which is that although proponents of the view of personhood as socially engendered explicitly assume an egalitarian social space in which the acquisition of personhood takes place and are actually committed to the notion of equality of all persons, they nevertheless emphasize the claim that personhood is a matter of degrees, which I have claimed connotes inequalities. They do this by insisting that this conception of personhood being relational connotes reciprocity and equality among individuals—this is based on the idea that one cannot be a person without others, indicating that individuals in a social context mutually influence each other towards attaining personhood (Wiredu 2008:333). Alternatively, they assert the egalitarian nature of African communitarian societies by insisting that each person retains her/his worth in community. For instance, Gyekye insists that ‘the natural membership of the individual person in a community cannot rob him of his dignity or worth (1992:114).⁶⁸

⁶⁷Less explicitly, other communitarians seem to me to be committed to some kind of egalitarianism where this is expressed in terms of mutuality, solidarity and reciprocity. See Wiredu (2005) who emphasizes a ‘system of reciprocity’ as definitive of African communitarian cultures and Gbadegesin (1991) put a stress on fellow-feeling and solidarity among individuals.

⁶⁸Additionally, some of the widely cited African gender theorists who approach the issue of equality by examining gender as an organizing principle in traditional culture also fall within the camp of communitarians who make a case for an egalitarian social organization in traditional Africa. I have in mind Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) and Ifi Amadiume (1987) whose works I have explored here. As well as Nkiru Nzegwu (2001) who argues for equality in traditional culture through the idea of a dual-sex system. In general, they are agreed that gender inequalities were not a feature of African Yoruba, and we should add communitarian, traditional culture because gender as a category was not a feature of that culture and that gender inequalities were non-existent in traditional African communitarian cultures because gender roles were fluid and complimentary.

Rather than conceive the individual as an isolated and autonomous subject who stands apart from others and independently acts upon the world around her, impinging, as it were, her will on others, proponents of this conception of personhood theoretically depict an individual as already embedded in a network of constitutive relationships so that the individual is as much impacted upon as she impacts on others as well. Thus, on this relational picture of personhood, the exercise of social power is very much dynamic and mutually influencing rather than static and one dimensional. This leads to the idea that African traditional communalistic cultures were egalitarian where this is expressed in terms of equilibrium, balancing multiple powers, complementarity, and dual-sex power structure (See, for example, Sofola 1998:54, Jell-Bhalsen 1998:102, Stead 1987:8).

Yet, in order for this sort of mutual influence to be possible, it must be the case that the social context is in an important sense egalitarian and the relationships in which individuals are embedded are relations of equality—a supposition that flies in the face of the available evidence in social anthropology, some of which I have been exploring. So, there seems to be a paradox. This notion of personhood as socially determined must rest on the social power differentials among individuals that are constitutive of social relations and yet it must also assume an egalitarian social order, an equal playing field, as it were, in which agents mutually impact on one another towards the attainment of personhood. This seems quite odd. At best, then, this conception of personhood is expressive of a wish. If the actual social realities and relations in which individuals are located are not egalitarian, and if proponents of the view of personhood must implicitly assume an egalitarian social structure for the acquisition of personhood, then that conception of personhood must be

expressive of the wish that society and social relations were in fact egalitarian. That is, this view of personhood seems to be rooted in our desire for an egalitarian society.

Although in principle there is nothing wrong for a theory of personhood to articulate a wish—in particular, our wish for a social space that is characterized by relations of equality, it has to be pointed out that there is a logical gap between what is and what we wish were the case. The point here is that this conception of personhood proceeds as though the latter were in fact the case and, as a result, glosses over the actual nature of the social space in which personhood is acquired.

The idea of personhood as socially engendered in a system of social relations that are unequal is fundamentally different to one involving the social production of persons in an egalitarian social context. Until the social space in which personhood is acquired is sufficiently expressive of equal power distribution among individuals, the idea of personhood as socially engendered remains an expression of wishful thinking, if, that is, the moral equality of all persons is to be adequately accounted for.

2.6. Conclusion

I have attempted to make sense of the idea that the meaning of personhood may connote instances of power relations. I attempted to establish this in two distinct ways. First, I suggested that the communitarian and normative idea of personhood seems to be motivated by a non-epistemic motive, which I described as a desire to reaffirm African culture and identity. This claim is positioned within the general claim that African conceptions of

personhood have often been used as a foil against Western notions of personhood. I illustrate by references to other discourses how this desire has been manifested—particularly in the emergence of African philosophy as a counter colonial practice whose primary aim was oppositional in view of relocating the African subject and reaffirming African culture. More specifically, I examined very briefly negritude and in more detail ethnophilosophy as two trends in African philosophy that were motivated by the same desire that in my view underpins the communitarian and normative conception of personhood. This desire, I maintain, is reflective of a power struggle in the form of reaffirming the culture of a people who were once oppressed.

In the remainder of the chapter, I argued that if the communitarian and normative conception is the view that personhood is socially engendered, then it must be sensitive to the actual social conditions that constitute the lives of individuals in community. More specifically, since age, social position and gender are modes of power relations that constitute the lives of individuals in community, a conception of personhood as socially engendered must be sensitive to these facts. Indeed, proponents of this conception of personhood make an analytical and sometimes causal connection between age, social position, and gender on the one hand and personhood on the other. This feature of communitarian and normative personhood therefore shows it as a conception that rests on the social power differentials among individuals in community. Along the way, I take some time to establish that gender is in fact a social category in African cultures by examining some of the oppositions to this view, in particular those emanating from the works of Oyeronke Oyewumi and Ifi Amadiume. Ultimately, I argued that the claim that

communitarian and normative personhood depends on social power differentials among individuals is at odds with the claims that the social space or communities in which individuals acquire personhood is egalitarian and that the idea of the equality of persons can be established by appeal to the communitarian idea of personhood.

I believe that the observation about the relationship between gender and the communitarian and normative idea of personhood is an interesting one, in the sense that there is much to be said about it. In the next chapter, I continue my critical examination of this idea of personhood. More specifically, I show that the attempt to justify it by appeal to fiction reveals two interesting points. First, I argue that the criteria by which the success of individuals at personhood is assessed turns out to be less reliable than initially thought. Second, I argue that the appeal to fiction reveals more clearly the gendered nature of the communitarian and normative idea of personhood—an observation with interesting new implications for the conception of personhood under discussion. To my mind, this last point is an extension of the discussion on the relationship between personhood and gender undertaken in this chapter.

Chapter Three

3. Fiction, Culture and the Concept of a Person⁶⁹

3.1. Introduction

The idea that the African discourse on the self evinces two distinct though related conceptions (the ‘metaphysical’ and the ‘normative’) has gained currency in recent years. Although the two conceptions are recognized, the normative one is held to be germane to African thought.⁷⁰ This is a widely received view—Kwasi Wiredu, for instance, maintains that while the ‘African mind is not oblivious to ontological aspects of a person...’ it is normative concerns that are ‘more dominant’ (2009:13). Elsewhere, Polycarp Ikuenobe claims that ‘it is the normative and not the metaphysical idea of personhood that is germane to African communal traditions’ (2006:117). Gail Presbey makes a similar point when she observes that African concepts of person are ‘not to be understood primarily as metaphysical stances on the nature of the self, but rather as descriptions of intragroup recognition’ (2002:57).

The usual support for the perceived importance of the normative view is that it is the one appropriate to traditional African societies, which are predominantly communalistic. In a

⁶⁹This chapter has benefited from the critical comments of participants at the 2011 Annual conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA).

⁷⁰For a more detailed discussion of these views of personhood see Kwasi Wiredu (1992), ‘The African Concept of Personhood’; Kwame Gyekye (1997), *Traditions and Modernity*; and Dismas Masolo (2004), ‘The Concept of the Person in Luo Modes of Thought’. In general, I accept the methodological approach underpinning what I have described in Chapter One as the first tier of personhood and here as the metaphysical view. Much of this chapter is an assessment of the normative view of personhood.

communal setting, Wiredu argues, ‘the corresponding idea of person would be of a morally sound adult who has demonstrated in practice a sense of responsibility to household, lineage and society at large’ (2009:16). And Menkiti, expressing the same idea early on in the literature, claims that ‘the various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accepted this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations’ (1984:176). Recently, however, there has been a slight shift to other sources of support. Two such attempts suggest themselves. The first, and more recent, is an undertaking by Wiredu (2009) to show the relationship between philosophy and orality and how, in particular, the normative view of personhood is rooted in and emerges out of an oral culture. The second is the attempt by Ikuenobe (2006) to situate and thereby glean support for the normative idea of personhood in fiction—in particular, Achebe’s (1994) *Things Fall Apart* (henceforth, TFA). It is worth noting that this—i.e. endorsing the communitarian and normative idea of personhood by reference to Achebe’s TFA—is also a feature of Dismas Masolo’s (2010) discussion linking the meaning of person to a conception of the good life in his recent book, *Self and Community in a Changing World*.⁷¹

It is this latter attempt that motivates my interest here as it opens up an ostensibly new point of support for the normative view—in fiction. Indeed, it is quite easy to see why

⁷¹See especially Chapter 2, pg. 96. Although, I often refer to Ikuenobe’s appeal to TFA my arguments target the *strategy* of appealing to Achebe’s TFA. This means that the considerations raised here against Ikuenobe’s project are equally applicable to Masolo’s attempt to link the meaning of personhood to some communal conception of the good life. Another significant point worth noting is that the appeal to TFA by Ikuenobe and Masolo in making the relevant points they make shows its significance or, at least, that they take TFA to be a significant and authoritative literary work.

Achebe's work is an attractive source of support, given its literary, historical and cultural significance. To my mind, TFA is an authoritative text and arguably one of the most important literary reflections on aspects of African culture to have emerged from English-speaking Africa. Thus, if it is instructive and illuminating at all on the subject of personhood, as Ikuenobe's (and Masolo's) appeal to it seems to suggest, it would reinforce powerfully the presumed importance of the communitarian and normative view of personhood.

In this chapter, I articulate some of my misgivings about Ikuenobe's undertaking. Although the overall thrust of this chapter is to resist the idea that the communitarian and normative idea of personhood is a theme explored in TFA, in section 3.2 I propose a conditional argument. It runs as follows—even if we grant that normative personhood is a theme explored in TFA, there is still much to be said against such a conception of personhood in light of Achebe's work. Here, I rely on the details about the individual histories of key characters in the novel to advance two related claims.⁷² First, it is quite undesirable to ground personhood in substantive claims about human flourishing or conception of the good life since the resulting conception of personhood would be worryingly repressive and intolerant of alternative forms of human flourishing, which are central to contemporary democratic and liberal culture. Second, I try to make good on my suspicion that relying on cultural norms of expectations and recognition, which are

⁷²This is the strategy that Ikuenobe (2006) and Masolo (2010) employed. For example, they reasoned from the social failure of the main protagonist in the novel—i.e. Okonkwo—and the consequent social disapproval on the way to concluding that he failed to achieve personhood in the normative sense.

contingent and unstable, can provide a reliable basis for deciding whether one is a person, in the communitarian and normative sense.

In section 3.3, I query the assumption that normative personhood is a theme Achebe explores in TFA. I argue that contrary to Ikuenobe's claims to have located the idea of personhood in TFA, the evidence seems to point more plausibly to Achebe's treatment of gender as an axiomatic principle around which social life is organized in the imagined Umuofian community. I then suggest that Ikuenobe's misidentification of gender as normative personhood is not mere happenstance; there is good reason to suspect that what is often flaunted as the normative view of personhood is essentially a conception of how individuals in community come to acquire gendered identities.⁷³ In section 3.4, I consider a potentially damaging objection to my arguments that normative personhood is fundamentally gendered and respond accordingly.

3.2. Normative Personhood in Things Fall Apart?

The normative conception takes as its starting point the claim that any robust definition of person must be done in reference to the community. A person is not an isolated entity and so cannot be defined by reference to some static and isolated quality, like rationality, soul

⁷³One probable doubt about the undertaking of this chapter is the question whether fiction can illuminate philosophical discussion at all. By way of responding, it is important to note that the use of fiction to shed light on and ground philosophical claims is rife. See, for instance, Leke Adeofe's (2004) adaptation of Locke's (1694) widely cited story of the Prince and the Cobbler in his discussion on an African (Yoruba) view of personal identity. See also Schechtman (1996). Quite apart, there may also be more specific doubts as to whether Achebe's TFA can illuminate the African discourse on personhood. My take is that insofar as this work provides an unexaggerated and evenhanded portrayal of traditional African culture prior to its encounter with an alien one (see Jeyifo 1991:99 and JanMohamed 1991:91), and thus comes as close as anything to understanding the structure and workings of a deeply traditional and communalistic African culture, it can shed light on the African discourse on self, which is held to emerge from traditional culture.

or will. Thus one of the foremost defenders of the view, Menkiti, is at pains to point out to his readers that ‘the African view of [person] denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual’ while affirming a definition of person in terms of ‘the environing community’ (1984:171). The upshot of this is that on the normative view to be a person not only is it necessary that one is situated in a community and that one sustains vital relationships with others but one must also act in certain ways, undergo certain processes of induction, meet specific obligations deriving from one’s natural belonging and position in a cultural community and be recognized as doing so. In the words of Menkiti, 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... become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term’ (1984:173).

By normative personhood, then, I shall mean the idea that persons are communally produced, where this involves individuals undergoing rituals of incorporation and transformation while also conforming to norms of behaviour and satisfying communal expectations of success, whether moral or social. It is this idea of personhood that Ikuenobe believes Achebe explores in TFA.

In reaching that conclusion, Ikuenobe’s strategy is to show how specific characters in the novel achieve or fail to achieve personhood by filling in the essential details regarding their individual careers and examining their performance over a range of criteria, including especially their ability to meet familial and communal expectations of success. Thus, on

the one hand, Unoka's failure to meet specific responsibilities to his household, or to conform to communal standards of success, makes him a paradigmatic case of failure of personhood in the normative sense. In this regard, Ikuenobe takes the narrator's own verdict to be illuminating: 'Unoka, the grown up, was a failure' (Achebe 1994:3). On the other hand, Ezeudu's success in discharging familial and communal responsibilities and his status as a wealthy man ostensibly earn him normative personhood. This is how Ikuenobe sees the matter and attempts to justify the view not only as a theme Achebe explores but also as the relevant idea of personhood to African thought. However, my consideration of some of these cases reveals that the matter is much more involved than Ikuenobe is willing to acknowledge.

Consider, for instance, the reasons why Unoka is said to have failed at personhood. Ikuenobe portrays him as one who exhibited 'bad qualities—laziness, being a debtor, having no title, being unable to provide for his family'. He adds that failure 'is based on whether or not one has taken a title, achieved social status and recognition, and taken on the social responsibilities that are demanded by the community' and that success at personhood is a matter of 'acquiring titles, working hard, and being strong' (2006:123). Obviously, on these standards Unoka did not excel, hence the conclusion that he fails at personhood. Yet, what Ikuenobe withholds from his readers is that Unoka excelled in other ways. In particular, he was an accomplished musician and flautist as Achebe takes care to highlight. '[Unoka] was very good on his flute,' he writes, 'and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their

instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace' (Achebe 1994:2).

What begins to emerge is the suspicion that Unoka's alleged failure is biased in favour of his society's definition of success. He couldn't cultivate the land and so didn't own huge barns of yam as is expected of successful men in Umuofia. Yet, one is left with a sense that had Umuofian society been organized slightly differently, with emphasis on other kinds of accomplishments including especially musical ones, communal expectations would perhaps be slightly adjusted in such a way that Unoka's unquestionable ability with the flute would be a socially recognizable accomplishment. And with social recognition would have come personhood, if indeed personhood is a function of social recognition. Further, the issue becomes even more complicated if we imagine some other cultural community in which flute-playing and other kinds of musical accomplishments are socially prized higher than the celebrated virtues of Umuofia (e.g. physical strength). The possibility envisaged here is not farfetched.

Charles Sarvan (1977) makes a similar point by situating Unoka in a hypothetical context in which his accomplishments are highly regarded. 'One can easily picture Unoka', he writes, 'having an honored place at some royal court, together with the philosophers and the other artists' (1977:157). The narrator implied that Unoka's musical accomplishment was more appreciated elsewhere: 'Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting'

(1994:2). In these alternative communities, where values are differently prioritized, an individual like Unoka is likely to attain high social recognition and thus easily pass the test of normative personhood.

There are three suggestions I wish to make here. First, Ikuenobe's judgment that Unoka epitomizes the failure of personhood strikes me as overly simplistic. This is because there is an important sense in which the character of Unoka in the hands of Achebe represents a useful literary device for appraising the very culture that labels him as a failure. It is certainly not preposterous to think that the author of the novel holds up to scrutiny the very society that judges Unoka to have failed. In other words, it is not simply the case that Unoka is merely the author's portrayal of what it means to fail in Umuofia; the character Unoka allows the author to contest the culture's definition of success. As Sarvan (1977:157) points out, failing to pay close attention to Unoka is '...not only to miss much of Achebe's implicit criticism of traditional society but also to miss the moving portrayal of a talented but misunderstood and lonely man'. Ikuenobe's rather hasty and simplistic conclusion seems to overlook this insight and thus fails to appreciate the full range of possibilities made available by the author in the character of Unoka.

Second, it is rather disturbing that personhood in the sense that is said to matter in African thought should depend entirely on contingencies. Whether one community ranks physical strength higher than rational persuasion (which Unoka must have had in abundance for him to consistently borrow in spite of his reputation) or the ability to cultivate the land over music-making strikes me as matters of geographical, historical and cultural contingencies.

It is conceivable that these could have been otherwise. Since Unoka is judged on these terms, however, it follows that the conditions of his failure are simply matters of contingencies. Indeed, it seems that Unoka would be a success at another place, another time, seeing that the criterion by which his failure is being assessed varies across place and time. But can personhood plausibly depend on such contingencies or any other highly variable quantity—on whether one is a successful farmer or not or is physically strong, a warrior or a lover of peace who finds the sight of blood distasteful? It is very hard to believe that the difference between being a person or not is down to such considerations.

A friend of proponents of the communitarian and normative view might object. She may argue that it is not whether some community values this or that practice, ideal etc. that matters for personhood. What matters, she might contend, is that the community values something—attaining personhood is simply a function of conforming to these ideals. This leaves open the range of things a community might highly value. Thus, even if Umuofia valued something else, this fact would be insignificant as personhood is a matter of succeeding at *whatever* a community takes to be highly valuable. However, this objection would have missed the argument being made here. The argument is not that what Umuofia prizes highly do not suffice as criteria for deciding whether a person attains personhood in the normative sense. If this were the case, then it would count as a powerful objection to observe that communitarian and normative personhood is not focused on *what* each community values but is about achieving communal benchmarks of success, whatever these may be.

Instead, my argument is that (1) since different communities value different things it is highly probable that although some individual fails at personhood in one community she could without any modification to character or behaviour attain personhood in some other community. If this is the case, then (2) it seems that there is something amiss about an approach to the question of personhood that suggests that an individual's chances of becoming a person is a matter of where they happen to find themselves—a matter of contingency. In the case of Unoka, while he is judged to have failed at personhood in Umuofia, he very well could have been a success elsewhere (e.g. in Greek culture or a more liberal, future Umuofian culture) without any modification to his character. Thus, it is either a grave misfortune (or perhaps injustice) on the part of the individual (in this case Unoka) that he exists at a time or in a place in which the culture's values and social priorities are what they are. My contention is that rather than think of Unoka or any such individual as merely unfortunate, we should cast a critical eye on the criteria that form the basis on which failure and success is assessed. My contention is that we question the validity of judging personhood on a narrow conception of success or the good life, which is an implication of the communitarian and normative view of personhood—or, at least, as it is exemplified in Ikuenobe's and Masolo's appeal to TFA.

A third, and related point, then, is that Achebe's delicate treatment of this character as expressing, in the view of Sarvan (1977:156), a 'quiet but stubborn courage of nonconformity' as well as an indifference to the 'values of his culture – wealth, titles, physical courage' exposes, in my view, the dangers of grounding personhood in a narrow and substantive conception of the good life or flourishing. The danger is that the resulting

idea of personhood becomes rather too restrictive. It would be restrictive precisely because it would exclude a wide range of individuals who would otherwise be described as successful. It would be restrictive precisely because it would exclude from the community of persons those individuals that do not conform to a particular definition of success or conception of the good life. This, of course, would be a consequence of suppressing alternative ways of flourishing.

With specific reference to Achebe's TFA, a deeply communal society such as Umuofia would affirm only those values that are socially acclaimed, where such acclaim is ultimately a matter of convention. At first glance, this may not seem like a bad thing. Yet, in giving social affirmation to forms of flourishing that are consistent with a communitarian ethic, society runs the risk of declaring as unacceptable and forbidden unorthodox forms of flourishing and excellence. Additionally, those individuals who embrace these alternative ways may be excluded, with the label of 'failures at personhood'.

Without a doubt Unoka lived out a conception of the good life that departed radically from his society's and he was unwilling to be bullied into conformity so much so that at death he clung to his flute as a symbol of his nonconformity and his affirmation of an alternative way of flourishing in an all too restrictive culture. 'Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away,' says Achebe, 'he took with him his flute' (1994:11). Perhaps, the picture of Unoka holding on to his flute, the symbol of his most important accomplishment and way of flourishing—something his community couldn't possibly appreciate—is Achebe's way of casting a critical eye on the narrow-mindedness and bias of Umuofian

culture against alternate ways of flourishing. 'It is a criticism of Unoka's society that instead of recognizing his creativity and giving it scope, he was forced to follow one narrow, rigid pattern' (Sarvan 1977:157).

In sum, if, as I have been assuming, normative personhood is a theme explored by Achebe in TFA, then there are some important lessons to be learnt. Sadly, these lessons do not positively recommend the normative view. The analysis so far has shown that Unoka's failure is not merely of a function of his flawed disposition—at least this is not straightforwardly evident as Ikuenobe's analysis suggests. Instead, it is, even if partly, consequent upon the authoritarian weight of Umuofia's insistence on a narrow and rigid conception of the good life to which every individual must conform. One vital lesson then is that exclusion is a dangerous consequence of grounding personhood in a substantive notion of what the good life is. Additionally, a more promising conception would benefit immensely from a more liberal conception of the good that permits alternative ways of flourishing in community.

We are yet to consider Okonkwo around whom central bits of the narrative revolve. His early years are characterized by enviable achievements. He had thrown Amalinze the cat in a fiercely contested wrestling match—a feat which won him fame throughout the nine villages and brought honour to his clan. Besides being a wealthy farmer who ably shouldered his responsibilities to his household, Okonkwo had taken his third wife, two titles and had 'shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars' (1994:5). It is worth stressing the point that in the culture in which the author situates him, these attributes and

accomplishments are highly prized. As such, Okonkwo is revealed as a man ‘destined for greatness as a result of his conformity to his society’s ideals...’ (Whitaker and Msiska 2007:8). In an unexpected twist of fate, however, Okonkwo is tragically destroyed. Ikuenobe quickly concludes that his eventual failure—marked by the abominable act of taking away his own life—amounts to a failure of personhood in the normative sense.

More than a few critics of Achebe’s TFA have represented Okonkwo as Umuofia’s cultural avatar. They have argued that the values and ideals Okonkwo embodies are those of his society and in his character these are given full expression. For instance, Douglas Killam describes Okonkwo as ‘the embodiment of Ibo values, a man who better than most symbolized his race’ (1969:16). On her part, Catherine Innes asserts that ‘the reader never doubts that [Okonkwo] is the product of his society’s system... He is... a *type* of his society’ (1990:26). But if he is a ‘type’ and an ‘embodiment’ of the values of his society, how then is he adjudged by the same society to have failed? Interestingly, his alleged failure is not due to his subsequent refusal to conform. If anything Okonkwo was even more determined to comply with cultural expectations and even when he fell short of them, he willingly accepts the prescribed punitive measures as, for instance, when he is banished from Umuofia for inadvertently killing a clansman.

Some critics of TFA have explained Okonkwo’s tragic demise by appealing to his personal flaws. His narrow mindedness, the argument runs, ensured that Okonkwo was alienated from those values and ideals which he conforms to. Thus, he is ultimately estranged from his community—the very community that ostensibly confers the status of personhood on

him by means of social recognition. This point is expressed powerfully by Abiola Irele. Okonkwo's 'personal disposition,' he writes, 'his reaction to these social determinations stemming from his subjective perception of them, prepares his individual fate' (Irele 1991:80). However, while there is a great deal of initial plausibility to this line of reasoning, on a closer assessment, one suspects that the argument seems to construe Okonkwo's rather enthusiastic compliance to cultural norms as a flaw. But this is hardly a flaw in a man who witnessed firsthand the extent of cultural exclusion and disapproval when individuals fail to conform, as in the case of his father. Okonkwo is not unique in the values he espouses, although his enthusiasm with regards to conformity is uncommon. Yet, his personal dispositions are shaped by his own culture and so explaining his demise as merely a result of his personal dispositions strikes me as somewhat rushed.

On this point, Sarma provides a compelling insight. 'One cannot somehow lay the blame on Okonkwo. His action at the end, hasty though it was, was quite in accordance with the traditional values. It was an act of conviction, almost religious, and the end vindicated the character of Okonkwo who emerges as the lone representative of the Igbo value system while the whole community lay around him in a shambles' (Sarma 1993:69). Nnoromele (2000) and Friesen (2006) offer similar interpretations of the character of Okonkwo that move away from the view that attributes his failure to his personal flaws. In these latter analyses, the underlying intuition is that in focusing on Okonkwo's personal dispositions the argument obscures the possibility that the very social determinations that are held to be person-defining in the normative sense may be inadequate to constitute a suitable criterion for defining personhood.

A good reason why we should be critical of the social determinations, rather than Okonkwo's personal disposition, as an explanation of his eventual demise, relates to the point that throughout the story, Okonkwo remains a relatively stable character and retains his original dispositions and perception of cultural norms. It is hard to believe that a sufficiently stable dispositional attitude towards cultural norms and values should simultaneously bring him so much success and subsequently be the basis of his destruction. To adequately explain the contrasting fortunes of Okonkwo's early and later years, it is not his relatively stable disposition that needs to be looked at. Rather, it seems to me that we should pay closer attention to the very social determinations, which are constantly evolving, and must have significantly altered between the period of Okonkwo's success and demise, during which time the strength of Umuofian culture was severely tested by the arrival of a presumably more formidable culture. These social determinations upon which the criterion of personhood is based, being constantly evolving, are relatively unstable and so can explain why it is the case that although Okonkwo always maintained a disposition of conformity towards these social standards, he fails in the end to be successful in attaining personhood. The point here is that while Okonkwo remained fairly stable, always conforming to the standards of Umuofian culture, the social determinations by which he was judged had changed almost unnoticeably.

Now, it is easy to conclude that Okonkwo's failure was ultimately of his own making as he failed to recognize that his culture was evolving and so adapt his response to the demands of culture accordingly. While this may be true, it leaves unanswered a vital question—the

question of whether we should judge individuals' success or failure on the basis of benchmarks that are always evolving. At this point, I should indicate that my misgivings here relate directly to Achebe's own critical remarks in a conversation with Biodun Jeyifo concerning Okonkwo's alleged failure, which he attributed quite explicitly to the act of betrayal by Okonkwo's own culture rather than his dispositional attitude. Achebe is recorded to have said:

This is a society in *Things Fall Apart* that believes in strength and manliness and the masculine ideals. Okonkwo accepts them. Actually the culture "betrays" him. He is "betrayed" because he's doing exactly what the culture preaches. But, you see, the culture is devious and flexible... The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength, the culture says, "No, no, hold it!" The culture has to be ambivalent, so it immediately raises the virtues of the women, of love, of tenderness and so on, and holds up abominations (Achebe, cited in Jeyifo 1997:118).

Besides Achebe's explicit claim that the cultural ideal Umuofia sought to promote was closely aligned with a particular gender identity, there are two other points that deserve notice.⁷⁴ First, the point that Achebe's protagonist, Okonkwo is 'doing exactly what the

⁷⁴In the next section of this chapter, I argue that personhood is not a theme in TFA. Instead, a critical examination of Achebe's own aims suggests that a central theme of the book concerns the manner in which the imagined traditional culture constructed and negotiated individual acquisition of the relevant gender identity.

culture preaches' but ends up as a failure—in the quest to attain personhood. Recall that on the conception under consideration, personhood is the sort of thing that is acquired in proportion as one conforms to the standards of the community. Yet, quite puzzlingly what the foregoing analysis of Okonkwo's case has revealed is that conformity to the purported benchmarks of normative personhood cannot guarantee the requisite success. Surely this indicates at the very least something unstable or perhaps unpredictable in the application of whatever criterion is being used to determine whether or not one is a person, in the normative sense. Second, an important question begs to be answered. Can the question of whether or not an individual earns personhood be based on a criterion that is unstable and unpredictable—on a criterion that is 'flexible', 'devious', 'ambivalent' and with a tendency to 'betray' in the words of Achebe?

I argue that it cannot. And my consideration of Okonkwo's case strongly reinforces this suspicion. Consequently, not only should we not be surprised at Okonkwo's tragic demise despite conforming to the requisite standards but also, given the unstable nature of these social determinations of success, we should frequently expect that conformity to them will not offer reliable guidance in deciding who is a person in the normative sense. This is because by the time such judgment is made the cultural benchmarks for assessing personhood may have evolved substantially, so that one is uncertain what criteria to apply.

The unreliability of the criterion for normative personhood is thrown into sharp relief in the case of Obierika, who is also an accomplished man according to his culture's definition of success. He had taken titles, showed himself a gallant warrior in inter-tribal wars and

fulfilled his responsibilities to family and society. All these lead Ikuenobe to declare him a paradigmatic case of success at normative personhood. Yet, Ikuenobe glosses over the nature of Obierika's relation to the very cultural norms, on the basis of which his success is determined. According to Biodun Jeyifo (1991), Obierika's relationship to the norms of his culture bears a Janus-face. In him we see at once an individual who openly conforms to the expectations and norms of his culture but at the same time maintains in his private life a skeptical and dissenting attitude towards them; a skepticism that borders on outright rejection. And Achebe takes great care in mapping out instances in which this feature of Obierika's personality comes to the fore.

In one instance, Obierika opposed the practice of title-taking, which, according to Ikuenobe, is an important part of social recognition and therefore a basis for normative personhood: 'sometimes, I wish I had not taken the *ozo* title... I don't know how we got that law...' (Achebe 1994:48). And in a separate incident, he is even more resolved declaring that '...if the oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it' (Achebe 1994:46). But it is in the following incident occurring immediately after Okonkwo's banishment from Umuofia that we come as close as anything to having a full glimpse of the character Ikuenobe idolizes as the epitome of success at normative personhood:

As soon as day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and

destroyed his barn... They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them... Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led to greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, who he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? (Achebe 1994:89–90).

The point I wish to emphasize here is that although Obierika relates to his culture with a certain degree of duplicity, sometimes merely going through the motions of culture when his convictions are otherwise, he is nevertheless canonized by Ikuenobe as the epitome of success at normative personhood. Although his silent protests at certain questionable aspects of his culture are done in the privacy of his *obi*, so that it is of no benefit whatsoever for purpose of cultural reformation, he is deemed to have succeeded in attaining normative personhood. This is hard to believe, and most people would intuitively perceive that there is something amiss here and that the judgment about Obierika's success seems misguided—not Ikuenobe, though. In the next section, I shall argue that the emphasis on social recognition or non-recognition in Umuofian culture has more to do with the processes of how individuals come to acquire the status of manhood (or

womanhood), and very little or nothing to do with the conceptually distinct concept of personhood.

For now, let me recap the main points. On the assumption that normative personhood is a theme in TFA, there are some general morals we can draw regarding this conception of personhood. The first is that grounding personhood in a substantive conception of what the good life is or what constitutes flourishing is not very attractive since it results in an overwhelmingly restrictive and exclusive conception of personhood. The second is that it is not at all clear that personhood is the sort of thing that can be plausibly grounded on the contingencies of culture and history, as proponents of the normative view hold. This latter point reinforces my earlier point about the unreliability of social determinations as the criterion for deciding whether or not one is a person.

3.3. Personhood or Gender?

Up to now, I have been assuming that Ikuenobe is right in claiming that normative personhood is a theme Achebe explores in TFA. However, in actual fact it is not, or so I now argue. My positive view is that there is good reason to think that gender is a theme explored in the novel and that what the relevant characters achieve or fail to achieve is not personhood, but rather the Umuofian conception of what it means to be a man. I draw on important insights from Achebe's novel that help reinforce the conclusion. I shall also argue that Ikuenobe's misidentification of gender as personhood is not mere happenstance, since the so-called communitarian and normative conception of personhood seems to be no more than a conception of gender. In reaching this conclusion, I examine closely aspects of

Menkiti's version of normative personhood with a view to uncovering the deeply gendered nature of normative personhood. This should be enough to bear out the claim that normative personhood is rather a theory of gender.

I begin with the first. Why should we not be persuaded by Ikuenobe's claim that normative personhood is a theme Achebe explores in TFA? Well, one obvious reason is that personhood is not a term Achebe employs explicitly in the text. At no point does he make reference to the term normative personhood either. Although this observation does not by itself settle the matter, it is worth adding that Achebe frequently and explicitly uses the term 'man' or 'woman' respectively to indicate a kind of status that only male or female members of the community are expected to attain. It can be inferred from this that when Achebe discusses social recognition he is not concerned with personhood but rather gendered identities—how these identities were constructed in Umuofia and the nitty-gritties involved in coming to acquire them. Indeed, the first few chapters of the novel reveal the intention of the author to recreate scenes based on pre-colonial African social, political and religious institutions and what we learn is that Umuofia is a deeply gendered society. That is to say, in this society, individual responsibilities and obligations are resolved largely on the basis of gender and individual success is measured in terms of conformity to shared conceptions of what it means to be a 'man' or 'woman'.

One way Achebe achieves this is by portraying a culture in which the description 'man' is closely linked to social achievements that are unique to male members of the community. I have in mind two such achievements. One of them is the achievement of being a successful

farmer of yams. Thus, early on in the novel we are told that ‘yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed’ and further, ‘Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man’ (Achebe 1994:22). Notice how in this fictional community the social status of manhood is equated to that of being a great farmer. Yet, Achebe makes no such link with personhood. It seems to me that if he intended the link to be between social recognition and personhood, then the emphasis on man in connection to great farmer would be absent since personhood is a gender-neutral concept, and women should qualify as well. But it appears this was not Achebe’s aim, and he is keen to stress that in Umuofia the recognition of being a great farmer is closely aligned with being a man, as opposed to being a woman.

The point then is that one of the benchmarks for success appropriate to men is the ability to grow a staple crop that has been culturally reified with a gender bias. This is how he makes the point, ‘Okonkwo’s mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop’ (Achebe 1994:15). No matter how hard the women in Umuofia worked they could not possibly attain the status of ‘great farmer’ and, since that status is closely connected to an acquired identity, they couldn’t possibly acquire that identity. This reinforces the idea that the identity Achebe explores in TFA is one that is individuated by gender.

Similar considerations apply to the other kinds of socially recognized accomplishments that Achebe treats in the novel. For instance, the practice of taking titles is reserved for male members of the community. The author does not portray women as candidates for

any of the available titles in the land. In fact, 'woman' is equivalent to the lack of titles. This is revealed clearly in a passage in which Okonkwo reprimands Osugo: 'Only a week ago', writes Achebe, 'a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man, Okonkwo had said: "This meeting is for men." The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman' (1994:17). So, since it is the case that in the depicted Umuofian culture, having titles is reserved for a particular gender, then it seems that whatever identity an individual acquires in virtue of taking a title must be correspondingly gendered. If so, title-taking could not possibly be a basis for personhood for if that were the case, women would be legitimate candidates as well.

But that's not all. Not only does the concept of social recognition carry strong gender connotations in Achebe's TFA, the very processes by which individuals are socialized as members of the community are organized primarily on the basis of gender so that some such processes are exclusive to individuals who belong in a particular gender group. Thus we are told that the stories that children are told as part of the complex process of socialization and incorporation into community are customized to reflect the interests of the relevant gender. It is not surprising, then, that there are 'masculine stories of violence and bloodshed' (Achebe 1994:36), which underlines the culture's emphasis on such virtues as courage, physical strength etc.—all of which go into making a man in Umuofia. In addition, responsibilities are tailored to suit particular genders and male and female children are brought up in view of what constitutes the ideal for men and women

respectively. For instance, the responsibility of carrying a man's stool is the duty of a son, and a daughter of the household is barred from doing so (Achebe 1994:31).

As it turns out, the essential social achievements upon which Ikuenobe hinges the acquisition of personhood—being a great farmer, title-taking, etc.—are, as far as Achebe's TFA is concerned the basis for acquiring manhood.⁷⁵ As well, the rituals of incorporation and the other processes by which individuals learn social rules of behaviour are organized around one central principle—gender. This implies that the institutions and practices of Umuofian culture more likely support the view that gender identity, not personhood, is what individuals in Achebe's imagined Umuofia attained in virtue of social achievements and/or recognition. If this is the case, one cannot help but suspect that Ikuenobe has with a sleight of hand produced the idea of personhood in Achebe's TFA. Even so I believe that Ikuenobe's misidentification of Achebe's treatment of gender in TFA as personhood actually exposes this conception of personhood for what it really is—a conception of gender.

One way to corroborate this claim is to examine an important thread within the normative view of personhood. This has to do with the precise route to attaining normative personhood. To do so, I focus on a widely cited version of the view—i.e. Menkiti's—as a representative example. Personhood in African thought, says Menkiti, is a status attained by undergoing 'rites of incorporation, including those of initiation at puberty time', thus the emphasis on 'rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the

⁷⁵See Roselyne Jua (2009) for a detailed discussion of the idea that TFA explores how individuals come to acquire a gender identity, in particular manhood as it is conceived in Umuofia.

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..' (1984:173, 174). The underlying idea here is that belonging to a cultural community is necessary for attaining personhood in the normative sense. As Menkiti states, 'without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply' (1994:172).

An interesting detail that is often glossed over, however, is that the social and ritualistic processes by which individuals are integrated as full-fledged members of community are fundamentally gendered. A foray into cultural anthropological research detailing the deeply gendered aspect of ritualistic ceremonies of incorporation and passage into adulthood is not required. It should suffice for my present purposes, however, to indicate that there is no shortage of such evidence in support of the point being made here. Eugenia Herbert (1993) sheds light on African ritualistic ceremonies, indicating that African traditional societies developed elaborate and sometimes very unique sets of rituals adapted to suit culturally evolved conceptions of feminine and masculine identities. Not only does she affirm the perspective that traditional cultures largely perceive the world as essentially gendered, she also points out that rituals of incorporation are instituted on the basis of gender.

In general, the incorporation of individuals into the community through various rites of passage is typically overseen by full-fledged members of community of comparable gender (219). More specifically, the ritualistic passage from boyhood to manhood falls primarily

within the province of the older men in the community. It is under their tutelage that a young boy learns the requisite social skills and rules of behavior befitting a man as his culture defines it. According to Herbert, this is also true in the case of ‘girl’s initiation, which *as a rebirth into adult womanhood, orchestrated by women*, falls entirely within their natural domain’ (ibid.) emphasis added).⁷⁶ Of course, this by no means implies that young girls may not learn important aspects of culture from men and vice versa. The point I wish to stress, however, is that socialization based on gender is the principal mechanism by which individuals are incorporated into community. If this deeply gendered process constitutes the route to attaining normative personhood, then it seems the corresponding achievement should be the appropriate gender identity and not personhood, which by definition must disregard the distinctions of gender.⁷⁷ At least, it is not straightforwardly obvious that undergoing a deeply gendered process should lead individuals acquire personhood rather than the relevant gender identity. To unproblematically claim otherwise would be rather curious.

Besides the gendered nature of the purported normative personhood, it seems quite hard to prise it apart from gender. A woman who has competently satisfied her familial and

⁷⁶Notice that Herbert (1993) describes the endpoint of these gendered ritualistic processes as the attainment of a gendered identity—i.e. womanhood. This should reinforce one of my main claims in this chapter, which is that it is not at all obvious that individuals who undergo deeply gendered processes of incorporation and socialization in community should attain a personhood status, rather than a particular gender identity, as proponents of the normative view claim.

⁷⁷Admittedly, one could argue that the observation that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is based on gender distinctions does not by itself make the conception implausible. One could make a case that although they are both persons, man-persons are different from woman-persons. This is simply a point that this conception of personhood seeks to capture. However, in the last section of this chapter I point out that gender based differences in this idea of personhood are not necessarily benign. Instead, such distinction may indicate how woman-personhood is *inferior* to man-personhood—something I believe is problematic for a conception of personhood.

communal obligations, which typically includes the obligations of motherhood and the expression of feminine virtues, is held to be deserving of the title of person, in the normative sense. And yet it is hard to distinguish this from her deserving the title of proper woman in the sense at issue in a gendered identity. Similarly, a man who lives up to his society's expectations of success and fulfills certain obligations, which usually includes taking a wife, raising one's own family and fending for them, is hailed as being a person in the normative sense. Yet, all of these would be enough to describe him as a great man in the eyes of his community, assuming that his community prizes the same ideals as the imagined Umuofia.

Might it be, then, that what has been paraded as the normative view of personhood is simply a smokescreen, a disguise for the complex ways in which traditional African cultures have negotiated gender ideologies and constructed feminine and masculine identities? Can it be that the specifics of what is involved in the attainment of gender identities are what normative theorists have elevated to a conception of personhood? This supposition is not the least bit absurd and it would be foolish to dismiss it as such. Indeed, it is somewhat striking that the normative view of personhood and gender converge on a number of features.

One obvious point of convergence is that they both require individuals to go through the very same gendered processes of ritualistic incorporation into community, as I already indicated. But they converge in other ways as well. They share a conventional element. In this sense, whether one is a person (in the normative sense) or a man (in the sense at issue

in a gender identity) depends on us, on what we say and how we treat the individual in question. It depends on a complex of social and cultural variables. As well, normative personhood and gender identity are acquired social statuses. According to Menkiti, normative personhood is a status that is acquired in community in accordance with the performance of certain obligations deriving from one's station. In meeting these obligations, which I have argued are fundamentally gendered, individuals allegedly attain the status of personhood. Again, this is also true of gender insofar as conforming to conventional masculine or feminine identities constitute in the words of West and Zimmerman a 'socially organized achievement', which is a vital part of their conception of gender as a performance rather than 'merely' a set of characteristics (1987:129).

Relatedly, gender and normative personhood share a normative feature. That is, whether or not one is a person in the normative sense or man, in the sense at issue in a gender category, is a matter of conforming to prescribed cultural norms of behaviour or prevailing social ideals of masculinity. In both cases individuals could simply fail to attain the required ideal. This idea is a central implication of all versions of the normative account. Thus Menkiti writes 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' (1984:173).

All these points of convergence are natural ancestors to the suspicion that normative personhood may just be a smokescreen for what has been flaunted as normative personhood. In other words, I am claiming these points of convergence between

personhood and gender may have led, or shall we say misled, Ikuenobe, in analyzing Achebe's work, to misidentify acquired gendered identities as personhood.

Obviously, two concepts may be strikingly similar but nevertheless distinct. It may be argued that this is the case with normative personhood and gender. Maybe. What is clear is that any plausible account of personhood that begins with the intuition that individuals acquire personhood in a social and cultural context that is predominantly gendered must admit at the very least that the relevant account of personhood takes the acquisition of gendered identities to be a necessary part of personhood. If this is the case, the onus is on the normative theorist to show how it is that such a deeply gendered process can lead to the acquisition of something as distinct as personhood, which by definition is gender-neutral. While it should not be surprising that the criteria for attaining a gendered identity should be appropriate to the gender in question, we should find it disturbing to say the least that determining whether or not one is a person turns on whether the individual is male or female or more general facts about gender. But this is precisely what the normative view of personhood implies insofar as the process of attaining personhood is structured on the basis of gender. It implies that there are different criteria to attaining personhood (i.e. gender-specific sets of obligations to be met, rules of behaviour, rituals of incorporation and socialization processes etc.), and these differences are primarily based on the differences between the genders. As it stands, then, there seem to be an unhealthy conflation of the two in the current formulation of the normative view of personhood.

3.4. A Probable Objection

In the preceding section, I have argued that the communitarian and normative view is a gendered conception of personhood by chiefly arguing that the processes by which personhood in this sense is acquired is a deeply gendered process. Consequently, I maintained that the appropriate acquisition is not personhood but the relevant gender identity. For example, if a boy undergoes and satisfies all of the gender-specific rituals of incorporation and norms of behaviour, there is no reason to believe that he acquires personhood. Instead, the appropriate identity he acquires should be manhood.

Even so, there is, I think, one probable ground on which my contention that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is a conception of gender identity may be contested. Opponents may claim that although there are gender-specific requirements conformity to which may lead one to acquire the relevant gender identity (i.e. ‘man’ or ‘woman’), there are nevertheless androgynous or gender-neutral requirements, norms of behaviour on the basis of which individual conformity may lead to the attainment of personhood.⁷⁸ An example of such normative requirements for personhood may be the requirement that individuals attain a balance of both male and female attributes in their personality or conformity to the Golden Rule, or some other more general principle that can serve as guide to human behaviour. Kwasi Wiredu actually appeals to the Golden Rule in providing normative content to his idea of sympathetic impartiality as an ideal that individuals must approximate in order to become persons in the normative sense.

⁷⁸This objection was first brought to my attention during the presentation of an earlier draft of this chapter at the annual conference of the PSSA. I am grateful to Prof David Martens for impressing upon me the need to respond to this objection.

Following Wiredu, a friend of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood may contend it is not just gender-specific rules of behaviour that individuals are expected to conform to; instead, it is the ‘*Golden Rule*, supplemented with the customs governing behaviour in a given society or culture’ (Wiredu 2009:15, emphasis added).⁷⁹

If a non-gendered principle like the Golden Rule provides the standard conformity to which enables the individual to be assessed on whether or not the individual attains personhood then my argument falls away. However, we should not be persuaded by this line of objection. First, it should be kept in mind that although a non-gendered criterion is introduced, the gendered ones are not thereby eliminated. And we must not downplay the important role that the cultural expectation to satisfy gender-specific norms of behaviour plays in the attainment of normative personhood. In other words, normative personhood is still a deeply gendered phenomenon even if we include the additional non-gendered benchmark for assessing whether an individual attains personhood. So, we must examine the implications of gendered personhood and how they impact on the purposes for which the non-gendered criterion is introduced.

I have argued in Chapter Two that gender as a social category not only reveals inequalities in terms of individual access to social capital, like power, but also that it is an important tool for social domination of members of a particular gender group—more specifically women. In addition, I argued there that the available objections against this conclusion emerging from gender theorists working in Africa do not succeed. I do not wish to rehearse

⁷⁹See also Wiredu (1992a) for Wiredu’s discussion of the Golden Rule under his idea of the principle of morality emerging from Akan traditional culture—a principle he describes as sympathetic impartiality.

those points here. Instead, I wish merely point out when those points are read in tandem with the conclusion reached in this chapter that normative personhood is fundamentally gendered, we begin to arrive at a response to the probable objection under consideration. Consider the following claims:

1. The communitarian and normative view is a conception of personhood as social achievement;
2. Communitarian and normative personhood is a fundamentally gendered phenomenon;
3. Gender as a social category is a basis for social domination and unequal treatment;
4. More specifically, the hierarchical nature of gender relations is reflected in the inferior positions of women as a group in relation to men;
5. Consequently (i.e. inferring from 3 and 4), social achievements by men are generally superior to the achievements of women.
6. Given 1, 2 and 5, it follows that female-personhood is generally inferior to male-personhood.

I submit that inequality of male and female personhood is a corollary of the gendered nature of communitarian and normative conception of personhood. The point is that even if there is a non-gendered basis for normative personhood, it is important to note that it is not a *sufficient* condition for personhood; it is only a necessary condition. That is, satisfying that condition by itself doesn't guaranteed personhood. This leaves the claim that personhood is a gendered phenomenon intact. But it also reveals something further: that

the personhood acquired by a member of subordinate gender group is inferior (*in virtue of the individual belonging to that gender group*) to the personhood acquired by an individual belonging to a superior gender group. To the extent that gender is constitutive of the communitarian and normative idea of personhood, and that the female gender is disadvantaged socially, to that extent female personhood is compromised vis-à-vis male personhood. This leads me to conclude that satisfying the additional non-gendered criterion does not undercut the force of my original objection that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is gendered.⁸⁰

Another way to approach the objection under scrutiny is to reflect on the question: which of the two broad sets of criteria is really doing the important work for the communitarian and normative conception of personhood? Is it the more general, non-gendered criterion? Or is it the gender-specific cultural norms of behaviour? The question is even more pressing when we consider that the particular requirements and expectations of culture may not always be in agreement with universal principles of right conduct. That Metz has observed, and quite rightly I believe, that the Golden Rule's requirement that an individual treat others as the individual would like to be treated may run contrary to the justifiable practice, for example, of imposing penalties on individuals for crimes committed. 'After all', Metz writes, 'the golden rule would instruct a judge, when responding to an offender, to consider whether he would like to be punished (perhaps if he were in the offender's shoes), and since virtually no judge would want to be punished himself, it appears

⁸⁰I should note that although I focus on the Golden Rule, the considerations here would also apply to other universal, non-gendered principle of right behaviour. In addition, I should observe that my considerations apply as well to traditional African concepts of 'respect' as a moral principle, which ostensibly traverse the distinctions of gender.

invariably impermissible for a judge to penalize an offender' (2007: 378).⁸¹ So, although most African cultures would sanction punishment against offenders, the Golden Rule would not.

What this reveals is that the requirements of a more general, non-gendered principle like the Golden Rule may sometimes be at odds with particular cultural practices. So, proponents of the communitarian and normative view must settle the question of which is fundamental: general principles or gender-specific cultural codes? If satisfying the requirements of a universal principle, like the Golden Rule, is all that matters for personhood, then it is unclear in what sense belonging to and being incorporated into this or that culture should matter at all. It would be unclear why fulfilling family and clan obligations is essential for personhood as Menkiti, Wiredu and other proponents of the communitarian and normative view claim. If satisfying the customs of particular cultures is all that matters, then the additional requirement to live up to universal principles of morality seems to fall away and, as such, the objection under consideration. If satisfying *each* sets of criteria matters equally for attaining personhood, then we return to my first response—the point that since communitarian and normative personhood is fundamentally gendered, in the sense of being situated within relations of hierarchy between men and women, then it seems to follow that even if personhood is acquired in virtue of meeting an additional, non-gendered criterion, the personhood of women would already be compromised by reason of their belonging to a specific gender group adjudged to be inferior to that of men.

⁸¹Thad Metz (2007b, especially 377–378) discusses this point in detail. See also his *Beneficence as a Source of Meaning in Life in the World's Major Religio-Philosophies* (2013b), pp. 11–12.

Finally, we cannot rule out the argument that so-called universal, non-gendered principle of morality may in application be gendered. Here, as in the arguments in Chapter Two, the point is that there is always a gap between standards set by general principles and laws, on the one hand, and actual practices that characterize social reality, on the other. In this vein, Ntuli (2000) has argued strongly that *hlonipha* as a general principle of moral respect towards persons among the Ngunis is fundamentally gendered in the sense that men are expected to receive higher forms of respect than women. If this is the case, then merely suggesting that there are non-gendered criteria for assessing personhood may not be sufficient to show that communitarian and normative personhood is not a gendered phenomenon.

3.5. Conclusion

If I am right that the so-called normative view of personhood is more appropriately a conception of gender, then what many African philosophers who endorse this view have come to accept as the analysis of the concept of a person is not actually an analysis of that concept at all. What has been largely ignored is the fundamentally gendered nature of the alleged normative view of personhood, so that it has been possible for the normative view of personhood to get away with its self-description almost without being noticed. This is regrettable. My analysis is an attempt to show that the communitarian and normative conception is fundamentally a conception of gender identity.

My central aim throughout this chapter has been to undermine whatever support for the normative view may be gleaned from Achebe's TFA. Part of my contention is that the so-called normative view of personhood lumps together gender and personhood. In this way, the distinction between the two has been blurred. However, it is important to recognize that gender and personhood are two distinct concepts; while the latter picks qualities (e.g. agency, persistence, bare capacity for consciousness etc.) that are non-gendered, the former is socially constructed and depends on the kind of contingent facts that ostensibly ground the so-called normative personhood. As well, it should be clear enough that personhood is a generic term, in the sense that it applies over and above gender differences and all the other distinctions necessarily entailed in the concept of gender. Clearly, this does not imply that concerns about gender are secondary; in fact, they are central aspects of the social identities people acquire over the course of their lives. Yet, an enquiry into the social identities people acquire is subsequent to an analysis of personhood or personal identity, since persons are the sort of entities that acquire social identities. A point Kwame Gyekye stressed early on in the literature when he asserted that 'what a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he, qua person, thus becomes the subject of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he cannot be defined by what he acquires' (1992:108).

Chapter Four

4. Individual and Community in Contemporary African Thought⁸²

4.1. Introduction

It is crucial to notice that the critical issues I have been raising in the previous three chapters in relation to the communitarian idea of personhood are in many ways a function of how we think about the relationship between individual and community. The communitarian idea of personhood takes the community to be prior in the conceptualization of personhood. Consequently, it faces several problems. In this chapter, I wish to investigate the relationship between individual and community.

I begin by noting that some of the most widely discussed moral and political theories hinge on metaphysical assumptions about the self. For instance, in the Western tradition John Rawls' and Thomas Hobbes' political philosophies are premised on the notion of self in terms of the individual as abstracted from and independent of actual social relations into which the individual voluntarily enters. Likewise, the most dominant moral-political philosophy in contemporary Africa draws on a particular metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community, which itself informs a specific conception of self. This approach goes under the rubric of moderate communitarianism and its major exponent is Kwame Gyekye, who, like other African philosophers, has been at the forefront of the

⁸²A slightly modified version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in the journal *Philosophia Africana* under the title 'Individual and Community in Contemporary African Moral-Political Philosophy' (2013b), 15(2): 117–134. I am grateful to the anonymous editors for their helpful comments.

campaign to give theoretical expression to what was once manifested as a communalistic way of life in traditional African societies.

The aim of this chapter is to critically analyze this metaphysic as well as the moral-political philosophy that derives from it. In section 4.2, I sketch out Gyekye's metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community, in particular how it informs his conception of personhood. I then draw attention to some tensions internal to the logic of that metaphysics. More specifically, I argue that (1) because Gyekye misconceives the source of the individual-community dilemma what he proposes as an answer merely restates the original dilemma and (2) the assumption he must make for his metaphysics to get going is questionable on theoretical and practical grounds. In the section 4.3, I briefly set out the ensuing moral-political philosophy that takes that metaphysics as its starting point and argue that it faces a new set of problems. In particular, I test it on one of the pressing issues in contemporary Africa that pits the demand for individual liberty against communal good—and then propose (3) a conditional argument viz. if the criterion of adequacy for any moral-political theory is its potential to resolve moral-political dilemmas, then one that is based on that metaphysics is ill-equipped to deal with contemporary moral dilemmas. Moreover, (4) if it were to succeed it would require substantial modification to the original principle.

In the section 4.4, I argue that an adequate metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community, and by extension a moral-political philosophy, should be premised on the notion of priority. Drawing on insights from the recent resurgence in the

debate between monism and pluralism, I throw some light on the notion of priority. I argue further that (5) the priority relation should run in the direction that takes the individual rather than the community as basic. I conclude by comparing the results of the two priority theses on some contemporary human rights issues; I argue that in general the individual priority thesis fares better.

4.2. Individual-Community: A Metaphysic of Equality?

Consider the following two ways the relationship between the individual and community may be expressed: first, as a dependence relation in which the individual (read as ‘parts’) is basic and community (read as ‘whole’) or any such related facts are derivative; second, as a dependence relation in which community is basic and the individual or any such related facts are derivative, in the sense of being explicable by reference to the community. Each of these two intuitions about the relationship between individual and community is widely shared.⁸³ Call the first one the individual priority thesis and the second the communal priority thesis—these descriptions reflecting what each considers to be basic in that relationship.

One of the prominent challengers of the communal priority thesis is Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye. In chapter 2 of his book, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, Gyekye inquires into the subject of ‘the most appropriate type of relation that should exist between the individual and society’ (1997:

⁸³See Placide Tempels (1959), John Mbiti (1969) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) for detailed discussion of the view that takes community as basic, and Bénédet Bujo (2001) for the alternative. Thad Metz (2012a) has articulated what he regards as two Sub-Saharan African moral theories each of which draw on either way of characterizing this relationship.

35). He begins by casting a critical eye on some of the materials of traditional African culture, in particular Akan proverbs, which seem to support the communal primacy thesis. According to Gyekye, such Akan fragments as ‘When a human being descends from heaven, he [or she] descends into a human society’ and ‘a person is not a palm tree that he [or she] should be complete or self-sufficient’ seem to presuppose ‘the priority of the cultural community in which the human being finds herself’ (1997:38). Even so, he is not persuaded by the communal primacy thesis since it misrepresents the relationship by crowding out the individual, including her autonomy and freedom. By maintaining that the individual is ‘*wholly* constituted by social relationships’, it ‘tends to whittle away the moral autonomy of the person—making the being and life of the individual totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, practices, and ends of the community’ (1997:37).

For Gyekye, the communal primacy thesis errs in proposing as it does a metaphysics in which community is prior vis-à-vis the individual. Because they haven’t ‘fully recognized the status and relevance of individual rights ...’ such views ‘patently model the notion of radical and unrestricted communitarianism.’ It is a view that has been ‘overstated’, he says, and one he finds ‘hard to support’ (1997:38). This, however, doesn’t lead Gyekye to endorse the alternative view that the individual is metaphysically prior to the community. On the contrary, he argues that the ‘ontological derivativeness of the community ... cannot be upheld’ since this would imply that communal belonging is ‘merely contingent and optional’ (1997:39).

As it turns out, then, Gyekye finds neither the communal nor the individual priority thesis plausible. His rejection of both expressions of the priority relation paves the way for an alternative metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community. And what is distinctive about it is that it doesn't distinguish between individual and community in terms of which is basic, or prior; in principle they are both taken as equally basic. In his words, 'the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of equal ... standing' (1997:41).

This insight receives its fullest expression in Gyekye's account of personhood. On this account, a person is a composite of two basic metaphysical (i.e. individual and communal) features since not only is a person 'by nature a social (communal) being ... she is, also by nature, *other* things as well ...' (1997:47). By '*other* things', Gyekye has in mind the capacities for rationality, deliberative judgment, virtue, free choice—individual capacities, which he sees as existing independently of the cultural community in which, on his view, the individual is located. As such, 'the most that can be said, then, is that a person is only partly constituted by the community' (1997:59).

Significantly, by identifying individual and communal features as basic to the constitution of person, Gyekye's aim is to establish a relation of metaphysical equality, rather than priority, between the two. There are two ways we may characterize Gyekye's metaphysics of equality. One way is the simple claim that individual and community are equally basic. The implication is a denial of any sort of supervenience between them; each existing independently of the other. As such they are not modally constrained: altering the intrinsic

properties of one would not produce a corresponding effect on the other. The difficulty, however, is that a supervenience relation does not obtain between them. That is, facts about individuals impact on the collective and vice versa. And it is crucial that an account of the relationship captures this fact.

Alternatively, Gyekye's position may be characterized as the view that the dependence or supervenience relation between them runs in both directions (i.e. it is symmetric). In this case, the view is that the collective depends on the individual and the individual depends on the collective. This idea is not foreign to the literature.⁸⁴ Notice, however, that this position is a conjunction of the individual and communal priority theses. Dzobo's attempt to rework Mbiti's widely cited statement of the communal priority thesis 'I am because we are; since we are, therefore I am' resulted in the bizarre conjunction: 'I am because we are, and since I am therefore we are' (1992:132).

The difficulty with this amalgamation is that it combines two mutually exclusive theses. One holds that the community is basic; the other flatly denies it. Thus, a conjunction of the two doesn't automatically generate a viable alternative; instead, it either implies that neither is basic (which doesn't aid Gyekye's project since he requires basic entities or values for his metaphysics and moral-political philosophy respectively) or that the conjunction is simply unintelligible. One sense in which this claim of intelligibility can be made is by pointing out that the argument contained in the conjunction clearly fails the simple test of validity. Similar to Kaphagawani's criticism of Mbiti's original version, it is unclear what

⁸⁴See Dzobo (1992), Eze (2009) and Wiredu (2008)

the helping premise/s is/are that establish the two mutually exclusive conclusions reached in the conjunction.⁸⁵

Further, Gyekye's inclusion of basic, non-derivative individual features as essential constituents in the metaphysical structure of personhood anticipates his subsequent case for equally recognizing and upholding individual rights, since according to him 'rights belong primarily and irreducibly to the individual' (1997:62). Ultimately, then, Gyekye's position is that metaphysical equality between individual and community is the most appropriate way of characterizing that relationship since it holds better promise in articulating a moral-political philosophy in which individual rights and communal good are equally recognized and upheld. For that reason, he writes, 'guided by the assumptions about the dual features of self ... it should be possible to deflate any serious tension between the self and its community' (1997:76).

If Gyekye's metaphysical assumptions could deflate 'any serious tension' between individual and community, it would be irrational not to embrace it. But I doubt that it can. There are two main reasons why I am not persuaded by Gyekye's preference for metaphysical equality, over priority. One concerns what I regard as Gyekye's misunderstanding of the original dilemma; he reads the original dilemma as a function of the failure to equally recognize individuality. I shall argue that this is fundamentally mistaken. The other is related to an assumption I believe Gyekye must make in order for his metaphysics to get off the ground. I shall argue that even on his own account Gyekye's

⁸⁵Kaphagawani (2004:337-8)

explicit denial that there can be radical conflicts between individual and community is questionable on both theoretical and practical grounds.

Let me begin with the first: Gyekye's response to the individual-community debate misconceives the source of the dilemma. This is seen from what his moderate communitarianism is meant to do—to *acknowledge*, while still retaining its communitarian orientation, 'the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual human person' and to recognize 'individuality, individual responsibility and effort' and in his assertion that '...no human society is absolutely communal or absolutely individualistic' (1997:40, 41), as though this point was ever in contention. To be sure, there are features of communalism in the most individualistic societies and vice versa. It seems to me that both sides in the debate—i.e. those who assert either the communal or individual priority thesis—would concede this point. All each side need claim is that these individualistic or communalistic elements are merely derivative not fundamental. In fact, Menkiti, who unequivocally asserts the ontological priority of the community, doesn't deny that there are features of human society that can be broadly characterized as individualistic. His view is rather that '... priority is given to the ... collectivity' and individual features, 'whatever these may be, are seen as secondary...' (1984:180). So, a metaphysics that merely requires the recognition of individuality in the communitarian scheme misses the point of the debate. And in making this his central concern, Gyekye rather curiously assumes that the real controversy was about the failure to recognize individuality.

Yet if the source of the controversy was never merely about recognition, perhaps it was about *equal* recognition. Part of Gyekye's point is that individual and community should be *equally* recognized; in this way, his metaphysics would take us beyond the simple individual/community priority dichotomy. Or, so Gyekye hopes. He also wants to say that metaphysical equality has some merits over priority—it holds better promise in resolving the individual/community dilemma (Gyekye 1997:76). But herein lies the puzzle—the original source of the dilemma is precisely due to assigning equal weight to the demands of individuality and communality. To see this, consider Gyekye's own remarks when setting out the problem at the very beginning of his discussion:

The problem arises because we believe, on one hand, that the individual human being has autonomy, freedom, and dignity—values that are considered most worthwhile and ought therefore to be respected by the society; we believe, on the other hand, that the individual not only is a natural member of the human society but needs society and all that it makes available for the realization of the individual's potential, and for living a life that is most worthwhile (1997:35).

Gyekye's point here is that because we do not believe any less in the fundamentality of individual autonomy and freedom than we do in the fundamentality of the community, we are confronted with the problem of explaining how these two components are related since the claims they make on us clearly pull in different directions. But if the original controversy was a function of equally recognizing the claims of individuality and

communality, then how can a metaphysics that proposes equal regard for both, by recoiling from distinguishing which one is basic, take us any further beyond the original dilemma? If we reached a cul-de-sac by reason of believing that these two frameworks can be given equal regard, how could we expect a theory that proposes the same to properly articulate what the appropriate relationship between individual and community should be? It seems to me that the correct response is that it couldn't. Thus, the metaphysics underlying Gyekye's moderate communitarianism doesn't add anything new or non-trivial to the debate. Because it advocates equal recognition of communality and individuality, which was always at the root of the controversy, moderate communitarianism does not take us beyond the original dilemma but merely restates it. In this sense, it merely disguises itself as an answer to the question of what the appropriate relationship between individual and community should be.

Now to the second point: in order for Gyekye's metaphysics to get going, we have to assume that it is indeed possible to equally recognize individuality and community. It would be odd to propose a system of equal recognition if it were not possible. Yet, this possibility implies that the two items to be equally recognized are compatible, which is a way of denying that there are deep conflicts between the two. To my mind, this last point is the assumption Gyekye must make for his metaphysics to get off the ground. Indeed, he assumes this throughout. In one place, he claims explicitly that '...communalism, as conceived and understood in Akan or African social philosophy, is a consistent theory, one that is not *opposed* to the fundamental interests of the individual.'⁸⁶ But Gyekye is not alone. Other ways of denying the conflicts between individual and community have been

⁸⁶Gyekye, K. 'Person and Community in African Thought' <http://www.galerie-inter.de/kimmerle/>

proposed.⁸⁷ Augustine Shutte, for instance, has suggested a fusion between the two. ‘Each individual of the community’, he says, ‘sees the community as themselves, as one with them in character and identity. Each individual sees every other individual member as another self. Thus there is *no room for a separation* between the individual and the community...’ (2001:27). The point of this is to assert along with Gyekye that there are no deep conflicts between individual and community.

There are two reasons why Gyekye could not make this assumption and therefore why his metaphysics cannot get off the ground. The first reason is that that assumption would render moderate communitarianism somewhat unnecessary. This is so because if there was no conflict in the first place there would be no need to attempt to resolve the conflict. But because Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism came about as a way of resolving the conflict, it couldn’t possibly begin with the assumption that there are no radical conflicts between the two. Assuming this would completely eliminate any rationale for a metaphysics that proposes equal recognition, since that metaphysics was proposed in the first place to eliminate such conflicts (Gyekye 1997:76). (Note that my earlier point was that there are indeed conflicts arising because we equally recognize both and that Gyekye’s metaphysics succeeds in restating this conflict by proposing equal recognition.) Additionally, Gyekye couldn’t make the assumption that there are no deep conflicts between the two in that it would be question-begging. Gyekye’s metaphysical exposition was designed to show how the conflict could be resolved; but by assuming it, he would be assuming what he is supposed to demonstrate.

⁸⁷See also Eze (2009) and, more recently, Masolo (2010:134).

Second, Gyekye couldn't make the relevant assumption because it is simply wrong. Actually, these conflicts do exist.⁸⁸ Turner, for instance, has noted that what is at stake in this individual-community controversy is 'a basic clash of styles of thoughts, the one liberal and individualist the other "communitarian" and "holist"' (1968:32). In the next section, I discuss a contemporary issue that shows up the conflict; in the meantime, I submit that insisting otherwise either conceals the real problem or implies that the individual-community controversy is either based on a misunderstanding or a blatant lie, part of which ridicules the entire oeuvre of philosophical endeavour geared at addressing this rather obdurate problem in philosophy. This is hard to believe!

4.3. On the Equal Moral Standing of Community and Individual

Gyekye's metaphysics and the resulting conception of personhood as a composite of non-derivative individualistic and non-derivative communalistic features has massive implications for his moral-political philosophy, for in that system, which he distinguished as moderate communitarianism as opposed to the unrestricted one, individual dignity, upon which human rights are subsequently grounded, and communal good are taken at once as basic, non-derivative goods corresponding respectively to the two constitutive features of personhood. Moral agents are thus required to act in ways that simultaneously serve the good of the collective and exhibit respect for individual dignity and rights. This is so because, according to Gyekye, there cannot be an opposition between the two: '...the dignity or worth of the individual cannot be diminished by his natural membership in the

⁸⁸See Metz (2012b) for some hypothetical and real cases of individual-community conflict.

community’; ‘...the common good ... cannot—should not—result in the willful subversion of individual rights; and ‘...at both the theoretical (conceptual) and practical levels, communitarianism cannot set its face against individual rights’ (1997:63, 64).

On top of this, Gyekye’s two-fundamental-value system has implications for his political philosophy. Metz has described Gyekye’s political philosophy as deeming as appropriate ‘a state that determines policy by consensus-oriented democracy, protects substantial liberties, and distributes opportunities and wealth according to a market in the first instance but redistributes funds, via taxation, as necessary to meet needs’ (2012b:64).⁸⁹ For Gyekye, who explicitly balks at a democratic system characterized by majoritarianism, a consensus-based polity would acknowledge ‘the intrinsic worth ... and the moral (natural) rights of the individual’ and simultaneously advocate ‘the politics of the common good’ being ‘concerned with the communal welfare...’ (1997:69, 70). And all these in the spirit of a moderate communitarianism, which ‘gives accommodation to communal values as well as to values of individuality’ (76).

The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive account of Gyekye’s system but simply to show the implications of his metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community on his moral-political philosophy. And clearly, Gyekye takes care to point out that we need not distinguish between individual rights and communal good, in terms of which is basic. Problems arise, however, when these two presumably fundamental goods conflict. In such cases, it appears that we must apply deliberative judgment in adjudicating

⁸⁹For critical commentaries on the politics of consensus see Eze (1997), Eze (2009), Fayemi (2010) and Matolino (2013).

between them. Without such adjudication and consequent ranking of these values, a moral agent, it seems, would be at a loss on how to act. Thus, the real burden for any moral or political philosophy in contemporary Africa concerns how it negotiates and resolves the conflicts generated by the seemingly equally legitimate demands of community and individual pulling in opposite directions. Let us call this the adequacy criterion—the idea that part of what it means for a theory to be adequate is that it is as likely as its rivals to resolve potential moral-political dilemmas. My suspicion is that Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism is severely deprived in this regard.

Consider the issue of the rights of gays and lesbians living in many contemporary African communities with a well-defined conception of what constitutes the good, including acceptable sexual options that are consistent with certain highly prized collective values. Such values spring from a recognition of the place and role of the family, and important kinship relations, in forging a sense of group membership.⁹⁰ Thad Metz, drawing on the centrality of such relations and the associated values, has articulated what he deems a basic moral intuition shared by Sub-Saharan Africans quite generally. In his view ‘Many African people think there is some strong moral reason to extend familial relationships by finding a (heterosexual) spouse and having children. ...’ He goes on to explain that this goes beyond the simple obligation to care for one’s children or remain faithful to one’s spouse; it is ‘the stronger claim that one has some obligation to wed and procreate in the first place ...’ (Metz 2007:327–328). The point is that the idea of a collective good incorporates

⁹⁰See Cobbah (1987:318, 320 and 321).

preferences and values closely aligned with and propogative of family and kinship relations. In particular, it includes a clear preference for heterosexuality.

Although homosexual propensities are often put down to colonialism and other Western devices, it is also important to note as Philips does in his excellent review of the book, *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* by Murray and Roscoe, that 'rejections of same-sex relations in African cultures can ... be explained by a preoccupation with procreation and the reproduction of kinship ...' (Philips 2001:199). Elsewhere, Bristow (1996:247) observes that 'same-sex desire can be threatening to those institutions ... such as family ... that assume that heterosexuality is a natural, as opposed to cultural phenomenon'.⁹¹ By publicly questioning the consensus and the idea of the common good that legitimizes the 'naturalness' of heterosexual relations, and traditional notions of family, the open acknowledgment and practice of homosexuality threatens the very basis of a communitarian ethic. Thus, it is not at all surprising that homosexuality is one of the most intensely disputed and divisive issues in contemporary Africa and one that clearly pits the demand for individual liberties against a well-defined and substantive conception of communal good. The issue of homosexuality and the associated homophobia increasingly figures within everyday private and public commentaries, attitudes and behaviours, cultural reactions as well as popular political opinions.⁹²

⁹¹In places where homosexuality it was tolerated, it was only to the extent it was *subordinated* to heterosexuality. See Anderson (2007:129) and Philips (2001:197).

⁹²See Reddy (2001) for a catalogue of state and non-state opposition to homosexuality, in particular the rights of gays and lesbians, in contemporary in Africa.

How might a moral agent or a consensus-based state working on the assumptions of a Gyekye-inspired moral-political philosophy cope with the question of the rights of gays and lesbians in contemporary Africa where a robust conception of the common good demands equal regard? It doesn't seem that equally recognizing the rights of gays and lesbians, on the one hand, and the specific obligation to procreate, which is born out of a conception of the collective good, on the other, would provide any real guidance to moral agents and legislators. Nor is it entirely clear what a politics of consensus would amount to on such a deeply divisive matter. In either case, a moral agent or legislator could not rely on the principle of equal regard; acting would ultimately presuppose some kind of ordering of values and subsequent tradeoff, which is contrary to the principle of equal regard. Since the injunction to equally regard individual rights and communal good cannot provide any real guidance, then the moral-political theory may be said to be inadequate given the adequacy criterion.

It seems to me that the only realistic option available to someone who wants to be guided by Gyekye's principle is resorting to some form of casuistry. This would imply that in some cases individual rights could legitimately trump collective good, while in others the reverse would apply. Indeed, this insight is inferred directly from Gyekye's own remarks. In one place, he suggests that under certain conditions, 'the common good of the society justifiably trumps individual rights.' But since his version of communitarianism implies not 'privileging' one over the other or that the 'claims of individuality and community ought to be *equally morally* acknowledged' (1997:66, 67, emphasis added), we may read him as claiming that there are also possible scenarios in which individual rights may legitimately

trump communal good, for what would equal moral regard amount to if this were not the case? This last inference is drawn directly from Gyekye's work. In his very brief commentary on the rights of gays and lesbians in contemporary Africa, Gyekye portrays his moderate communitarianism as eliciting powerful moral reasons for upholding the rights of such persons over the collective (1997: 65). Thus, it appears that on a case by case assessment, moderate communitarianism would provide different moral reasons sometimes in favour of upholding individual rights and at other times in favour of communal good. This approach seems to ensure that its promise to equally regard both basic goods is met, albeit in a manner that seems arbitrary.

I have argued elsewhere that there are costs to this approach, including especially that it requires simultaneously appealing to mutually exclusive principles.⁹³ Here, I propose a different reason why relying on a case by case assessment doesn't bode well for Gyekye's two-value system.

This approach would rely on additional information about the circumstances of each case in deciding which of individual rights or communal good is to be prioritized in situations of conflict. An additional circumstantial reason may include considerations about the utility of upholding a certain right. That is, whether protecting some right has any utility at all. If the circumstances of the case do not attach additional value to protecting such rights it may well be overridden in favour of communal good. Conversely, if the protection of some collective good in favour of some individual in a particular circumstance would not

⁹³See Oyowe (2013c)

promote overall utility, it may well be suspended. However, the idea that what determines whether some individual right or collective good should be upheld depends on considerations of utility or the circumstances of the case has three undesirable implications.

First, it shows that the protection of rights or the collective good is only valuable as a *means* to some further circumstantially determined end. That is to say, on a case by case approach whether some right or collective good should be upheld turns on the circumstances of the case being examined. This is not particularly desirable for the moderate communitarian who seeks to regard the protection of individual rights and communal good as equally distinct moral ends. Second, because this approach must distinguish between individual rights and collective good on a case by case basis, the problem is that the criteria for discriminating between the two cannot be the moderate communitarian principle of equal regard which doesn't permit such discriminations. Third, and relatedly, this case by case approach implies that the principle of equally regarding individual rights and communal good is not independently plausible. Its plausibility rests ultimately on the circumstances of the particular cases. This result is quite worrying because it suggests that the moderate communitarian cannot insist on the principle of equal regard. What she can claim is that we may either regard individual right or communal good as basic *depending on the circumstances of the case*. To the extent that this latter principle involves distinguishing between the two in terms of which is basic, to that extent it involves a significant shift from the original principle that eschews such ordering of values.

By way of concluding this section, I note that two contemporary African philosophers, Bernard Matolino (2009) and J.O. Famakinwa (2010) have argued quite compellingly that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism fails to convince because it ultimately slides into the unrestricted one he analyzed and rejected. The basis for this claim is in part that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism doesn't really place individual rights on a par with communal good as it promised to do. Under pressure to adjudicate between demands of individuality and community, Gyekye's so-called moderate communitarianism would assert the primacy of the community over the individual (rights). While I am persuaded by the force of the foregoing argument, I believe there is more to be said against Gyekye's moderate communitarianism besides that it buckles under the pressure of application. At any rate, I interpret my own position as the claim that what moderate communitarianism claims *in principle*—equal moral standing for individual and community—couldn't possibly provide any real guidance on related moral or political conflicts and that the only sense in which its injunction can be made intelligible involves something quite contrary to the spirit of moderate communitarianism.

4.4. Individual-Community: It's a Matter of Priority

If I am right that Gyekye's metaphysics is inadequate, what, then, is the appropriate way to approach the debate on the relationship between individual and community? Metz has recently observed that 'a useful way to classify and to evaluate actual and possible sub-Saharan moral philosophies is according to which of these ideas are taken to be fundamental and which are derivative...' (2012:62). I believe that anyone who seeks to

respond adequately to the question must fully understand the meaning of priority and clearly account for which of the two is prior.

But what exactly is meant by priority? Jonathan Schaffer's recent intellectual recovery of a long-standing philosophical doctrine, namely, monism provides us with some helpful insights. He characterizes the debate between monism and pluralism in terms of the relationship between wholes and parts and goes on to defend a version of monism called priority monism according to which the whole is prior to its parts. Schaffer defines priority quite broadly as one arm of a 'metaphysical structure' (the other being posterior), which expresses 'what depends on what, and ... what are the fundamental independent entities that serve as the ground of being' (2010:35). In such a metaphysical structure, then, the term prior picks out that upon which something else *depends* (posterior refers to that which *depends on* what is prior). Take, for example, Barack Obama. If indeed he exists, then the proposition 'Barack Obama exists' must of necessity be true. But the truth of the proposition 'Barack Obama exists' *depends* on Obama's actual existence and it would be odd to claim otherwise—that is, that Obama exists *because* the proposition is true.⁹⁴

The example is illuminating—it suggests straightaway that the notion of priority invokes a dependency relation that is asymmetric and requires ultimate grounding or a foundational level, where asymmetry refers to the fact that the dependency relation runs in one direction (e.g. the truth of proposition depends on actual Obama, not the other way round) and a foundational level indicates that the sequence of dependence relations cannot go on *ad*

⁹⁴This is what Aristotle had in mind when he asserted that truth depends on being (Aristotle 1984: 22, cited in Schaffer 2010:35)

infinitum (e.g. the actual Obama is the basic entity upon which the truth of the proposition depends). The intuitive justification for positing basic entities is that ‘without ontologically basic entities,’ Schaffer writes, ‘being would be endlessly deferred, never achieved.’⁹⁵

The metaphysics of the relationship between individual and community is an inquiry into what constitutes this basic level and, since we must reject the idea that the two are equally basic for reasons given above, there are only two remaining possibilities—the individual and communal priority theses.

I believe the most powerful argument recommending the communal priority thesis concerns the point that the collective exhibits properties that are not reducible to individual ones. This insight has been variously expressed as the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Schaffer 2010:50); that the community is a *natural* formation (Masolo 2006:490); that the community has a reality in itself (Gyekye 1997:41); and that it is ontologically independent of the ‘life histories’ of its individual members (Menkiti 1984:171, 180). The argument may be summarized as follows:

1. If something exhibits properties that do not depend on its parts, then it is a fundamental whole
2. A community exhibits properties that do not depend on the individuals
3. From 1 and 2: A community is a fundamental whole
4. A fundamental whole is prior to its parts

⁹⁵Schaffer (2007)

5. Therefore, a community is prior to its individual members

The argument is obviously valid. What remains to be seen is whether the premises are true. In particular, premise 4 requires some explanation. The idea that fundamental wholes exhibit properties that do not depend on their parts, and that they are prior to their parts, is usually supported by appeal to entangled systems in Quantum physics. Such a system can contain ‘information over and above that of the quantum states of its components’ or, alternatively, it may be explained as a state of affairs in which ‘the physical properties of the whole are not fixed by the total intrinsic properties of any subsystems’ (Schaffer 2010:46, 48). In virtue of exhibiting properties that do not supervene on its parts, the whole is said to be independent and therefore prior to its parts. It may appear that the best scientific representation of reality supports the priority of the whole and by extension the collective over the individual. However, this view has been challenged (Morganti 2009). In the end, whether the first premise is true turns heavily on the physics. I do not wish to dwell on this point, however. Instead, I turn attention to the question of whether a community is a fundamental whole in the sense that it exhibits properties that do not depend on the individuals constituting it.

There are two reasons against this view. The first comes directly from the literature and it has to do with the idea of community that is caught up in that mode of thinking. The idea of community is of an independently existing entity; it has been interrogated and rejected (Appiah 1992; Hountondji 2002; Masolo 2009). Here, I recap some of the reasons for protesting against that idea of community. First, because that idea of community represents

it as something separate, existing over and above the individuals that constitute it, it cannot explain how individual actions, projects, movements and creativities continuously shape and alter the very constitution of community, cultural life and collective goals. In fact this aspect of our understanding of community reveals quite powerfully a more fluid rather than fixed concept of community; one that is always evolving, which evolution is a function of activities and movements of individuals that constitute it. If this is right, it seems that a more plausible notion of community is one which depends on the individuals that constitute it. Of course, this doesn't render community unimportant; although community is metaphysically dependent on individuals, it could still be thought of as valuable for the wellbeing of individuals.⁹⁶

Another reason why we shouldn't subscribe to the idea of community as some independently existing entity is that the only way of making it intelligible sets it up as an obvious threat to individual autonomy and freedom. The idea that community refers to something independent of individuals would imply that it has well-defined interests that are not reducible to those of the individuals within the community. It would further imply, or at least leave open the possibility, that collective interest so defined would sometimes conflict with *some* if not most individuals ones. And since the collective interest would always take precedence in the event of conflicts (precisely because it is taken as basic vis-à-vis individual interests), it seems to follow that individual autonomy and other freedoms, will be imperiled.⁹⁷

⁹⁶Notice that this role of community is at the level of value, not as a metaphysical entity. For African philosophers who have expanded on this point see Bujo (1997 and 2001) and Metz (2012a:66–68)

⁹⁷For more on this argument see Okolo (2003:253–254)

Yet, besides the fact that respect for individual rights and freedoms is something that must be given due attention, there is reason to suspect that the prioritization of the collective over the individual is questionable morally. As Coetzee compellingly argues if what it means to have a collective goal is the promotion of the well-being of individual members of the community, then the idea of community as representing interests separate from and independent of those of its members lacks moral significance as it cannot adequately serve the presupposed moral ideal (realizing the wellbeing of its members) (2001:276). That is to say, it is not at all clear that the moral goal of realizing the well-being of individual members is always consistent with the communal goal if the latter is separable from the former.

My two previous points are attempts to cast doubts on the idea of community as a separately existing entity, which must be presupposed if the claim in premise 2 above is to have any basis. A third point concerns the question of what sort of properties could be attributed to a collective that are not reducible to those of the individuals constituting it. (Recall that the claim in premise 2 is that the community is a fundamental whole because it exhibits properties that are *independent* of individuals). Part of the answer to that question can be found in Menkiti who defends the view that the community is prior to the individual. He writes that the ‘communal gene pool’ to which the individual identifies and ‘also the language which he speaks... *belong* to this or that specific human group’. He then adds that ‘social rules point them (i.e. individuals) to a mental commonwealth’ (1984:172, emphasis added.) Additionally, such things as value-systems, worldviews, and rights are usually

attributed to the collective in ways that indicate that they are not reducible to individuals.⁹⁸ Even so, it is hard to understand what it is for these facts to belong irreducibly to the collective.

One possibility is that they are non-individualizable in the sense that they can only be made sense of collectively rather as individual attributes (Coetzee 2001:277). In a sense, this claim seems outright false. The claim that a language, value-system or worldview belongs to this or that community is reducible to the claim that individuals in that community express themselves in that language, hold that worldview or subscribe to that value-system. It is hard to see why they are not so reducible. More specifically, some may contend that rights may be irreducibly attributed to a collective. The idea of collective rights, as distinct from individual rights, is of philosophical interest. To the extent that such rights belong and are irreducibly attributable to the collective, to that extent it seems plausible to assert that certain attributes belong to the collective, as opposed to the individual, and thus maintain that premise 2 above is correct. One problem with collective rights is that they are exclusionary: by definition they exclude non-members as well as dissenting members of the community.⁹⁹ Also, they potentially threaten individual autonomy because they tend to compete against the rights of individuals.¹⁰⁰ Thus, it is not at all clear why it is desirable to posit such rights.

⁹⁸See Hountondji (1983 & 2002) for criticism of attempts to attribute a philosophy to a collective mind.

⁹⁹See Glazer (1995:137). Also cited in Coetzee (2001:275)

¹⁰⁰See Johnston (1995:189). Also cited in Coetzee (2001:275)

Yet, if such rights can be explained by reducing them to individual rights, and if our goal is to achieve simplicity of explanation, it seems that the goal of understanding is best served by this reductive strategy rather than by construing community as a separate, further entity with rights, distinct, separate and comparable to those of individual persons. It appears to me that any collective rights are reducible to or can be explained in terms of the rights of individual members of that group. For instance, a collective right to group survival may be explained as the right individual members have to support the continued existence of the group. Likewise, the right of a group to a language is reducible to the right of each individual within the group to express that language. In both cases, we need not posit community as having rights independent of those of its individual members (which is what premise 2 above claims).

Perhaps these attributes are non-individualizable in the sense that they yield benefits that accrue to the collective rather than individuals merely. Even so, the mere fact that language, worldviews and value-system produce some collective benefits—transmission of cultural knowledge, a representation of the world and the regulation of conduct respectively—does not imply that it cannot be individualized. I do not see why the benefits that accrue to the community cannot be read as benefits to particular individuals; we need not posit community as some separate entity enjoying benefits distinct from those particular individuals enjoy. Moreover, these collective benefits are subsequent to and therefore dependent upon individual expressions and creative inputs. There would be no collective benefits if individuals did not first express themselves in the relevant language or constantly abide by or revise the relevant worldview or value-system. Since they depend on individual

expression and application, it would be mistaken to reason from the collective benefits such things as language, worldview, and value-system provide to making a case for the order of priority in favour of the collective.

Finally, there are independent reasons why we may still want to resist the idea that the community is prior to the individuals that constitute it (i.e. the conclusion in 5 above) even *if* the premises of the above arguments were true. This has to do with the fact that by accepting that conclusion we couldn't properly explain the way in which individual persons are intrinsically valuable as well as how it is that rights properly belong to them (Gyekye 1997:62). The idea is that if the community is prior, then individuals are derivative. Thus, whatever value or rights individuals may be said to have derives ultimately from the community. If this is the case, it follows that the rights of the individual derive from the community so that the claim that an individual has this or that right means that the relevant right belongs ultimately to the community.

Compare, for instance, the view that land belong primarily to a family or kinship unit.¹⁰¹ In such cases, an individual's claim to land is derivative since the individual owns the land in virtue of the group in which she belongs owning the land. Because it implies that individuals have value or rights *in virtue of* the community having value or rights, this view therefore cannot capture what I deem to be an uncontroversial intuition that the individual has *intrinsic* value or that rights belong primarily to the individual. As such, it couldn't possibly sufficiently underwrite the democratic ideal of individual rights.

¹⁰¹See Wiredu (1996:165–167) for a detailed discussion of this view.

4.5. Two Moral-Political Issues

The main point of contention has been that characterizing the relationship between the individual and community in terms of priority (rather than equality) holds better promise for new moral-political philosophies in contemporary Africa. My additional claim is that the direction of the priority relation should run from the individual to community. In this final section, I wish to discuss two related contemporary issues with important ethical-political implications. My aim is to argue that when the result of approaching these issues from the perspective of prioritizing the individual is compared with that of the communal priority approach, the former fares better in dealing with these issues.

4.5.1. Affirmative Action and Compensatory Justice

Most people would agree that achieving a just and equitable society is something morally desirable. One of the key requirements for doing so in places where there have been widespread historic injustices is setting up processes to remedy wrongs, especially those that were committed in the past. Affirmative action policies are intended for this purpose. On the one hand, justice requires compensation to those who have been wronged in the past; on the other, the process of dispensing compensatory justice would almost always require overriding some of the rights of others. (Consider cases of preferential hiring in which the rights of certain persons to a job or the opportunity to get a job may be overridden in favour of the compensation owed to others.)

Because it takes community to be an independently existing thing, having interests and rights that are not reducible to those of the individual members, a moral-political philosophy that rests on the priority of the community would have to treat the issue as a conflict of *group* rights—the right to compensation of the black community vs. the right to equal opportunity (or a job) of the white community. Individual members of these communities have these rights *derivatively* in virtue of the group having it. In this case, one group right would trump another, with the group right to compensation being the morally distinguishing factor.

One very obvious problem confronting this approach is that because it must regard the collective as a separate entity, with interests and rights independent of those of its members; it couldn't possibly explain why the individual has a claim to be considered *as an individual* regardless of her group affiliation. Compensatory justice is meted out to the collective and reaches the individual only derivatively. Coetzee, characterizing Appiah's position on a related matter, puts the point this way: 'the individual's claim to be considered only as an individual, regardless of race, colour or sex, is reduced at the expense of claims to group affiliation.' (Coetzee 2001:274). Yet, it seems to me that what is of significance morally is not the protection of the rights of some community merely but the rights of *particular individuals* within a community.

Relatedly, thinking of affirmative action policies as ways of correcting injustices to groups veers dangerously in the wrong direction as it misses the point that the individuals such policies are meant to serve do not always fit neatly into specific groups. Further, an

approach to compensatory justice that privileges the collective over the individual may lead to the mistaken view that affirmative action implies dispensing justice on the basis of race, sex or other social grouping *simpliciter*. But such blanket dispensation of justice simply on the basis of race or other grouping strikes me as something morally offensive about affirmative action policies.

I should state that I am not suggesting that group membership doesn't matter. I am only claiming that it matters derivatively; it matters only *because* the individual matters. To see this, consider in contrast how a moral-political philosophy based on individual priority would approach the issue. Because it prioritizes the individual, it is better positioned to explain why *individual rights* rather than collective rights should be the primary focus of such policies. It moves away from consideration of faceless group rights to consideration of the individual whose claim to be compensated becomes central. The rationale for compensatory justice, or more generally affirmative action policies, would be remedying the wrongs of the past *done to particular individuals* rather than a collective; justice would be served to the collective in virtue of the individual having their demands to be compensated met. In this sense, the claim that some group was wronged in the past, or has rights to be compensated in the present is reducible to the claim that certain individuals within the group were victims of past wrongdoing, or have rights to compensation.

If I am right that what many people find morally offensive about affirmative action policies is that it simply involves dispensing justice on the basis of group affiliation, then it is a merit of a moral-political philosophy based on individual priority that it takes the right of

the individual to compensation as basic while characterizing the individual's affiliation to some racial, sexual or gender grouping as a derivative (but still important, albeit derivatively) fact about the individual and therefore about compensatory justice.

4.5.2. Land Reform

The issue of land reform represents a special case of efforts to achieve justice by means of compensating for historical wrongs. Relevant policies are designed to ensure that pieces of land that were unjustly claimed in the past are distributed more equitably in the present.

Metz (2011) has argued that the morally relevant factor to consider in arriving at a just redistribution of land in contemporary Africa is a communal fact about friendliness. He reads the initial injustice as some kind of 'unfriendly action' and then propose that corresponding 'unfriendly action by the state towards whites, such as expropriation of land they currently hold, is justified only if it is likely to help those harmed by the land being held by whites, that is, dispossessed blacks.' (553). I do not find Metz's community-based justification of compensatory justice convincing for a number of reasons.

First, it erroneously construes what is clearly a subsequent benefit of compensatory justice as a necessary condition for compensatory justice. If there is legitimate claim for compensatory justice, then whether it is likely to realize some benefit is subsequent to the legitimacy of the claim. As such, it couldn't possibly be set as a pre-condition for compensation. Suppose that someone breaks into my property, steals my very expensive Ferrari and then gets caught. Suppose further that having my Ferrari back would mean that

I pose a threat to other motorists and further increase my chances of having a fatal accident, it seems to me that it would be unjust to have the offender retain my Ferrari until such a time that it is established that I no longer pose these threats to others and myself. Similarly, it would not be in the interest of justice to delay compensation until some subsequent benefit is realized. I am not claiming that having certain social benefits (e.g. reducing the risks of accidents on the road) are undesirable; instead I am claiming that while a state of affairs in which compensatory justice brings about certain collective benefits is desirable, it doesn't follow that compensatory justice is contingent upon such benefits.

Another related reason why Metz's account is unconvincing concerns the particular benefit it takes to be morally relevant for compensatory justice—to 'run farms and keep the economy stable, blacks given agricultural land need substantial financing and training' (2011:553). While it is important that those (i.e. blacks) who were previously denied land have the capacity to cultivate such land, it is important to notice that in the present time it is the offender (i.e. whites who unjustly appropriated land) who possess this capacity. But by privileging this rather contingent fact in the dispensation of compensatory justice, Metz inadvertently privileges the interest of the offender over that of the victim. For what this approach implies is that whether one justly owns land depends on whether one has the capacity to 'run farms and keep the economy stable'. And since whites possess this capacity, and are better placed to keep the economy stable, Metz's position seems to imply that they own land justly. However, since having this capacity and the benefit of a stable

economy is subsequent to the demands of justice, stipulating them as pre-conditions for justice unfairly privileges the interests of the offender vis-à-vis those to be compensated.

Further, because the communal priority approach to land redistribution must treat the conflict as one between groups, its solution to the problem must equally prioritize group rights over individual ones. This implies that equitable land redistribution would involve giving back land to communities; individuals have claims to such land derivatively (Wiredu 1996:165–167). That is, they have claims not as individuals but in virtue of being members of such communities. But a collective right to land is no particular individual's right to land. And just like in the general case above, the justice of land distribution may be mistakenly seen as primarily a racial programme.

An approach based on the individual priority thesis would fare better on the issue of land reform. To see this, it is important to notice that Metz's requirement that compensatory justice is undertaken *only* if it would help (in the sense of equipping them with capital and skill) the people whose land were wrongly expropriated is an extension of his general idea about taking community as basic vis-à-vis the individual. This is because the requirement is presented as a way of achieving a collective good: 'stable economy'. I am not opposed to a stable economy; I am opposed to presenting it as a requirement of compensatory justice (i.e. the order of priority). But because the individual priority thesis takes the individual as basic, it doesn't propose a collective benefit as prerequisite for meeting legitimate demands of justice. It sees the wrongs done in the past as harms done to individuals and therefore construes justice for them as a way of correcting the harms (i.e.

giving back land). The overall collective benefits would follow from the dispensation of compensatory justice, thus reversing the order of priority.

I should note that an approach to the land issue that doesn't include Metz's requirement for justice doesn't necessarily imply a 'Zimbabwean-style land grab' as Metz seems to suggest. It seems to me that what was especially problematic about the Zimbabwean approach is not that justice was dispensed without Metz's pre-condition; instead, it was because the redistribution process was from 2000 'fast-tracked' and politically motivated.¹⁰²

4.6. Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I examined the communitarian and normative idea of personhood with the specific aim of showing that the role of community in that conception of personhood ultimately undermines the individual in terms of the individual's basic freedom and rights. In this chapter, I have examined the relationship between the individual and the community. In particular, I have contested Gyekye's account of what that relationship should be and attempted to show that it doesn't succeed because it must make a questionable assumption about that relationship namely, that there are no radical conflicts between individual and community; an assumption, I argued, undercuts the very motivation for his account of what that relationship should be. I also argued along with some critics of Gyekye that ultimately his moderate communitarianism slides into the extreme one he analyzed and rejected.

¹⁰²For a detailed discussion of this view see Sachinkonye (2003:233–237) and Kinsey (2004).

I then proceeded to set up the question of what that relationship should be in the context of the discussion about parthood relations—i.e. about how parts are related to wholes. In the end, I argue that the individual priority account is the best answer to the question of what that relationship should be. I believe that the best guarantor of the rights of individuals in contemporary Africa is a moral-political philosophy that takes as its starting point the idea of the individual as basic. It privileges the rights of the individuals and requires the state to protect such rights against any apparent threat whether in the form of traditional or modern practices. In protecting the rights of individuals it can guarantee the protection of the collective good. And because it doesn't see the community, and therefore the collective good, as obtaining independently of or over and above the good of the individuals, it is also the best guarantor of the collective good.

The challenge I have not undertaken here is to provide a detailed account of what the role of community should be in a moral-political philosophy that takes the individual as basic. But what is clear is that a conception of personhood that takes community to be basic vis-à-vis the individual is confronted with major difficulties. But these problems are not unique to a communitarian conception of personhood. Similar difficulties arise for a communitarian conception of human rights. This is so because a communitarian or collectivist conception of rights is grounded on communitarian idea of personhood. As such, it takes community to be basic relative to the individual. I begin to discuss these issues in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

5. African Conception of Human Rights?¹⁰³

5.1. Introduction

The title of this chapter expresses a suspicion. Let me begin then with a comment on the root of my scepticism concerning the possibility of an African conception of human rights. It comes from an observation by Paulin Hountondji. ‘Words,’ he noted, ‘do indeed change their meanings miraculously as soon as they pass from the Western to the African context...’ (1983:60). He was writing at a time when the debate over the true meaning of *African* philosophy was a dominant discourse. What bothered Hountondji was how the mere addition of the prefix ‘African’ could so radically alter the meaning of a concept. But he wasn’t alone. Early on in the literature, Kenyan philosopher Odera Oruka had observed rather humorously that

What may be a superstition is paraded as ‘African religion’, and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as ‘African philosophy’, and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as ‘African democracy’, and the white culture is

¹⁰³An earlier version of this chapter was presented to the philosophy department at the University of Johannesburg in August, 2013. I am grateful for the critical comments and suggestions received. It has been accepted for publication in the journal *Human Rights Review*.

again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as ‘development’, and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development – but of course ‘African development’ (Oruka 1972:23).

I suspect that it is the same with human rights. A family of practices and ideas that have little or nothing to do with human rights often passes as a conception of human rights and this misconception has often gone unnoticed. Notwithstanding Hountondji and Oruka, there remains a degree of support for the idea that when employed in the context of Africa, concepts evoke unique, culture-relative meanings (Scholze 1992; Wiredu 1996; Woods 2003; Metz 2011 and Elechi 2004). More specifically, the claim is that the meaning of human rights is culture-relative and that African culture shapes and informs a unique conception of human rights.

Ironically, in the years immediately following the independence of many African states, it was frequently noted in the face of gross human rights abuses that human rights are not applicable to Africa. It was maintained that human rights talk constituted one further piece of evidence of Western imposition and imperialism.¹⁰⁴ Now, it is quite fashionable to talk about human rights in Africa—and not just any conception of human right but the *African* variety.

¹⁰⁴See Nhlapo (1989) and Claude Ake (1987)

The main thrust of this chapter is to reject in a somewhat roundabout way the position that human rights are a cultural relative phenomenon by way of contesting the corollary claim that there is an African case in point.¹⁰⁵ I explore three versions of what often pass as African conceptions of human rights, including Metz's contribution in recent years, and argue that they have little or nothing to do with human rights, are inadequate or are not African in the sense at issue in a cultural relativism.¹⁰⁶

I should note that the term *African* is potentially problematic. Along the way, I shall rely on a distinction between two senses of the term: one picks out a geographical category merely while the other refers to a family of ideas distinctive of cultures in the geographical area denoted as Africa.¹⁰⁷ My suspicion about African conceptions of human rights revolves mainly around this latter employment of the term. In my concluding remarks on this chapter, I note that some of the tensions that emerge in the attempt to propose an African collectivist conception of human rights, based on the communitarian conception of personhood, are evident in the African Human and Peoples' Rights Charter. I briefly highlight two of these tensions.

¹⁰⁵ I should note that I am not interested in a *catalogue raisonné* of human rights; my interest is in the question of whether there are diverse, culturally-relative (more specifically *African*) foundations for human rights. Or, alternatively, it is the question of whether ideas supposedly unique to African culture can provide a plausible philosophical foundation for human rights.

¹⁰⁶ It is crucial to note that this unique conception of rights is closely linked to the African conception of personhood that I have been critically examining. I make this connection explicit in the rest of the chapter and in this way continue, by focusing on the question of human rights, the explorations already undertaken in the previous chapters.

¹⁰⁷ For an employment of the term African in this latter sense, see Hountondji (1983) and (2002).

5.2. The Challenge of Relativism

It is not uncommon to find among many human rights theorists, moral philosophers as well as legislators the judgment that human rights are basic entitlements owed to human beings simply because they are human beings. The judgment strikes me as fairly uncontroversial and may be held by believers in human rights quite generally (Donnelly 1982:304, 305, 306; 2007:282; D'Sa 1985:74; Wiredu 1996:157; Ake 1987:5; Hellsten 2004:61; Oyekan 2013:144; Metz 2012a:19–12). A Universalist about human rights should accept this judgment maintaining that human rights are universal and inure to the human being simply in virtue of her being human. She would add that no further qualification is required for having a human right. This supposed universality of human rights is seen to follow unproblematically from the idea that human nature is universal (Ghai 2000:1096; Donnelly 2007:282–283; 1984:400).

Typically, the conception of human nature underlying the Universalist intuition about human rights is one of the human individual stripped as it were from the particularities of culture and identified primarily by that core property she shares with every other human being. Take, for example, Kant's idea of human nature as a function of the capacities for rationality and autonomy. The emphasis on *capacity* permits the Universalist to focus on that which all human beings have in common qua persons, turning attention directly away from whatever else distinguishes them, in particular the contingencies of human nature.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸This is the idea of the human individual birthed in the Enlightenment and given full expression in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1821) and Immanuel Kant (1785).

A Relativist about human rights is likely to object, however. The objection may run along two mutually reinforcing paths. She may deny outright the Universalist picture of human nature. She may hold that human nature upon which human rights are grounded is ‘not an abstraction, because humans are defined by their relations to others...’ (Ghai 2000:1097). On this view, it is difficult and even undesirable to make sense of human nature without due attention paid to the ways in which the elements of culture and the various contingencies of human life have contributed to its realization. The Relativist would insist that focusing on isolated human capacities is not sufficient to show what it is about human beings that distinguish them from each other and from beings in the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds.

Alternatively, the Relativist may claim quite generally that the enforcement of values and the meanings of concepts are always relative to some culture. This argument would begin from the observation that there are in fact non-trivial, non-superficial variations among the different cultures of the world to the assertion that there are no cross-cultural standards for understanding and assessing the values and practices of particular cultures. Consider Donnelly’s pithy description of cultural relativism. ‘Cultural relativism’, he says, ‘is a doctrine that holds that (at least some) such variations are exempt from legitimate criticism by outsiders’ (1984:400). To the extent that meanings and values are culture-relative, the Relativist may insist that the idea of human rights, including whatever is taken to be its foundation, is a cultural relative phenomenon.

All these indicate that cultural differences in the conception of human nature may yield different philosophical conceptions of human rights (Hellsten 2004:63, 69). So even if the Relativist believes in human rights (or dignity), she would still insist contrary to the Universalist's position that the meaning of human nature/dignity, upon which they are grounded, are relative to particular cultures. Thus, controversies remain regarding the details of what constitutes human nature or dignity, leaving theorists of human rights on different sides of the universalism-relativism debate.

I intend to engage the challenge of relativism not necessarily by contesting relativism as a theory but by contesting the idea that African conceptions of human nature can provide adequate foundations for human rights.¹⁰⁹

5.3. African Conceptions of Human Rights

A conception of human rights as it is employed here is a theory proposing a philosophical foundation, typically a conception of human nature and/or dignity, in virtue of which human rights are grounded. My reading of the discourses on human rights in Africa evince very broadly three distinct ways of conceptualizing human nature and/or dignity upon which human rights are subsequently grounded.

I should add that there is an underlying theme running through all three conceptions.

Because the Universalist picture of human rights rests on a thin concept of self—i.e. of the

¹⁰⁹It is crucial to point out that my use of the term human being/human nature in this chapter is intended to capture the same meaning of personhood that I have been discussing and examining. The collectivist idea of human nature that is held to ground a collectivist account of human rights is the idea of human nature realized in or defined in reference to the community.

individual stripped off all particularities—it is often closely linked to excessive individualism from the West.¹¹⁰ These three approaches to understanding human nature may therefore be seen as alternative ways of offsetting the perceived threat of individualism and alleged moral imperialism inherent in the notion of human rights.

5.3.1. African Human Rights: Conception 1

Perhaps the most common and widely cited conception of human nature discussed in the African literature on self is the idea that the human being depends both descriptively and normatively on the community. Consider John Mbiti who debunked the idea of the lone individual in African thought suggesting that the existence of the individual human subject could not be rendered intelligible without first presupposing the collective. ‘The individual’, he says, ‘does not and cannot exist alone except corporately.’ And the reason is that ‘He owes his existence to other people ... He is simply a part of the whole’ so that the ‘...community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual’¹¹¹ (1969:108; see also Tempels 1959:58; Menkiti 1984:171; Masolo 2010:134; Wiredu 2009:13; Ikuenobe 2006:117; and Hellsten 2004:63). In all these cases the idea of priority of the community figures prominently.¹¹²

¹¹⁰As Nhlapo observes, African Relativists about human rights hold that unlike the African one, Western conception of human rights ‘reflects the liberal, individualistic tradition of Western Europe and America and therefore has no relevance for African society’ (Nhlapo 1989:2, 4). And relatedly, Donnelly warns against ‘the dangers of moral imperialism implied by radical universalism’ (1984:402).

¹¹¹Mbiti’s widely cited maxim ‘I am because we are; since we are therefore I am’ (1969:109) captures this concept of human nature.

¹¹²During the drafting of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the drafters explicitly appealed to this idea of human nature as part of the commitment to remain faithful to African traditions. According to the rapporteur report, ‘Noting that in Africa, man is part and parcel of the group, some delegations concluded that individual rights could be explained and justified only by the rights of the community’ (OAU Rapporteur Report).

Additionally, it is typical of proponents of the view that the community takes priority over the individual to insist that there is a normative element to the idea of a human being. Menkiti, for instance, argues that ‘the various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accepted this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations’ (1984:176). Elsewhere, Wiredu adds that the African conception of a human person is one of ‘a morally sound adult who has demonstrated in practice a sense of responsibility to household, lineage and society at large’ (2009:16). That is to say, to be a human person is also a function of approximating certain cultural cum moral ideals.

This conception of human nature has been described as collectivist because it locates both ontologically and normatively the individual human being within the collective. Naturally, then, the conception of human rights that emerges is also collectivist (D’Sa 1985:74 and Hellsten 2004: 63). Several inferences follow fairly easily. For example, the collectivist orientation of African conception of human rights is believed to imply emphasis on economic and social rights over civil and political rights (D’Sa 1985:78; Cobbah 1987:331; Nhlapo 1989:4) and a rejection of the individualism that underpins Western conceptions of human rights (Hellsten 2004:68, 69 and Ake 1987) as well as the perceived imperialism associated with the individualism (Howard 1995: 1; see also Cobbah 1987:314; Donnelly 1982:311). This is why Cobbah insists that in African thought, ‘the starting point is not the individual but the whole group ...’ (1987:322).

All of the foregoing seems attractive. But there are very good reasons as to why we might want to reject this conception of human nature and the human rights conception it supposedly engenders. First, the idea that individuals derive ontologically from the collective seems unattractive as a logical option.¹¹³ The believer in Mbiti's dictum, or more generally, the collectivist conception of human nature owes us a plausible story about how to clinch the validity of the argument. Certainly, more than mere assertions will be required if a plausible theory of human rights is to be grounded on this or related claims about human nature. Until, then, it seems fair to hold that there is something particularly undesirable about grounding human rights on a conception of human nature that is logically suspect.

Second, the idea of the collective as 'producing' the individual implicates a questionable idea of community i.e., the idea of community as a natural formation. It is the idea of the community as some fixed, unchangeable entity existing independently of the community. (See Mbiti 1969; Menkiti 1984. See Masolo 2004: 490; 2009 and Hountondji 2002 for a description and interrogation of this idea of community). It is questionable because in order for the community to create or produce the individual its existence must be independent of and prior to the existence of individual human beings. But herein lies the difficulty: it seems rather odd to conceive of community as an empty set as it were, existing independently of individual members. Adherents of this idea of community as a

¹¹³I have already discussed this argument in Chapter Two when I made reference to Kaphagawani's (2004) point that Mbiti's dictum 'I am because we are and since we are therefore I am' fails the simple test of validity.

fixed, unchanging entity fail to consider that individual human beings have multiple interests and do not neatly fit into rigid wholes. Instead, they are part of more fluid communities that are always changing, which changes are dependent ultimately on the creative inputs of individual members.¹¹⁴

Third, because it prioritizes collective or people's rights over individual rights (D'Sa 1985:77 and Howard 1995:2) by construing collective rights and interests as existing over and above individual ones, this conception of human nature yields the undesirable consequence that individual rights must always make way for collective rights. It seems to me that the litmus test for any serious conception of human rights is its performance over a range of conflict situations; so-called African conceptions of human rights readily imply that human rights always give way to traditional values (e.g. communal harmony, kinship relations etc.) whenever these values conflict. Moreover, prioritizing collective rights over individual ones may summarily exclude non-conforming individuals and minorities.

These upshots of the preference for collective rights are not particularly desirable if a conception of human rights is to be regarded as plausible (Gyekye 1997:38; Okolo 2003:253–254; Coetzee 2001:275–277). This is because they show human rights to be of less value and incapable of protecting the dignity of human beings (that is, if they are readily overridden by other non-rights considerations). A conception that yields these results cannot be a plausible conception of human rights.

¹¹⁴I have discussed this argument in Chapter Four of this thesis, where I contested the idea that the appropriate relationship between individual and community is one that takes the latter as basic. In that chapter, I argued along with Gyekye that a more plausible idea of community is one that recognizes the role of individuals in shaping and reconstituting it.

Fourth, there are difficulties associated with the idea that human nature is a function of being located in this or that culture, satisfying group norms, obligations, adhering to rituals of social transformation, etc. One obvious problem is that since these practices are contingent on particular cultures, it would counterintuitively imply that one's status as a human being is lost or diminished if one were to be removed from that cultural context. This seems to me clearly false since we do not conclude that human beings who have relocated to unfamiliar cultural terrain thereby lose their standing as human beings. The other problem is the unwelcome consequence of asserting unequal rights. If what it means to be a human being depends on how one approximates particular cultural or social ideals, and since human beings are likely to approximate these ideals to varying degrees, it seems that they are likely to possess human rights unequally. Yet, not only is it hard to understand what it means for one human being to have, for example, more right to life or freedom of speech than another, it seems objectionable as far as the moral equality of human beings is concerned to hold that view.¹¹⁵

Admittedly, a believer in the conception of human nature under scrutiny may concede that human rights are not equal for all human beings. Yet such an admission would cast further doubts on the plausibility of this conception since it negates the logic underlying the moral and political salience of human rights. The reason why we care deeply about human rights is because they are important protections against abuses and disregard for human dignity.

¹¹⁵I have made a similar point in Chapter Three about relying on contingent facts to establish whether an individual is a person or not. In Chapter Two, I argue that if personhood is a matter of degrees then it raises the problem of how to account for equality within a communitarian system that tends to place high premium on egalitarianism as a feature of traditional communal society.

The idea of unequal rights would worryingly justify a regime of torture, assault and many other ways of violating the dignity of those whose rights are judged to be lesser or inferior.

Fifth, a conception of human nature that descriptively and normatively conceives the individual as derivative vis-à-vis the collective is philosophically ill-equipped to explain what it is about a human being that makes her the bearer or agent of right or any other intrinsic property.¹¹⁶ That is, it cannot fully capture the intuition that rights are properly grounded in the individual. This is because it takes the individual to be a derivative of the collective such that whatever attribute the individual has is merely an instance of something ultimately attributable to the collective. This is perhaps what Hellsten had in mind when she observed that African communitarians ‘tend to draw moral foundations for rights from the need to protect different communities, which individuals are valuable members of’ (2004:70). But as Coetzee says, ‘The individual’s claim to be considered only as an individual, regardless of race, colour or sex, is reduced at the expense of claims to group affiliation’ (2001:274, see also Appiah 1994).

Suppose there is a plot of land. A view of human nature built on the notion of collective priority would imply that such land belongs primarily to some clan or family; the individual only has a claim to such land in virtue of the clan or family to which he belongs owning the relevant land (Donnelly 1984:419 and Wiredu 1996:165–166).

¹¹⁶To have an intrinsic property is to have a property that is internal to one’s nature. Most, if not all, people believe that each human being has properties (or characteristics) that are intrinsic (i.e. internal to the nature of human beings) as opposed to extrinsic. The capacity for pain is intrinsic to an individual human. While it may be true that some painful action may be inflicted on a person externally, similar action would not cause a member of mineral (e.g. rock) or vegetative (e.g. plant) world to experience pain.

Notice, however, that the issue is no longer about a right but a reward the individual enjoys in virtue of belonging to this or that group. But that's not all. Collectivist conceptions of human nature characteristically prioritize obligations or duties to the collective over rights individuals may claim against the collective (Menkiti 1984:180; D'Sa 1985:76; Gyekye 1992:116; Howard 1995:2; Hellsten 2004:63; Nkondo 2007:90). But duties, like benefits and rewards, are conceptually distinct from rights in general and human rights in particular.

How might one distinguish between rights and duties, contesting the view that human rights are *just* another way of analyzing basic human duties? To say that one has a right in the sense described above is not to say that one has specific moral or legal obligations, although such obligations may arise for one with respect to the rights of others. Some duties, therefore, constitute appropriate moral responses to the demand of respect that human rights elicit. As such, they are not equivalent to human rights; one involves doing what is morally obligated, the other involves having an entitlement (Donnelly 1982:304). Also, it seems logically possible to do good without necessarily recognizing or invoking a human right (as in certain cases of truth-telling and obedience to the law) and to do good while simultaneously failing to honour human rights (as when doing good involves maximizing social utility, where this may involve aggregating the overall consequences of some policy in the manner Jeremy Bentham originally envisaged). Moreover, duties can be grounded on facts (e.g. natural law, divine command, tradition etc.) other than the

requirement to honour human rights. This category of duties may have little or nothing to do with human rights.

All these scenarios indicate that human rights and duties come apart so that a conception of one is not strictly speaking a conception of the other.¹¹⁷ And since the considerations that occupy believers in a collectivist account of human nature in which the collective takes precedence are about duties and benefits individuals have or enjoy by virtue of being members of particular groups, it seems to follow that the alleged conception of rights that emerges is a conception of duties or the collective good which may have nothing to do with rights or in which talk about human rights figures only marginally. But a conception of the collective good and an account of the duties one has to perform to promote it or the benefit one receives via membership is not quite the same as a conception of human rights, which are entitlements that may be held against the collective.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷Similar distinction can be made between human rights and benefits. Human rights are not the same as benefits, although there are obvious benefits to having such entitlements as human rights to freedom of association, life and not to be tortured. Moreover, there may be benefits where no rights can be claimed. In this sense, not all benefits that human beings enjoy are entitlements. In this connection, acts of charity are often cited. While a beggar may benefit from the generosity of another, it is not obvious that the beggar is entitled in the sense at issue in a human right to that generosity. If the generous person's action is a strong obligation, it may be explained in terms of a general obligation to do good, which may involve a divine command, rather than a special entitlement owed to the beggar. It may be grounded, for instance, on the duty to advance the collective good of all; in this case, rights as special human entitlements need not be claimed, for what is it to claim that a beggar has a right to the money in each and every person's wallet? This is also true of one's kinsmen; if there is a strong obligation to provide for one's kinsmen, such obligation has its roots in the value placed on kinship relations rather than on special entitlements one's kinsmen have.

¹¹⁸It is worth noting that some commentators on Human rights in Africa have found it less attractive to ground claims about human rights and individual freedom on the conception of self that prioritizes the collective and duties over the rights of individuals (See Okolo 2003 and Gyekye 1997). In my concluding remarks, I note that communitarianism may well be best suited to account for dignity by appeal to duties rather than rights, thus reinforcing my suspicion about whether there is such a thing as an African, in the sense of collective, conception of human rights.

5.3.2. African Human Rights: Conception 2

Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Gyekye was at the forefront of the attack on the conception of human nature based on the idea of communal priority. This view engenders what Gyekye terms unrestricted communitarianism because it fails to adequately capture what it is about human rights that makes them entitlements that belong irreducibly to the individual. He argued that a useful way of satisfactorily grounding human rights in contemporary African thought is to give full appreciation to the role of individuality in the making of a human being since such rights are properly vested on the individual. In his view, ‘the most that can be said, then, is that a person is only partly constituted by the community’ (Gyekye 1997:59).

For Gyekye, other non-communal features, including a person’s individual capacities, also play a role in the constitution of human nature. The human being is as much communal in nature as she is an individual. ‘The most satisfactory way’, says Gyekye, ‘to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing’ (1997: 41). That is to say, Gyekye’s way of circumventing the difficulty of the first conception is to propose a conception of human nature that is based not on priority of the collective but on the equality of individual and collective features in the constitution of human nature. The resulting view of human rights is one that assigns equal moral importance to these individual entitlements as well as to the duties of individuals in service of the collective good.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹Moreover, by balancing as it were the claims of individuality and collectivity, this conception of human nature and, by extension, human rights stop short of the excessive individualism that is often the target of

Notice how Gyekye attempts to integrate the twin intuitions that rights are properly grounded in the individual and that they are properly African in the collectivist sense. The former is grounded on the individualistic component of human nature, while the latter is explained by reference to the communal aspect of human nature. In other words, it is thoroughly African in the sense that it captures what is culturally valuable about the community both in its constitution of human nature and its assumed role in the conception of human rights. Gyekye sees his account which goes under the name of moderate communitarianism as able to account for the collective orientation of human nature since the community remains the axiomatic principle around which other facts or values in African cultures, particularly the Akan culture, revolve.

Difficulties remain, however, both conceptually and practically. At the level of conception, the idea that collective and individual features mutually constitute the human person is quite hard to render intelligible. Consider Dzobo's attempt to rework Mbiti's 'I am because we are; since we are, therefore we are' in a manner that is faithful to Gyekye's idea of equality of the two. The result is the following bizarre conjunction: 'I am because we are, and since I am therefore we are' (Dzobo 1992:132). This thesis is intended to capture the same intuition Gyekye has—the idea that neither the community nor the individual is prior. However, it strikes me as implausible. In particular, it is bizarre precisely because it is

attack in supposedly Western conceptions of human rights (Hellsten 2004:68; Howard 1995:1; Cobbah 1987:314.

unclear how the 'I' is at once dependent and independent of the 'we'. At best, the expression suggests a misunderstanding of the relation of supervenience.¹²⁰

Further, at the level of conception, the possibility of assigning equal moral status to individuality and collectivity strikes me as potentially counter-productive. This is because the two are potentially at odds in ways that may often necessitate tradeoffs. In South Africa, for instance, where important recent policies have been geared towards meeting social objectives including especially compensatory justice, the right of the white male applicant to equal opportunity, including the opportunity for employment is potentially at risk in a system in which policy choices prefer members of previously disadvantaged groups, typically black members of the population. It is not always clear that the imperatives to equally regard the right of the white applicant and to promote the socially desirable objective of compensation are politically achievable simultaneously. Nor is it desirable morally that policy choices should fail to distinguish between these evidently conflicting aims in terms of which is basic.

The impossibility objection follows directly from the fact that the two aims are at odds; meeting the relevant social objective usually means overriding the right of some actual individual or vice versa. The undesirability objection follows from the fact that heeding the imperative to assign equal moral regard doesn't take us beyond a conflict which begs to be resolved through moral and political tradeoffs. Thus the conception of human rights

¹²⁰ Again this point was first suggested in Chapter Four. In addition, if Kaphagawani's criticism of Mbiti's claim (on which see Chapter Two) is correct then it is the case that Dzobo's own version is doubly troubled by the charge that it is logically problematic.

emerging from a notion of human nature that is based on the equal moral standing of community and individual is not quite compelling.

Additionally, such a conception is also fundamentally naive. It fails to see that human rights by their very definition are for the most part conflict notions, entailing claims that are held against others, society or the state. Because human rights are protections against legal, social and political abuses, including policies that threaten human dignity (Donnelly 1984: 415), they may not always be consistent with programmes and policies that purport to advance the collective good (e.g. state-sanctioned torture against terrorism). A sophisticated conception of human rights must demonstrate keen awareness of the political and moral tradeoffs that respect for human rights often demands rather than insist on blanket claims that presuppose that there could be no radical conflicts between individual rights and collective good or that these claims ought to be equally held.

Another reason we shouldn't be persuaded by Gyekye's conception of human nature accounted for by means of the equal moral standing of individuality and community is that on the way to arriving at this conclusion Gyekye misconceives the original source of the individual-community dilemma—the problem of how best to account for the relationship between the two. His proposal of equality seems to imply that the dilemma is a function of not equally recognizing both. But this is mistaken.¹²¹

¹²¹I have discussed this objection in Chapter Four—the objection that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is merely a restatement of the problem it seeks to resolve.

Practically, and because of the tradeoffs necessary when individual rights and collective good are in conflict, a conception of human rights that is premised on the equality of the two is pressured into judgment about which of the two is basic. On the one hand, if the individual is taken as basic vis-à-vis the collective, the resulting conception of human rights would be one firmly grounded on the individual. Yet, it would have surrendered its claim to be culturally African since assigning priority to individuality would cast the collective in the secondary, derivative role, thus valuing the collective less than is characteristic of many sub-Saharan African cultures. On the other hand, if priority is assigned to the collective vis-à-vis the individual, we would inevitably arrive at the first conception, which, as we have seen, is more correctly a conception of the collective good and duties of individuals than of human rights. My view is that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism buckles under the pressure of application, preferring collective good over individual human rights in cases where they conflict.¹²²

All these tensions at the heart of Gyekye's account of human nature makes it unsuitable as a plausible foundation of human rights.

5.3.3. African Human Rights: Conception 3

More recently, however, Thad Metz has urged us to turn attention away from Gyekye's conception of human nature and towards one he deems more plausible. He has proposed a conception of human nature by way of articulating an idea of dignity that on his view is

¹²²Many critics of Gyekye are in agreement, arguing quite compellingly that his conception of human rights is actually indistinguishable from the first conception analyzed here, which Gyekye strongly rejects (1997:38–39).

faithful to ideas associated with sub-Saharan African cultures. Metz has in mind ideas that relate sub-Saharan African cultural valuation of community to what is most special about human beings—i.e. their dignity. This leads him to a conception according to which a human being has dignity insofar as she has the capacity for community, where community is characterized in terms of solidarity (2010:82–85; 2011:538; 2012b:68-69); friendship and love (Metz 2012a:27) as well as having a shared identity and exhibiting a good will towards relevant others with whom one shares a life or a common sense of self (2007:335–340; 2012a:23, 27).

Human rights are consequently grounded on this conception of dignity so that a human right naturally accrues to one simply because one has the capacity for harmony, shared identity, love, friendship and goodwill. Interestingly, Metz believes that we can arrive at a different set of moral judgments about various human rights issues by focusing on this conception. Thus, he envisages it as a rival to the most popular Western conceptions, including especially the Kantian conception of dignity based on the capacity for rationality and autonomy. Shortly, I shall argue that Metz's account is not sufficiently distinguished from Kant's.

In the meantime, I should note that Metz's account attempts to combine two insights. First, it seeks to capture the key idea that rights are properly vested in the individual, in the sense that they are intrinsic rather than extrinsic to the constitution of the individual. This is why he insists that it is the individual's *capacity*, rather than the relationships constitutive of actually being in community, that matters for dignity (2011:543 and 2012a:26). As such it

sidesteps one of the key drawbacks with the first conception viz. human rights are only available to the individual qua individual *derivatively*. Second, to the extent that emphasis is placed on the capacity for *community* rather than autonomy, Metz's account seeks to show commitment to the view that human nature is, in some non-trivial sense, communal—a commitment that is ostensibly characteristic of sub-Saharan African cultures. In other words, Metz wants his account to be African in the sense that it captures the idea that the community is basic. Thus, its merit is that it attempts to make sense of the intuition that human rights are basic entitlements belonging irreducibly to the individual while still remaining culturally African.

Yet, it is precisely because Metz aims to combine these insights that his supposedly African conception of human rights encounters major difficulties. First, it is not at all clear that locating dignity in the individual *capacity* for community can adequately capture what is distinctive about sub-Saharan African valuation of community. One reason for holding this suspicion is that the cultures found in this region characteristically place a higher premium on the value of community than Metz would allow. More specifically they take being in certain kinds of relationships as constitutive of the ultimate moral good and the basis of human dignity, insisting that merely having that capacity is not sufficient (Gbadegesin 1991:65; Mokgoro 1998:3; Gyekye 2004:16; Iroegbu 2005:442).

Consider the statement by the renowned Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whom Metz cites approvingly. Tutu notes that it is not merely the *capacity for* but more appropriately 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods' that matter. More specifically, he

holds that ‘Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good’ (1999:31). Also, in an earlier work in which Metz develops an account of what sub-Saharan African cultures take to be the greatest good he concludes that certain kinds of relationships, not the capacity for community merely, are constitutive of the good, in particular, ones in which shared identity and goodwill are exhibited (Metz 2007:334–341), thus indicating that the value sub-Saharan cultures attach to community is not merely in the possession of the capacity for community but in the *proper exercise* of that capacity. Yet, Metz’s account privileges the capacity for community over actually being in the kinds of relationships sub-Saharan African cultures take to be constitutive of the good.

A friend of Metz may argue that it is more important that Metz’s conception is plausible than that it is African—in the sense of being faithful to the ways sub-Saharan African cultures value community.¹²³ My response is that indeed my objection doesn’t yet cast doubt on the plausibility of Metz’s account. But to the extent that he wants his conception of human nature and human rights to remain faithful to ideas characteristic of sub-Saharan African cultures, to that extent it falls short in its present formulation.

Second, the problem is compounded by the fact that there is indeed a conception of human dignity held by theorists in sub-Saharan Africa—one that is at odds with what Metz takes to be representative of these cultures. This idea of dignity locates what is most valuable about human beings in the actual harmonious relationships within which individuals exist. It is the view that having dignity is a function of some extrinsic fact viz. being in

¹²³I am grateful to Thad Metz for pushing me on this point.

community or exercising one's capacity for community in a way that promotes community, rather than some intrinsic property as Metz would have it (See Bujo 2001:88; Botman 2000)¹²⁴. Metz is not persuaded by this view; neither am I persuaded by the reason he provides for rejecting the view.

Metz's reason is that if dignity is a function of being in community or based on the exercise of one's capacity for community, then it would counterintuitively imply that being in isolation would amount to a loss of dignity (Metz 2011:543; 2012a:26). But cases of isolation need not imply that connections with relevant others are severed and therefore a loss of dignity. Important familial and friendly relations may be preserved in cases of isolation. Consider something that perhaps was commonplace during Apartheid: a father is forcefully taken away and placed in isolation. Or, consider someone who embarks on a journey to climb Mount Everest preferring a period of isolation and solitude. She doesn't thereby sever her relationships with her family, neighbours, friends etc. Although she is temporarily isolated from them, she may still be connected to them in important ways. These cases—of forced and voluntary isolation—do not suggest that when in isolation one's relationships to vital others (family, neighbours, friends etc.) are thereby severed. Although these individuals are now isolated, they may still remain connected to family, friends in important ways—and this connection need not be mysterious or spiritual.¹²⁵

¹²⁴Similarly, African accounts of personhood (e.g., Menkiti 1984; Placide Tempels 1959; Wiredu 2009) that have so far been discussed in this dissertation also tend to place emphasis not on intrinsic qualities but on extrinsic ones, in particular, relationships in community. I should add that in drawing attention to this alternative, sub-Saharan African conception of dignity, I am not thereby affirming it. My aim is merely to suggest that it is a strong rival to what Metz says is representative of sub-Saharan African cultures and that we are not yet motivated to accept Metz's account rather than the alternative.

¹²⁵Although, a supporter of Metz could argue that in cases where the isolation is forced upon an individual by his family, friends, community, etc. as a penalty (e.g. when one is expelled as punishment), there seem to be

The point is that a believer in the idea that dignity is a function of being in community need not accept Metz's reason for claiming her view is counterintuitive; she may still not be persuaded to accept Metz's account of human rights grounded in some individual *capacity* for the same reason. That is to say, Metz has not given us enough reason to prefer his conception of dignity (and therefore of human rights) over what many other theorists of human dignity in sub-Saharan Africa characteristically hold.

Third, suppose that Metz insists that his view gives equal moral importance to individual *capacity* and the promotion of *community* in the way these cultures tend to value it. The difficulty is that his account would include two candidates for the title of ultimate value. On the one hand, the individual capacity may be seen as what has ultimate moral importance and all moral agents ought to respect. On the other hand, it may be claimed that the promotion of community, that is relations of solidarity and harmony, is the ultimate good and all of morality should be about realizing this aim. We would be uncertain which one Metz takes to be basic.

Beyond the uncertainty, however, it appears also that as in the second conception of human nature above, respecting individual dignity and rights may not always be consistent with the aim of realizing the collective good. Many of the problems identified with Gyekye's

good reason to think that if dignity was a function of relationships, then that individual would counterintuitively lose her dignity. However, given that Metz's account seems to be that what we are related ultimately at the level of our humanity, it is hard to believe that expulsion from this or that family amounts to severing relationships with others, and therefore a loss of dignity. The point I am making seems to me to be the same as what Alasdair McIntyre (1984:137) and Charles Taylor (1991:33) had in mind when they argued that even in situations of isolation vital connections with others remain.

account are thus imported here. But clearly, Metz's view is that it is the individual capacity that is fundamental—at least as far as his account of human rights is concerned.¹²⁶ Again, because this view doesn't fully value community, one would be left to wonder how far off course Metz may have gone in attempting to construct a conception of dignity and human rights that is culturally African for it is because he wishes to remain faithful to sub-Saharan valuation of community that he is caught up in the dilemma of having to choose between two potentially conflicting candidates for the title of ultimate moral value.

Again, Metz may be willing to sacrifice the African pedigree of his conception in favour of plausibility. So it would be useful to examine the plausibility of Metz's account of human dignity upon which he grounds human rights. I do not think that Metz has offered a plausible conception precisely because it is not sufficiently distinguished from the Kantian one, which is also better vis-à-vis Metz's one.

Metz's account comes as close as anything to the conception he describes as Western—i.e. Kant's conception of dignity based on the capacity for autonomy. One way to see this is to consider that the so-called capacity for community appears to hinge heavily on the Kantian capacity for autonomy or voluntary decisions. This is evident in Metz's description of that capacity. '...What is valuable about friendship or communal relationships', Metz says, 'is that people come together, and stay together, *of their own accord*' (Metz 2011: 548). That is, as Metz conceives it, the capacity for community upon which dignity is based is on his

¹²⁶Indeed, there is a tension noticeable in Metz's works. For instance, in an earlier work 'Toward an African Moral Theory' he seems to hold that community rather than some individual capacity is the most important value in the world (2007:334), something he seems to deny in his discussion of his supposedly African account of human rights (Metz 2011 and 2012a).

view closely tied to the capacity for autonomy or deliberative judgment. This leads naturally to the problem of which one is actually doing the work for Metz's conception of dignity.

Given what Metz has to say, it is impossible to imagine that there are people who possess Metz's capacity for community independent of the capacity for deliberative choices; it is this rather heavy dependence of the capacity for community on Kant's capacity for autonomy that leads me conclude that it is the latter that is doing the important work in Metz's own account. Moreover, the capacity for community as Metz defines it is only one possibility of human agency—one that is available among others to one whose dignity is a function of the Kantian capacity for deliberative judgment. As such, it couldn't possibly ground dignity ahead of the more basic capacity for autonomy or deliberative judgment.

An analogy may be helpful at this point. Suppose that in the constitution of South Africa it is explicitly stated that what distinguishes South Africans from other citizens of the world is that they unlike, say, Ghanaians, Germans, Lithuanians, Argentineans etc. have the right to vote for a *particular political party* (e.g., ANC). Citizens of other countries would be forgiven if they find this clause ridiculous and redundant seeing that this is a right they also have in virtue of having a right to vote quite generally. They do not see the right to vote for this or that political party as making one special or adding anything non-trivial to the more general right to vote, including the right to vote for a particular political party. As well, they may even regard this supposed special right as a limitation on the autonomy of South Africans casting further doubt on its value.

Similarly, it seems ridiculous and redundant to claim that what makes human beings special is the *capacity for community* while presupposing about them that they have the capacity for deliberative choices quite generally, including the capacity to be in community with relevant others. Isolating this particular choice doesn't add anything new or non-trivial to the status of a human being who already possesses the Kantian capacity for deliberative choices. In fact, there may be good reason to think that accounting for what is special about human beings in terms of only one of the capacities available to human agency is unhelpfully restrictive exposing it further as an unreliable basis for a dignity. And if Metz takes it to be the conception capable of grounding an African conception of human rights, then it is an implausible view for the same reasons.

I should indicate that Metz is not unaware of the problem—but he argues that although rationality and autonomy are necessary to relate with others, 'on the African view, one has a dignity insofar as one is capable of using one's intelligence in a particular, other regarding way' and that it is possible to have the Kantian capacity for deliberative judgment which has nothing to do with identity and solidarity. So, he concludes that they are not one and the same thing (Metz 2012a:27 and 2010:94).

However, Metz's response misses the point of the objection. The objection is not that they are one and the same thing; of course, these are clearly two distinct descriptions. Instead the objection expressed in stages is that (1) they (i.e., the Kantian and the Metz-inspired African conception of dignity) do not describe two different scenarios about what makes

human beings special in the sense at issue in having a dignity; (2) that Metz's capacity for community is entirely dependent on the Kantian capacity for deliberative choices and so the former cannot provide adequate foundation of human rights; and consequently (3) that we could have a complete and robust account of dignity that makes no explicit or special mention of the capacity for community even if it may be inferred.

It seems to me that the only way Metz's account can overcome this objection is to incorporate the added clause requiring that the capacity for community is *exercised* in the relevant way in order for one to have a dignity. In this case, what makes human beings special is not merely the possession of this or that capacity but *exercising that* capacity in a particular way. This would imply that dignity is a function of being in community as the exercise of the capacity for community must presuppose a network of relationships. But to claim this would involve Metz admitting to something he explicitly denies by virtue of denying the commonplace view among majority of adherent of sub-Saharan cultures that having a dignity is a function of actually being in community (2011:544).

5.4. Conclusion

I have been contesting the position that a conception of human rights can be plausibly described as African—to the extent that the term African picks out the collectivist orientation of cultures below the Sahara or the ways in which adherents of these cultures rank community as a final, non-instrumental and superlative moral value. Because these cultures must value community as such and because human rights are properly grounded in

the individual, there is a potential conflict of values confronting a conception of human rights that purports to be African in the relevant sense.

Nowhere else has this tension been more visible than in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. This regional instrument was intended to articulate the core tenets of a human rights doctrine while remaining faithful to the traditions of the peoples of Africa.¹²⁷

The result is a major tension at various levels. First, the Charter's provision that rights and freedoms are guaranteed 'without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status'¹²⁸ is at odds with the African concept of human nature that ostensibly derives from traditional worldview and value system. This idea of the human being must locate the individual in this or that group and normatively requires the attainment of pre-defined social and moral status in order for one to be fully a human being and therefore to have this or that right. While the Charter itself seems to dissociate group membership from the idea of a human being and therefore vest rights on human beings irrespective of group membership, the African concept of self must presuppose group membership as the basis for being a human being and therefore having a right.

Second, and as Nhlapo (1989) has indicated in his very careful analysis, the primacy given to the family or more accurately the extended family (see especially Chapter 2 of the Charter, articles 18, 27–29) is potentially at odds with some of the more modern rights

¹²⁷The drafters of the Charter were required to draw on the '...the virtues of [African] historical tradition and the values of African civilization which should inspire and characterize their reflection on the concept of human and people's rights.' (Article II, OAU Charter, cited in D'Sa 1985:74).

¹²⁸Article 2, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Right.

contained in the Charter, in particular, those closely aligned with the notion of individual consent and equality of persons. Nhlapo's position is that to the extent that the 'notion of family impinges upon almost every area of community life, including property ownership and even civic status', traditional thinking about family remains inconsistent with the rights of women, individual consent and property ownership. This is because 'the African family is riddled with inequalities, in status, in property, in divorce law and in many other areas' (Nhlapo 1989:19, 13). As such, how is the injunction to protect traditional values and the family consistent with notions of individual consent where, for instance, marriage is not seen as a matter between two individuals but between families?

All these seem to suggest that a conception of human rights that seeks to achieve these aims would veer dangerously in the wrong direction. In Nhlapo's words, 'what seems to have received scant attention is the possibility that the twin objectives of the Charter [i.e. being uniquely African and guaranteeing basic human rights] are incompatible, and that achievement of one must necessarily be at the expense of the other' (1989:9). Yet it is not all gloomy. Given these tensions, there's good reason to think in line with Donnelly that in traditional African thought systems, 'the substantive issues discussed today in terms of human rights, such as life, speech, religion, work, health, and education, are handled almost entirely in terms of duties that are neither derivative from nor correlative to rights, or at least not human rights' (Donnelly 1982: 306). And this may not be a bad thing if indeed human rights are but one way of protecting human dignity.¹²⁹

¹²⁹For a comprehensive discussion on the idea human dignity can be accounted for in ways other than appeal to human rights, see Donnelly (1982) and Leary (1990).

In the next chapter, I continue the discussion about the difficulty of grounding human rights within a communitarian framework. In particular, I further explore Metz's attempt to provide a philosophical grounding for human rights that takes seriously the goal of highly prizing communal harmony, relationships etc. Since the publication of *Towards an African Moral Theory* in 2007, Metz has become one of the most important recent contributors to an African communitarian principle of morality that seeks to account for traditional liberal ideals like autonomy and individual human rights. Moreover, the high premium placed on the community in Metz's conception of an African moral theory is strikingly similar to the prominent role of the community in the idea of personhood that I have contested in the previous chapters. It is for this reason that I believe his contribution deserves further treatment not only as a way of exploring further the theme of communitarianism but more specifically to address his variant of a communitarian moral theory and conception of personhood in the context of human rights. I explore the question of whether Metz's account of ubuntu moral principle can adequately ground human rights.

Chapter Six

6. Strange Bedfellows: Ubuntu and Human Rights¹³⁰

6.1. Introduction

Respect for basic human rights is a very important feature of the modern world. This is in part due to the fact that human rights are politically salient and there are pragmatic reasons why people deeply care about them. A moral theory that fails to adequately capture the importance we attach to these rights would be considered by many as inadequate. Communitarian moral theories are often seen as exemplifying this theoretical deficiency. Consequently, proponents of variants of the theory have been burdened with the responsibility of accounting for the importance we attach to basic human rights and thus resisting the charge of collectivism—the accusation that such theories cannot sufficiently account for individual rights and liberties—that has been persistently laid at their door.¹³¹ Yet, trying to account for human rights within a normative system that fundamentally prizes some communal or relational good over individual ones is like attempting a trick the aim of which is to eat one's cake and still have it. Metz's recent contribution to the debate strikes me as one such attempt.¹³² He insists that although other available alternatives of

¹³⁰ A slightly modified version of this chapter has been published by the *African Human Rights Law Journal* under the title 'Strange bedfellows: Rethinking *Ubuntu* and Human Rights in South Africa' (Oyowe, OA (2013c), 13: 103–124).

¹³¹ See, for instance, Gyekye's defense of moderate communitarianism as better equipped in adequately accounting for individual freedom and rights than its rival extreme communitarianism in K Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (1997); See also JO Famakinwa 'The Moderate Communitarian Individual and the Primacy of Duties' *Theoria* (2010) 76: 152–166 for an insightful criticism of Gyekye's view.

¹³² T Metz 'Ubuntu Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa' *African Human Rights Law Journal* (2011) 11: 532–559.

African *ubuntu* moral theory are susceptible to the charge of collectivism, his preferred version can do the trick.

Notwithstanding my frivolous analogy, I believe that Metz's article is a worthwhile contribution and repays close philosophical attention. It represents one person's search for a distinctively African communitarian approach to morality that is suitable for public policy formulations on matters that are pertinent to South Africa, and perhaps Africa as a whole. Yet, disagreements there are bound to be when a moral theory is advertised in the public space as a panacea to conflicts and problems of monumental proportions. This chapter is an attempt to articulate some of my disagreements with Metz's attempt to 'construct an ethical principle that not only grows out of indigenous understandings of *ubuntu*' but also 'clearly accounts for the importance of individual liberty' and 'serves as a promising foundation for human rights.'¹³³ I think that ultimately Metz fails to deliver on these promises. I pursue several distinct but interrelated lines of argument in establishing three central claims. In the next section (6.2) of this Chapter, I argue that there are good reasons to doubt the communitarian status of Metz's *ubuntu* moral theory—I explore what it means for a theory to be truly communitarian and then express some doubts about whether Metz's theory counts. Next, I argue in section 6.3 that Metz has not successfully shown that individual freedom is compatible with an *ubuntu* ethic. My strategy is to explore three options available to Metz for establishing the compatibility of the two and argue that each one presents new problems for his *ubuntu* moral theory. In the final

¹³³T Metz (2011:534).

section(6.4), I try to cast doubts on the initial appeal of Metz's account of human rights. My contention is that that account controversially represents rights as duties.

6.2. The Communitarian Status of Metz's Ubuntu Moral Theory

In its simple form, Metz's variant of *ubuntu* moral theory is unquestionably communitarian. But Metz hasn't offered us a simple theory; there are several layers of intuitions that have shaped the development of what is now his preferred ubuntu moral theory.¹³⁴ My immediate aim is to examine in detail some of his recent philosophical commitments with a view to determining whether the theory in its current expression still retains its communitarian pedigree.¹³⁵ I think that we have reason to suspect that it doesn't. In particular, I argue that a moral theory is sufficiently communitarian if it adequately captures the basic tenets of communitarianism. One such core aspect of communitarianism is its construal of the individual moral agent as necessarily embedded in a network of relationships. I take this to be the foundational claim about the dependence of the individual on the community. Alternatively, a communitarian theory should fully capture the value of community as a non-instrumental good. Implicit in this claim is the view that in any hierarchical ordering of values, community should rank higher than other

¹³⁴ See Metz, T. 'Toward an African Moral Theory' *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2007a) 15: 321–341 for the original expression of Metz's ubuntu moral theory. Since then the theory has been developed and sometimes modified to include, for example, an account of human dignity, human rights etc. The following publications represent the development in Metz's and modification of his original intuitions about a distinctive African moral theory: 'Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory' *Journal of Human Rights* (2010) 9: 81–99; 'African Conceptions of Human Dignity: Vitality and Community as the Ground of Human Rights' *Human Rights Review* (2012a) 13: 19-37; also Metz 2011; 'Developing African Political Philosophy: Moral-Theoretic Strategies' *Philosophia Africana* (2012b) 14: 61-83. 'African Values, Human Rights and Group Rights: A Philosophical Foundation for the Banjul Charter' in O Oche (ed.), *African Legal Theory and Contemporary Problems: Critical Essays* (2013a) (forthcoming).

¹³⁵ Compare Ramose's criticism of the African status of Metz's ubuntu moral theory in his 'But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz' (2007) 26 *South African Journal of Philosophy* 347–355.

alternatives.¹³⁶ To be more specific, then, my view is that on both core aspects of communitarianism, Metz's favoured ubuntu theory is to be found wanting; indeed, it seems to veer in the direction of the liberal tradition.

Metz's project on ubuntu begins with a critical survey of the available literature with the aim of articulating, not the prevailing view of morality among Africans, but instead a justified moral principle that is faithful to values found in Sub-Saharan Africa. In order to do this he explores the term *ubuntu* and the associated maxim 'a person is a person through other persons.' And having considered and rejected a variety of expressions of this maxim as an ethical principle, Metz settles for one according to which 'an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community.'¹³⁷

Along the way to arriving at this favoured principle, Metz explicitly claims that the aim of morality is not individual well-being or self-realization. On his account, the fundamental moral value that a moral agent ought to promote inheres in certain kinds of relationships rather than in anything internal to the individual.¹³⁸ However, since promoting certain kinds of relationships, in particular friendly ones, may sometimes justify sacrificing individual freedom and other basic human rights, Metz introduces a deontological

¹³⁶In characterizing the core commitments of communitarianism, I rely on Bell's threefold distinction of communitarianism as expressing a metaphysical claim regarding the communal nature of the self, normative claim about community as the fundamental value and methodological claim about the importance of communal context in moral and political reasoning—the last of which is omitted since it is less relevant for my present aims. See D Bell *Communitarianism and Its Critics* (1993).

¹³⁷T Metz (2007a:334).

¹³⁸T Metz (2007a:334) and T Metz 'Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics' *South African Journal of Philosophy* (2007b) 26: 369–387.

constraint to the theory. ‘A moral theory that focuses *exclusively* on promoting good outcomes however one can,’ Metz cautions, ‘has notorious difficulty in accounting for an individual right to life, among other human rights.’¹³⁹ Consequently, he suggests an alternative way of responding to value that requires moral agents to ‘prize’ and ‘honour’ harmonious relationships. This way of responding to value, he says, is opposed to merely trying to promote harmonious relationships as much as one can. The point here, to my mind, is similar to the distinction between Jeremy Bentham’s and John Stuart Mill’s accounts of Utilitarianism—whereas the former advocates maximizing as much pleasure as one can, the latter focuses instead on the *quality* of pleasure moral agents are to maximize. Yet, while integrating a deontological constraint may be an attractive feature of the theory, it is worth noting how an original intuition has been modified.

There are three important points I wish to make in this connection. First, it is worth pointing out that in the original statement of the ethical principle it seems that the moral agent is obliged to do the good—i.e. promote harmonious relationships—everywhere. Now, it appears that sometimes the good is not worth doing. More importantly, the moral agent within the ubuntu moral system has moral reasons to refrain from doing the good and these reasons derive not necessarily from her valuation of community, but from facts about some inherent value in the individual—i.e. specific entitlements the protection of which assures the individual’s well-being. So, although the theory still retains its commitment to the view that morality is other-regarding, it seems to imply that there is some non-

¹³⁹T Metz (2011:540).

instrumental value inherent in individuals rather than relationships, and this value is worth pursuing for its own sake.¹⁴⁰

Second, and relatedly, it appears that there are now two, rather than one, non-instrumental values in Metz's ubuntu theory. Or alternatively, it is not entirely clear that we should still regard friendly relationships as the *sole* fundamental moral value a moral agent ought to promote. If the view that harmonious relationships are constitutive of the good and the claim that basic individual rights ought to be respected are accurate, then it seems that there are two normative aims worth pursuing. Further, it doesn't seem entirely true that the morally right action is one that promotes harmonious relationships as per Metz's statement of the original ubuntu ethical principle. To adequately reflect the recent modifications of the theory, it appears that Metz's preferred version of an African ethical principle should be modified such that the morally right action is the one that produces harmony and/or exhibits respect for human rights. But Metz hasn't done so—which may suggest that he still regards harmony in relationships as the sole fundamental moral value, in which case it is unclear how his theory can fully account for individual freedom and other basic liberties.

Third, and further, not only does the theory in its more recent appearance equally prize two distinct moral values, it also prizes two competing, insofar as they are potentially conflicting, non-instrumental values. Although, it may be the case that these aims sometimes coincide, it is nevertheless true that they do diverge. In fact, the need for Metz

¹⁴⁰See T Metz (2007b:383) for the claim that the basic moral reasons for acting are extrinsic rather than intrinsic. For a defense of a version of ubuntu that holds that the basic moral reasons for acting are intrinsic and thus advocates individual well-being as the fundamental moral aim see J van Niekerk 'In Defence of an Autocentric Account of Ubuntu' *South African Journal of Philosophy* (2007) 26: 364–368.

to incorporate a deontological constraint in this ubuntu moral theory is born out of the recognition that the goal of achieving harmony may sometimes be at variance with the aim of upholding individual freedom and other human rights.¹⁴¹ If I am right, then, it follows that Metz has now fragmented the fundamental moral aim in a way that gravely undermines the original statement of the favoured principle. Yet, his theoretic romance with human rights doesn't end there.

Having integrated the deontological constraint, Metz did not miss the theory's potential to ground human rights in spite of its communitarian leanings—something he pursues in an indirect way by first providing an account of human dignity. In his view, the available ubuntu conceptions of human dignity in Southern African thought are inadequate. More specifically, a view of human dignity grounded in relationships or in communal belonging is inadequate because if dignity inhered in relationships or 'were a function of actually being in community', then, a person in solitary confinement 'would counterintuitively lack a dignity'.¹⁴² For a more promising conception, Metz proposes that 'one is to develop one's humanness by communing with those who have a dignity in virtue of their capacity for communing'.¹⁴³ That is, individuals have a dignity insofar as they have a communal

¹⁴¹I return to these issues later.

¹⁴²T Metz (2011:543). It is not entirely clear, and Metz doesn't say, why a proponent of that view cannot happily bite the bullet and admit that dignity cannot be had outside of the network of relationships that constitute a person's identity since whatever individual attributes a person may have are dependent on facts about the community. But as I pointed out earlier, for a more appropriate response see, for example, A MacIntyre *After Virtue* (1984) 173 who argues that communal roles remain even in isolation and C Taylor *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991) 33 who contends that even in such isolated states, 'dialogue continues within us.'

¹⁴³I should point out that the suggestion here that 'one is to develop one's humanness by communing' strikes me as odd for a theory that emerged out of a careful review and denouncement of ubuntu moral theories that hold individual wellbeing and self-development as the fundamental value. Metz seems to have without any warning and argumentation reverted to the view that aim of morality is self-development.

nature, that is, the inherent capacity to exhibit identity and solidarity with others... it is not the exercise of the capacity that matters for dignity, but rather the capacity itself'.¹⁴⁴

I want to draw attention to something rather odd in the preceding passage that further deepens my suspicion that more recent expressions of the ubuntu theory under consideration reflect a radical shift from the original simple statement of the ethical principle. It is odd that a theory that originally locates the fundamental moral value in certain kinds of relationships would opt against the conception of dignity as inhering in such relationships. The reason why I consider this odd is that since dignity is non-instrumentally valuable, grounding dignity in something besides what the theory says is constitutive of the good immediately identifies two potentially conflicting non-instrumental values—one that is extrinsic (i.e. inheres in relationships) and another that is intrinsic. This reiterates my earlier point that Metz's ubuntu theory in its full-fledged version seems to incorporate two distinct and conflicting moral values. But there is a further cause for worry.

In the first instance, my misgiving about the communitarian status of the theory relates to how the view that human dignity resides in an individual's *unexercised capacity* for community theoretically represents the moral agent. It seems to me that grounding dignity in a yet-to-be-realized capacity for community represents the individual as existing in principle outside the network of relationships that constitute community. The mere possession of that capacity sets the individual apart from the community, insofar as having

¹⁴⁴T Metz (2011:544). I shall suggest shortly that merely having such a capacity does not by itself suggest that an individual has a communal nature.

that capacity expresses the promise of the individual's subsequent entry into community. In resisting the view that dignity is a matter of 'actually being in community,' Metz implicitly represents the individual as necessarily occupying a place outside of those relationships that constitute community. This view of dignity thus produces a subject who in principle is able to impinge his will on the community from without. Not surprisingly, then, Metz is keen to emphasize the role individual choice plays in the eventual exercise of that capacity. Here is Metz, 'part of what is valuable about friendship or communal relationships is that people come together, and stay together, of their own accord'.¹⁴⁵ The image, then, is of autonomous individuals who through practical reasoning in something akin to a Rawlsian original situation have chosen *of their own accord* to live with others in community.

But why is such a representation of the individual moral agent problematic? In order to fully answer the question, we must first recognize that Metz's reason for claiming that what's special and valuable about a human being is the *capacity for community* is primarily to capture the communal nature of the self. That is to say, he seems to recognize that for his moral theory to be genuinely ubuntu or communitarian, he must integrate the metaphysical claim about the dependence of the individual on the community. What has emerged, however, is the complete opposite: that is, that the distinctive *capacity* that gives humans dignity cannot be causally dependent on the community since any actual community must presuppose it. By offering an account of dignity that is independent of communal belonging or relationships, it appears then that Metz not only cannot account for

¹⁴⁵T Metz (2011:584).

the communitarian belief that the individual is causally dependent on the community but also he unintentionally shows support for the view that the community is causally dependent on the individual—in particular, it is merely the outcome of individual choice.¹⁴⁶

Additionally, with the Kantian capacity for individual choice an essential part of the definition of the individual, it is not entirely clear that it is the capacity for community that is doing the important work in grounding human dignity even on Metz's account. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that Metz seems to rather disturbingly construe the capacity for freedom as playing a fundamental role in grounding human dignity. And he construes the capacity for community as essentially including the freedom to exercise it as one deems fit. He thus insists on 'one's ability to decide for oneself with whom to commune and how' and is keen to emphasize that that capacity for freedom ought not to be restricted.¹⁴⁷ I have already argued in the previous chapter that it is not the capacity for community, but Kantian capacity for deliberative choices that is doing the important work for Metz's account of dignity. I also argued that Metz's anticipated response to the problem fails to

¹⁴⁶It is worth pointing out how this feature of his theory sets Metz apart from African and Western communitarians even though his theory is supposed to be communitarian. For instance, Menkiti maintains individual facts, like dignity, are dependent on communal ones when he explicitly claims that in the African communitarian normative system '...the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be' IA Menkiti 'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought' in Wright, R. A. (ed.). *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (1984) 171. See also J Kenyatta *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965) 180 and LS Senghor *On African Socialism* (1964a) 49, 93–94. Among Western communitarians similar views are held. For instance, C Taylor contests the idea of individual as independent of society in his 'Atomism' *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers* (1985) 2. On his part, McIntyre (1984:250) is opposed to the idea of individuals voluntarily entering into community with already established interests.

¹⁴⁷T Metz (2011:584)

convince.¹⁴⁸ Here, I am making the point that because Metz emphasizes the capacity for deliberative choice, or because it is the doing the important work for his account of dignity, as I have argued, Metz's ubuntu moral theory seems to portray a picture of the individual as independent of the community. This picture of the individual runs contrary to the idea of the ubuntu individual as constituted by relationships or dependent on the community.

Even so, Metz will likely object that a communitarian moral theory needn't endorse the conception of the individual as causally dependent on the community in the way I have been suggesting. He could argue that his project is really about the substantive moral aim of valuing communal harmony by which individuals ought to live. Thus, the argument concludes, the theory is sufficiently communitarian. Yet, while it is true that on Metz's theory honouring friendly relationships is a moral goal, what the analysis so far has revealed is that it is not the only non-instrumental value worth valuing—individual liberty and basic human rights are also taken to be non-instrumentally valuable. It seems to me that this tacit acknowledgment of individual freedom as equally valuable as communal harmony further casts doubt on the theory's claim to being communitarian.

I have two reasons for so thinking. First, if I am right that the more recent expression of the theory integrates two potentially conflicting moral aims, then it doesn't straightforwardly follow that moral reasons for acting always derive from our valuation of community.

¹⁴⁸ In accounting for human dignity Metz specifically asks, 'what is it that makes us (typically) worth more than members of the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms' Metz, T. (2012a:19). Perhaps, implicitly aware that some non-human animals also arguably have a basic capacity for community, he is keen to emphasize *freely chosen* communal relationships as more valuable and thus as the basis for dignity. This is why I think the capacity for freedom is doing more work in grounding dignity in Metz's theory than he seem to have realized.

Indeed, in certain borderline cases where these aims conflict, moral agents can have reasons for acting that derive neither from their valuation of harmony nor the aim of reducing discord. Since respecting human rights is something worth doing morally, and doing so sometimes goes contrary to realizing harmony, it seems that moral agents can have reasons other than community-based ones for acting. Thus it is not a straightforward matter that this is a substantive theory that prioritizes communal harmony. Second, the valuation of individual choice and freedom seem to implicate the liberal commitment to a plurality of moral outlooks or conceptions of the good such that the theory seems to counterintuitively undermine the substantive moral reasons it proposes by justifying moral outlooks that do not recognize honouring community as a non-instrumental value. Such a theory is anything but communitarian. Indeed, Metz's theory strikes me as more liberal than communitarian despite the claims to the contrary. This is because if we take him seriously by truly upholding the value of individual choice and recognizing a plurality of conceptions of the good, then it seems to me belief in a theory that regards relationships as the bearer of the fundamental moral value would be merely optional.

But perhaps Metz's ubuntu theory cannot be neatly placed in a liberal or communitarian scheme. Perhaps this seemingly *equal* valuation of the individual choice and community is a unique feature of the theory, setting it apart from the extremes of liberalism and communitarianism. In what follows, I argue that in attempting to incorporate the value of individual freedom within a single normative system that already prizes communal harmony as the fundamental moral value, Metz's ubuntu theory is caught on the horns of a dilemma.

6.3. Collectivism and Individual Freedom

One of Metz's aims is to show that his version of an ubuntu-inspired moral theory is impervious to the charge of collectivism. As he articulates it, the criticism is that such a theory with its 'uncompromising majoritarianism or extreme sacrifice for society... is incompatible with the value of individual freedom that is among the most promising ideals in the liberal tradition'.¹⁴⁹ I should add that for a theory that already takes communal harmony to be the fundamental moral value the criticism is even more acute. In this section, I intend to motivate the claim that Metz's ubuntu theory fails to adequately deal with the criticism.

Let me quickly clarify this aim. Although I argued in the previous section that Metz's theory is less communitarian than it purports to be, here I am claiming that even if the theory was sufficiently communitarian it couldn't successfully resist the charge of collectivism—the criticism that individual liberty and communal harmony are incompatible.

Of course, the onus is on Metz to show that communal harmony and individual freedom are indeed compatible. But what would this compatibility amount to? It couldn't possibly mean that these values never conflict since his integration of the deontological constraint into the theory is precisely to resolve such conflict. So by compatibility Metz must have meant that his theory can either 1) incorporate both values while offering some criteria of

¹⁴⁹T Metz (2011:533).

ordering between them or 2) equally value communal harmony and individual freedom as non-instrumental goods, in which case it eschews any such ranking of moral values. Suppose then that Metz can tackle the problem and show that the values of communal harmony and individual freedom are compatible in either sense within his ubuntu-inspired moral theory. I suggest that there are three possibilities—I consider each in turn and outline the costs for his theory. I argue that each option represents a *cul de sac* and that consequently Metz has not convincingly shown that his theory is resistant to the charge of collectivism.

6.3.1. First Horn: Individual Liberty Trumps harmony

Consider, for instance, the right of a gay person in a community that deeply abhors homosexuality and sees it not only as totally opposed to its established values (e.g. the value of procreation) but also as a threat to the moral health and overall harmony of the community. The individual has the right to freedom of sexual expression, an entitlement the upholding of which would be in tension with communal values and harmony. In a world in which human rights are valued it seems that the right to express one's sexuality in ways that fall outside the dominant heteronormative paradigm would remain valid and can be insisted on even if doing so would hurt relationships or result in substantial division in the community. Admittedly, there are cases in which this specific conflict may not arise—for instance, if this form of sexual expression is consistent with communal values.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰Disregard for the rights of gay and lesbian persons is a pervasive feature of many African communities and, interestingly, these attitudes and practices are justified on grounds of protecting communal harmony and safeguarding against whatever is divisive and harmful to communal harmony. If Metz is right, then there are grounds—specifically community-based ones—for withholding an individual's freedom to sexual expression.

Assuming then that there are conflicts between the values of harmony and individual freedom and that an agent must act, a moral theory that requires us to value these goods equally doesn't take us beyond the original conflict; it merely reproduces it. This is so because at the root of the conflict is our desire to regard these goods as equally valuable in themselves. If this is right, then it seems there is a requirement on a theory that seeks to integrate both moral aims to provide a clearly defined way of ordering these values in the event of a conflict. One possibility is to prioritize individual freedom over harmony. In this way the theory retains the two values within the ubuntu normative system even though one of them—harmony—is merely instrumentally valuable. (In the above case, the freedom of the gay person ought to trump communal harmony and values).

This may initially strike some as different than Metz's view seeing that he at various times clearly regards communal harmony as the fundamental moral value. He repeatedly emphasized that the fundamental moral value worth pursuing for its own sake is friendly relationships. Thus we are enjoined to '*...prize or honour such relationships*',¹⁵¹ and elsewhere he adds that one becomes a person insofar as one *honours communal relationships*', 'prizes *identity and solidarity* with other human beings' and that 'An individual realizes her true self by respecting the *value of friendship*'.¹⁵² Moreover, in an earlier work Metz claims that 'as opposed to well-being or self-realization, this account of *ubuntu* posits certain relationships as constitutive of the good that a moral agent ought to

¹⁵¹Metz (2011:539).

¹⁵²Metz (2011:540 My emphasis). Once again, this last interpretation of the maxim seem to commit Metz to the view that respecting the value of friendship is a merely a means to realizing oneself, something he explicitly denies. See, for instance, his response to Jason van Niekerk (2007:382–386).

promote'.¹⁵³ Yet, it is not at all obvious that Metz is entirely opposed to ranking individual freedom above communal harmony. The deontological aspect of the theory seems to work in part because individual freedom is so ranked. It implies that when these values are paired against each other individual freedom should trump harmony.

In any case, it matters less whether Metz actually believes individual freedom should always trump harmony since my argument is that if he were to take this option, which clearly values the liberal ideal of individual freedom, then there are huge costs for his theory. One such cost is that it can only value harmony instrumentally—that is, relative to individual freedom the aim of achieving harmony is merely subsidiary. This supposition would ultimately render null and void the original ethical principle which obliges moral agents to promote harmony and reduce discord. Relatedly, this option completely strips the theory of any remaining claim to being communitarian since it would now appear that the fundamental moral value worth pursuing for its own sake is individual freedom. If I am right about my earlier claim that the theory cannot capture the causal dependence of the individual on the community, then by prioritizing individual freedom over harmony it cannot possibly capture the communitarian belief that achieving harmonious community is the fundamental moral aim. What is more, this option would make the theory degenerate into a version of liberal theory in which case the charge of collectivism doesn't even begin. Any attempt then to defend the theory against that charge would amount to a fruitless exercise.

¹⁵³T Metz (2007a:334).

6.3.2. Second Horn: Harmony Trumps Individual Liberty

Again if compatibility means that a single normative system merely integrates two potentially conflicting values then, assuming that we are faced with a conflict, another way to order these values is to prioritize harmony over individual freedom. In this case, considerations of communal values and harmony should trump the individual's right to sexual freedom. In the original statement of the ubuntu-inspired ethical principle Metz seems to have done this by explicitly endorsing the principle that 'an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community'.¹⁵⁴ Once again, this option may retain the value of individual freedom alongside communal harmony. However, in cases where individual freedom conflicts directly with harmony this option would imply that the moral agent does the right thing in promoting harmony.

I should note again that although this is one way of integrating the two values within a single normative system, this doesn't seem to adequately characterize Metz's position since as already indicated he has incorporated a deontological constraint in the theory barring moral agents from promoting harmony by way of undermining individual freedom. Yet, there are costs *should* Metz take this option. One obvious one is that the theory would be unable to fully capture the value we place on individual freedom—i.e. it cannot account for it as non-instrumentally valuable. I think it is fairly uncontroversial to regard most, if not all, basic human rights as valuable in themselves. In the rights to life, dignity, freedom etc. are enshrined basic goods that are desirable in themselves, not merely as a means to

¹⁵⁴T Metz (2007a:334)

some more fundamental value such that when that more fundamental value cannot be secured, protecting these rights would be optional. Or alternatively, these rights may be violated in the promotion of that fundamental value. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the South African Bill of Rights assumes this much, and Metz discusses the rights in these documents extensively. If this were not the case, then not only would the obligations they impose require further justification, but also the very fact of having them would be counterproductive.

A moral theory that values individual freedom merely instrumentally is inadequate and would be the ideal target of the charge of collectivism. Should Metz take this option his theory would be unable to fully account for individual freedom. Moreover, taking this option would fall far short of Metz's own promise to go beyond what other ubuntu proponents have said on the matter.¹⁵⁵ And they are all generally agreed that the value of individual freedom is only secondary. So should Metz take the option under consideration, then his theory would be no better than the ones he disapproves of. Indeed, the charge of collectivism is in part the criticism that if communitarian and ubuntu-inspired moral theories acknowledge individual rights they do so instrumentally. Moreover, an instrumental valuation of rights flies in the face of the supposition that rights represent basic moral goods that are desirable in themselves—something I claimed is implicit in the South African Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

¹⁵⁵ Metz (2011) clearly promised to do better than other 'self-described adherents to ubuntu' who have 'done little to dispel such concerns'—that is the idea that an ubuntu-inspired theory cannot adequately value individual freedom. In this connection, he quotes Nkondo, G. M. ('Ubuntu as a public policy in South Africa' *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* (2007) 2) who sees an ubuntu-inspired theory as expressing 'the supreme value of society, the primary importance of social or communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual' (2011:533).

I should reiterate that although each of the horns considered so far seem not to fully capture Metz's position on the matter of the compatibility of harmony and individual freedom, my claim is that there are potentially damaging costs for the theory should he opt in favour of either. What then fully captures Metz's account of the compatibility between these values?

6.3.3. Third Horn: Harmony and Individual Liberty are Equally Valuable

Let's suppose that the two previous options do not sufficiently reflect Metz's view. In that case, a more plausible representation of his view would be that he fragments the fundamental moral aim in a way that permits honouring both values. That is, Metz's view is that moral agents should equally value harmony and individual freedom. Indeed, this strikes me as Metz's strategy not only in entertaining two conflicting values in one single theory but also in tackling the charge of collectivism. One reason motivating this characterization of Metz is that he proposes what appear to be conditions under which moral agents would have reason to either sacrifice the aim of promoting harmony or the aim of respecting individual liberties.

The first condition is captured in the deontological constraint. Here Metz cautions against promoting harmony at all costs. He specifically claims that when doing so would violate an individual's legitimate rights, we are to refrain from doing so. According to Metz,

...an instruction to promote as many communal relationships as one can in the long run would permit a doctor to kill an innocent, relatively healthy individual and distribute her harvested organs to three others who would otherwise die without them, supposing there would indeed be more of such relationships realized in the long term. A moral theory that focuses exclusively on promoting good outcomes however one can (which is teleological) has notorious difficulty in accounting for an individual right to life, among other basic rights.¹⁵⁶

So we seem to have a condition that pairs the values of harmony and individual liberty together in such a way that whenever promoting harmony threatens individual liberty, we ought to sacrifice the former. That way we honour the latter, which honouring implies that we do not use immoral means to promote the relevant value. But in honouring harmony an equal valuation of individual freedom is encouraged. It seems then that the theory can account for the value of individual freedom.

Yet, Metz also provides a condition under which harmony should trump individual freedom. In this case, when individual freedom poses a threat to communal harmony, the former can be justifiably limited. Consider, for instance, his example of how a right may be justifiably limited. Metz tells us that ‘... it might not degrade human dignity, and hence might justifiably limit a right, to lock an innocent person in a room in order to protect

¹⁵⁶T Metz (2011:540).

others from a virulent disease he is carrying'.¹⁵⁷ It seems then that in this instance communal harmony clearly trumps individual freedom. This seems to suggest that we can't possibly regard one value as more fundamental than the other since the priority relation between them runs in both directions. That is, there may be justification for prioritizing either value depending on the conditions.

Does this way of *equally* honouring both values within a single framework settle the debate over the incompatibility between individual freedom and communal harmony? I suspect that it doesn't. One reason for my suspicion revolves around the fact that these conditions Metz proposes do not necessarily represent two different conflicts. Are these different conflicts—one in which the agent has strong moral reasons to prioritize individual freedom and another in which the agent has strong moral reasons to prioritize communal harmony? I do not think so. That is, the proposal that we should respect basic human rights when promoting harmony threatens them (i.e. the case of the doctor vs. the innocent) doesn't suggest a different conflict to the proposal that we should prize communal harmony when individual freedom threatens it (i.e. the case of the diseased individual vs. the community). It seems to me that whenever promoting communal harmony poses a threat to individual freedom, an equal threat is directed in the way of the former—in which case the scenarios Metz describes pick out one and the same conflict.

The point I wish to make here is that for a theory that equally values individual freedom and communal harmony, the implication is that whenever these values go head to head a

¹⁵⁷T Metz (2011:542).

moral agent has equally valid reasons to honour both values. This means that every instance of conflict between individual freedom and communal harmony presents the moral agent with two equally valid, but potentially conflicting, principles for acting, viz.

1. We ought to restrict individual freedom¹⁵⁸
2. We ought to sacrifice communal harmony¹⁵⁹

The first principle suggests that a moral agent should act in such a way as to prize harmony, which effectively means restricting individual freedom. Since the moral agent must act, upholding the first principle would amount to violating the second. On the other hand, the second principle requires the moral agent to honour communal harmony by upholding individual freedom—which basically means that we are to sacrifice communal harmony. However, in doing so the agent would be violating the first principle – that is, going against equally valid reasons requiring the agent to uphold individual freedom. The problem is that in doing precisely what Metz’s ubuntu moral theory obligates, the moral agent would be violating some valid principle within that theory. And that violation would be justified by the same theory. And there is more. It seems that if the moral agent is to abide by the first and second principles, then in many instances the agent couldn’t possibly act. Rather than violate either principle the agent may have strong moral reasons to refrain from acting.

¹⁵⁸Partly implied by the claim that communal harmony is the fundamental moral value. And Metz has to claim this otherwise as I indicated earlier it would imply that individual freedom should always trump communal harmony in which case the latter turns out to be merely an auxiliary aim of morality. This, I argued, would completely strip the theory of its final claims to communitarianism.

¹⁵⁹Implied by the deontological constraint of the theory.

I find these features of Metz's ubuntu moral theory to make it incoherent. It seems to justify not only the violation of its own principles but also inaction, even though it is developed in the first place as a theory to guide the action of moral agents. In fragmenting a fundamental moral aim into two distinct and equally valid aims this ubuntu moral theory reveals an internal incoherence.

But perhaps the accusation of incoherence is unfair. Perhaps Metz could be more charitably read as suggesting that whether we restrict individual freedom or promote communal harmony should be determined on a case by case basis. In specific cases the theory will provide one obvious principle that will guide the moral agent. So Metz's example of an innocent person with a virulent disease who can be justifiably locked up so as to protect the health of the community provides one clear principle—we ought to restrict individual liberty *in this particular case*. A moral agent would not be violating any valid principle within the preferred ubuntu moral theory since the only thing the agent has moral reason to do *in this case* is to promote the health of the community. While this strategy evades the charge of incoherence, it comes with its own unique problems as well. For one thing it undermines Metz's own aim of developing a principle or basic norm that is intended 'to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones'¹⁶⁰ Here it seems that whether some act is morally permissible depends entirely on the particular case we are considering and the principle may vary depending on whether the case requires the moral agent to restrict individual freedom or sacrifice

¹⁶⁰T Metz (2007a:321)

communal harmony. Well, every moral theory, except for consequentialism, at some point requires judgment to apply. It's a matter of debate about how far one can go.

Even so, it seems to me that a theory that seeks in conflict situations to adjudicate between these values on a case by case basis should be fairly precise about how to go about it. In the event of conflict between harmony and individual freedom, why should we restrict individual freedom in one case and not in another? On what basis should we decide on whether a particular case requires us to sacrifice harmony? Any acceptable response to these questions, it seems to me, must appeal to something other than the values themselves. Since the theory equally values these goods, it must appeal to some higher value or more fundamental principle in discriminating between cases in which individual freedom is to be restricted and cases in which communal harmony is to be sacrificed. Metz has not provided any clear guidance in this regard. But more importantly in appealing to some higher or more fundamental value in resolving the conflict between equal values I suspect that the overall substance of the theory would have changed significantly. This is because that higher value needn't be—in fact it cannot be—communal harmony, in which case Metz's original aim of showing that his theory takes communal harmony to be the fundamental moral value would be undermined.

By way of summary, then, there are three possible ways for accounting for the compatibility between communal harmony and individual freedom—each with huge costs for Metz's ubuntu theory. These range from the entirely losing the ubuntu-communitarian substance of the theory (*first horn*), failure to account for basic human rights as non-

instrumentally valuable (*second horn*) to the theory betraying a deep-seated incoherence (*third horn*) by justifying the violation of one its own moral principles in certain instances of action.

6.4. Human Rights and Their Violations in Metz's Ubuntu Theory¹⁶¹

I think that Metz rightly grounds human dignity in a non-variable feature of the human being (i.e. some human capacity) so that human rights, which are subsequently grounded on human dignity, are, by extension, grounded in a non-variable quality, thus enabling the theory to capture the intuition that human rights are equal among persons and not had in degrees. Even so, the emerging account of human rights and what constitutes their violation strikes me as problematic.

On first approximation, it seems to me that human rights are protections of intrinsic rather than extrinsic goods. Perhaps, some may find this controversial. So, for those who do not already share this intuition, it is worth spelling out that rights are installed primarily as protections of certain goods (e.g. life, security, privacy, freedom etc.) in the individual holding the relevant right and these goods pertain to facts about the individual's constitution. To my mind, this effectively precludes suggestions to the effect that human rights are installed as protections of basic extrinsic value, in particular certain kinds of relationships. I read Metz as making such a claim. In his view, human rights are fundamental protections against enmity and unfriendly relationships.¹⁶² My aim is to

¹⁶¹I lack the space to treat each of the human rights (issues) that Metz addresses in his article (2011). Even so, what I say here about his construal of rights is applicable to his treatment of the relevant rights.

¹⁶²T Metz (2011:546).

contest this notion of human rights and the corollary that human rights violations are instances of ‘substantial division and ill-will...’¹⁶³

One reason why that construal of human rights is questionable is that it obscures the distinction between the relational nature of the concept and the basic good a right is meant to protect. By the relational nature of the concept, I mean that basic rights typically entail a duty on the part of another thus placing the right-holder and duty-ower in some form of relationship. Yet, we can distinguish the (nature of the) relationship between right-holders and duty-owers from the particular good that the right is meant to protect. The view that human rights are fundamentally protections against enmity blurs this distinction by focusing merely on the relationship between right-holders and duty-owers and insisting that basic rights are installed to protect against certain kinds of relationships namely, unfriendly ones. In doing so, however, it conveniently downplays the specific entitlements that are central to notions of rights and quite simply fails to recognize that a legitimate right-claim can be made even when doing so would result in enmity between the right-holder and the duty-ower. An individual’s right to freedom of sexual expression, for example, remains a valid entitlement that can be insisted upon even if doing so would not promote harmonious relationships or would result in substantial division among members of the community.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³T Metz (2011:548).

¹⁶⁴For a detailed view of human rights as heavily focused on privileges of a right-holder see RB Brandt ‘The Concept of a Moral Right’ *Journal of Philosophy* (1983: 44).

Another reason why the submission that human rights are protections against ill-will and enmity is questionable is that it construes the relevant individual entitlements as instrumentally valuable, their value being merely a function of whether or not they contribute to the aim of reducing discord or enmity—something that Metz should be denying if he is to adequately account for human rights as non-instrumentally valuable. Of course, upholding basic human rights may sometimes coincide with realizing friendly and harmonious relationships. But there are borderline cases as well. In such cases where these aims diverge, it appears that one of the two aims must be prioritized. I think that while a state of affairs characterized by the absence of enmity is more desirable than the reverse, a legitimate right-claim would remain so and must be upheld even when doing so could result in, or deepen widespread animosity and ill-will. It seems to me that it is only in this way that we can fully account for the value of individual freedom and human rights. Such rights embody intrinsic goods that are worth valuing in themselves, not merely because they are consistent with communal harmony.

Does this mean that human rights are not defeasible? I make no such claim. There are instances in which individual rights are justifiably limited. My view is that on such occasions it is not the case that individual freedom and rights are valued instrumentally. This is because any justification for restricting certain liberties must appeal to other more fundamental ones. That is, human rights are only justifiably limited when they are in conflict with other more fundamental rights. However, the restriction of individual rights on grounds of communal harmony cannot be justified.

Let me explain. Suppose that a certain employer installs an email monitoring system at work. Employees may understandably feel aggrieved. But supposing we were to restrict the employer's right to install an email monitoring system at work, it seems to me doing so would be justified by appealing to the employees' right to privacy, in which case the conflict is between the basic liberties—one liberty is justifiably restricted for another. Although a right is limited, a more important right is upheld. Suppose, however, that we were to restrict the employer's action on the grounds that doing so would promote harmony or reduce the overall negative feeling in the workforce. In this case, my view is that individual right is being treated as merely instrumentally valuable since here it is paired against some other kind of value, which is regarded as more fundamental. The point here is that in order to fully value human rights as non-instrumental goods they must always trump other kinds of value whenever a conflict arises. But individual rights may be justifiably overridden when it is conflict with other fundamental right.

Rather curiously Metz agrees with me on the preceding point when he says that 'only some stronger right can outweigh these 'negative' rights to be free from interference.'¹⁶⁵ But if this is the case then it implies that under no circumstances should communal harmony trump an individual's negative rights. What follows is that Metz's theory seems to imply that individual rights rank higher than communal value and so should always trump the latter (Second horn above). As I argued earlier there are huge costs for Metz's theory should he regard individual freedom as the most fundamental value—one of which is that the theory's final claim to being communitarian is completely lost.

¹⁶⁵T Metz (2011:548).

Further, in characterizing rights as protections against certain kinds of relationships, in particular, unfriendly ones, I suspect that Metz may have unintentionally accounted for the duties individuals (and the state) owe each other rather than for the basic entitlements individuals have.¹⁶⁶ Of course, it is true that talk of rights evokes corresponding duties. My point, however, is that it matters where one puts the emphasis. Focusing on the duties individuals owe each other can easily obscure the fact that basic human rights are to a certain degree conflict notions. For instance, if each individual were to fulfill their duties towards others, then the opportunities for friendship and goodwill opens whereas emphasis on individual entitlements may not necessarily be compatible with harmony and goodwill.¹⁶⁷ It is all well and good when a communitarian theory enjoins individuals to fulfill their duties towards one another. In fact, this is precisely what is expected of such theories—they typically prioritize duties over rights precisely because this is conducive to and consistent with the communitarian aim of promoting communal harmony.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Metz's discussion of rights focuses almost entirely on duties of individuals and the state. See, for instance, his treatment of the human rights to socio-economic goods where he claims 'with regard to solidarity... the state must do what it can to improve their quality of life, and to do so for their sake consequent to a sympathetic understanding of their situation.' T Metz (2011:550). It's easy to see how a sympathetic understanding of the situation of the poor can generate a duty on the part of the state and subsequently contribute to overall harmony but this doesn't suggest any entitlement on the part of people. Can the citizens also justifiably insist on their entitlements even if this disturbs the peace and harmony?

¹⁶⁷ The rights to liberty and privacy, for instance, have tags built into them barring others in the first instance to keep their distance and thus doesn't necessarily provide fertile a ground for the flourishing of friendly relationships. To put it simply, a negative right is the right to be left alone and to do one's bidding.

¹⁶⁸ Menkiti, for instance, writes that African communitarian societies are organized around the requirements of duty. In his words, 'in the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties.' (1984:180).

Yet, rights and duties are distinct notions.¹⁶⁹ One way to fully distinguish between rights and duties is to consider the latter from the perspective of the right-holder. This is because they are in the first instance the right-holder's basic privileges. The recognition that others have a duty not to interfere, for example, is dependent on the fact that such rights are in the first place entitlements or privileges a right-holder should enjoy. In this sense there can be rights (e.g. negative ones) in the sense of entitlements even when there is no one to perform certain duties. That is, my right to life doesn't disappear if there is no one with a corresponding duty not to interfere (admittedly, what may disappear is the need to assert such a right, but the entitlement remains). Conversely, the notion of duties can be best appreciated in the first instance from the perspective of the duty-ower. If I am right, then since Metz's original promise was to demonstrate how his preferred version of ubuntu moral theory can account for the central *liberal ideals of human rights and individual freedom*, not necessarily accounting for the duties we owe each other, this emphasis on duties strikes me as inadequate.

Finally, if rights as entitlements are privileges then they are valuable for the well-being and flourishing of the right-holder. In other words, from the perspective of the right-holder, asserting her basic rights to life, freedom, privacy, etc. is an important way to ensure her well-being and flourishing. From the perspective of the right-holder asserting a right is a matter of ensuring her well-being or flourishing. For example, recognizing and asserting

¹⁶⁹In a private correspondence Metz denies this distinction arguing that to have a right just is to have a duty of a sort. My claim is that rights and duties are related but nevertheless distinct. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between rights and duty see J Donnelly 'Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Conceptions of Human Rights' *The American Political Science Review* (1982) 76 303–316.

my right to freedom is vital to my well-being and development for I couldn't possibly flourish as an individual in conditions of enslavement or the absence of freedom. So, it appears that at least from the perspective of the right-holder human rights can be grounded in self-regarding concerns. In contrast, Metz thinks that human rights are more plausibly grounded in other-regarding concerns.¹⁷⁰

However, it seems to me that duties are more appropriately grounded in other-regarding concerns. My duties towards others derive primarily from facts about the other—facts about the other's entitlements or needs, for instance. But my rights are in the first instance entitlements I recognize and assert for my flourishing. I suspect that it is this belief that rights are grounded in other-regarding concerns that ultimately leads Metz to emphasize duties rather than basic rights. If I am right that human rights are more plausibly grounded on self-regarding concerns then there are damaging implications for Metz's ubuntu moral theory namely that, in its current expression, the theory seems to imply that reasons for acting are at once other-regarding and self-regarding. This strikes me as incoherent. Yet, in making this point I am only reiterating, albeit in a slightly different manner, an earlier point that in trying to accommodate two potentially conflicting non-instrumental values—or two potentially conflicting principles—Metz's ubuntu theory reveals an internal tension.

Indeed it is rather curious that a theory which explicitly claims that the fundamental moral value is *extrinsic* (that is, resides in something outside of the individual namely relationships) should proceed to define human dignity as an *intrinsic* moral value (i.e.

¹⁷⁰T Metz (2007a:384). In the second section (6.2) of Chapter Five of this thesis, I discuss other ways we can distinguish between rights and duties.

specific to the constitution of the individual and independent of relationships), and subsequently ground human rights on this intrinsic value. Such a theory betrays several levels of tension. At one level, it seems to claim that the moral value moral agents ought to promote is both intrinsic and extrinsic—and this despite explicit claims denying that moral value is intrinsic.¹⁷¹ At another level, the tension has to do with the fact that when there are conflicts between advancing either value, the moral agent in advancing one must necessarily undermine the other. But if moral agents do the right thing in undermining either of the moral values, then the theory itself must somehow justify sacrificing some value it regards as valuable in itself.

Moreover, in the event of a conflict, a moral agent experiencing conflicting motivations with regard to the relevant moral values may have to appeal to something other than the values themselves in adjudicating between them, in which case either value is insufficient to motivate agents to act and a third alternative value would have been introduced to the theory. Alternatively in order to avoid undermining either value, agents would justifiably refrain from acting altogether—something that itself is deeply disturbing for a theory that is supposed to guide agents in acting.

6.5. Conclusion

Can an African ubuntu moral theory successfully ground individual freedom and human rights? I have discussed three distinct arguments in establishing the claim that Metz's goal of grounding the liberal ideals of individual freedom and rights in his ubuntu moral theory

¹⁷¹T Metz (2007a:383).

fails to be achieved. My first suggestion was that Metz's attempt to ground human rights in his ubuntu moral theory raises the problem of where the fundamental value is in his theory. That is, in seeking to integrate two potentially conflicting and non-instrumental values in his theory, Metz substantially modifies his original ubuntu ethical principle in such a way that the communitarian/ubuntu status of the theory is undermined. Second, I argued that even if Metz's theory were sufficiently communitarian, it couldn't possibly ground individual freedom as a non-instrumental value. Third, I argued that Metz employs a tendentious reading of the concept of rights. In particular, that he erroneously construes rights as duties.

All this led me to suggest that an *ubuntu* ethic is not entirely suitable for grounding public morality. Perhaps for more industrialized and globalized societies, in which the liberal ideals of freedom and human rights are of paramount importance in shaping public morality, an *ubuntu* ethic can only play a much restricted role than it did in pre-industrialized African societies. I want to propose in its place a more individualist approach. In the next chapter, I suggest that the movement towards a more individualist approach is one that has been consistently urged in African philosophy. The approach I adopt in establishing this point is to draw attention to two important discourses in African philosophy that reveal the shift towards an individualist approach. My view is that the demand for the emergence of the individual both in the understanding of self and in the definition of African philosophy is a powerful indication in the direction that I am urging—the individual as the basis for a plausible conception of personhood and human rights.

Chapter Seven

7. Towards a Metaphysic of the Individual Self

7.1. Introduction

The title of the chapter may be somewhat misleading. So, I should point out straightaway that I do not intend to propose an inventory of African conceptions of self.¹⁷² Nor do I intend to propose a substantive view of self in the mould of Menkiti's or Wiredu's Akan philosophy of person, although ultimately the heft of what I have to say should point us in the direction I believe any such comprehensive theory of selfhood should head. My aim instead is to adumbrate on a way of thinking about self that is emerging powerfully in contemporary African philosophical discourses by tracing the intellectual forces that have led to it, while also assessing the overall utility of this shift in our thinking about self by framing the question of selfhood in terms of the goal of adequately grounding human rights in our modern-day culture. The central claim I advance is that there are rational pressures compelling us towards a metaphysic of self that is grounded on the primacy of the individual as opposed to the collective as the primary basis of social and political organization, the fundamental object of moral concern and the basis of fundamental moral value. Such a metaphysic of self promises a more plausible grounding for human rights, as an important component of development in Africa, than its immediate rival which takes community to be fundamental.

¹⁷²Didier Kaphagawani (2004 and 2000) has a useful and very critical inventory of African conceptions of personhood.

Adopting this position, I argue, entails dispensing with the notion of a communal self metaphysically construed as well as the assumption that the community is the bearer of ultimate moral value, the sole prescriber of norms and the metric for evaluating the moral and social status of the individual. It further requires rethinking the notion of community and its role and place in a plausible theory of selfhood. I navigate through these deeply intricate issues by reassessing two philosophical discourses figuring within the broad theme of tradition and modernity that have influenced and shaped contemporary sympathies towards a more individualist metaphysic of self. The first pertains to the issue of an African identity. I consider Appiah's exploration of the role of the African writer in the making of an African identity. I suggest that there is a striking correspondence between what Appiah terms the 'metaphysics of community' or the account of Africa as a metaphysical category, in the project of constructing an African identity, and the view of the African philosopher that self is a metaphysical collective. I argue that rejecting the first entails rejecting the second; this should ultimately pave way for the 'metaphysics of the individual self'.

The other philosophical discourse concerns the debate over the status of ethnophilosophy in understanding African philosophy. Drawing on an interesting insight in Masolo's recent work, I argue that beyond the lively protestations that characterize that debate, the core of Hountondji's criticism remains—that ethnophilosophy erroneously and unreasonably attributes a philosophy to a collective mind. I further argue that if the culmination of the single debate that entirely dominated the early stages of modern African philosophy was the reinstating of the *individual* mind as the basis for rigorous and critical thought, even if

culture provides the material for such reflection, then it seems that contemporary African thought, particularly in the conception of self, should revolve around the idea of the individual subject as the basis of social and political organization. In my concluding remarks, I contend that beyond the rational pressures towards a metaphysics of the individual self, imposed on us by the intellectual trajectory of these discourses, there are other pragmatic reasons why contemporary African thinking should take as its starting point the place of the individual as fundamental vis-à-vis the collective. More specifically, I have in mind the demand for individual liberties, which is a feature of modern-day culture we can no longer overlook.

7.2. An Individualist Self

By the end of Chapter Four of his widely discussed book, *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), Kwame Appiah had stumbled upon what he describes as a 'novel self'. After having noted that this conception of self 'is the product, surely, of changes in social life as well as in the technology of the word,' Appiah adds that 'this novel self is more individualist and atomic than the self of precapitalist societies ... it is no longer something that we in Africa could escape even if we wanted to. And if we cannot escape it, let us celebrate it.' (1992:84).

The context, of course, is Appiah's discussion of the ideological role of the writer in Africa or the relation of the writer to the social world she inhabits, with specific reference to the work of Wole Soyinka. In this connection, part of his concern was to explore how African writers, particularly in Anglophone Africa, negotiate the question of African

identity—by appealing to their own traditions. Appiah begins by describing the role of African writers as involving the ‘search for a culture’, quite distinct from the purposes of modern European writers who are steeped in a constant search for the individual self. African writers seek to ‘to develop their cultures in the direction that will give them a role’—indeed, a ‘public role’ (76). This puts the African writer, as much as it does the African philosopher, who, through her education and the language she employs, inhabits both the European world as well as her traditions, in a peculiar situation in which commitment to the latter may sometimes be at odds with the obvious pull of the former.

Appiah sees Soyinka as exemplifying this tension. He describes the tension, mediated through ‘the growth of both literacy and of the availability of printing’, as the struggle of the ‘authorial “I” to displace the “we” of the oral tradition’ or as the “I” seeking ‘to escape the persistent and engulfing “we”’ (1992:84–85). Thus in navigating such questions as the role of the African writer and the problem of African identity, Appiah juxtaposes two competing conceptions of self—one embodied in the ‘we’ of pre-capitalist societies and the other revolving around a new mode of individuality that underpins what he terms the ‘novel self’ or, elsewhere as, ‘the metaphysics of the individual self’ (82).

The reference in Appiah to the ‘metaphysics of individual self’ is interesting not least because it connotes a degree of exigency and inevitability—this ‘more individualist and atomic’ self, he writes, ‘... is no longer something we in Africa could escape even if we wanted to’ (Appiah 1992:84). I would like to think of this *inability to escape* in terms of some of the rational pressures compelling us away from the former, pre-capitalist

conception of self and pulling us in the direction of Appiah's novel self, by which I understand a conception of self in which the most fundamental facts, moral or otherwise, are grounded on the individual. The alternative, of course, grounds such facts elsewhere—namely, on extrinsic facts about communal belonging, relationships, harmony and such similar communal facts that are held to enjoy epistemic, metaphysical or moral priority over the individual.

The discourse on selfhood in African philosophical literature betrays a preference for this alternative, which has manifested in manifold guises in the works of Placide Tempels, John Mbiti and Ifeanyi Menkiti. Advancing that central idea, Menkiti claimed, in his seminal paper *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, that in construing self, whatever the individual attributes and histories may be, they are merely derivative vis-à-vis the community, which always enjoys metaphysical, moral and epistemic precedence (1984:171). Rather than espouse the metaphysics of individual self, he subscribes to the metaphysics of community—an idea that was already present in Mbiti (1969:108–9).¹⁷³

Yet, in spite of Mbiti we may still wonder how it is that the individual depends on, or is produced by, the community. Masolo (2004) has recently characterized this idea in terms of belief in the self as a metaphysical collectivity. Citing the work of Marcel Grauile (1965), Masolo sheds some light on this conception of self as emerging from ethnographical work on the sources of self. He writes that 'Among the Dogon, for example, ...the selves of individuals are formed out of the spiritual forces of ancestors' and

¹⁷³I have already quoted Menkiti on this point. See section 5.3.1 of chapter 5 of this thesis.

that ‘every individual self is constituted of a *nommo*, a *nyama*, and a *kikunu say*, all being spiritual forces from the Dogon metaphysical (ancestral) storage’ (2004:490). The term ‘metaphysical ancestral storage’ is reminiscent of Menkiti’s reference, earlier in the literature, to a ‘communal gene pool’ in which, he claims, the primal resources for the constitution of self are contained and which explains the existence of individual selves (1984:172). Later, Masolo would repeat Mbiti’s conclusion: ‘What this cosmology of life transmission tells us is that individuals depend on others (parents and ancestors) for their organic existence...’ (2004:490).

It is worth teasing out the implication of this dependence relation. The idea of self as a metaphysical collectivity implies very strongly that in construing self, community is prior to the individual. Interestingly, it further implies that we must posit community as an independently existing entity—indeed, unless we think about ‘metaphysical ancestral storage’ or ‘communal gene pool’ as existing independently of individual selves, we couldn’t possibly propose an intelligible explanation of how it is that community ‘creates’, ‘produces’ or ‘makes’ individual selves. What produces must be prior in any such metaphysical ordering, and in an important sense independent of that which is produced.

Many other accounts of self in the African philosophical literature on personhood that have been less strident on the alleged ontological dependence of the individual on the community have nevertheless assigned some kind of collective priority over the individual. Sometimes this may involve proposing various communo-cultural criteria that ought to be met in order for individuals to qualify as persons. This is the case with Wiredu’s position

on Akan philosophy of personhood as well as Rosalind Shaw's (2000) account of the techniques of 'self' among the Temne peoples of Sierra Leone. Among the Akan, for example, it is not sufficient for personhood, Wiredu (2009) informs his readers, to appeal to individual facts or qualities individuals possess. What ultimately matters, he insists, is that individuals are able to achieve communally accepted standards of behaviour—moral or otherwise. So, although individual facts are recognized in illuminating the notion of the communal production of individual selves, when pitted against communal ones, they are said to matter less. It is for this reason that conceptions of self that fall within this set must be placed alongside those of Tempels, Mbiti and Menkiti that explicitly locate self in some idea of a metaphysical collective.

Be that as it may, what holds these seemingly disparate conceptions of self together is the underlying assumption that the individual or any related individual facts could not possibly be the central point of reference in a complete account of selfhood. It seems to me that this is why Appiah must characterize such conceptions in terms of a 'persistent and engulfing "we"', since it must necessarily crowd out the individual. But it is not just that; it is also the fact that the alleged 'we', which, in the context it is employed, points to a metaphysics of community and connotes some kind metaphysical unity or consensus, is ultimately a fiction. But what is this fiction?

The answer can be found in the interesting parallel between the idea, intellectually funded by a recognizable set of African philosophers, of constituting self out of the raw materials of a metaphysical ancestral storage or a communal gene pool and the implications of what

Appiah takes to be Soyinka's answer to the question of the role of the writer in Africa. Soyinka's answer, according to Appiah, is steeped in dubious metaphysical assumptions—it is that the role of the writer in search of a culture is to promote the idea of an African metaphysical solidarity, by drawing on an African metaphysics. In Soyinka's answer, Appiah detects the assumption of an African world construed in terms of a 'common stock of cultural knowledge' (80), or metaphysical solidarity and unity among Africans quite generally.

With specific references to some of Soyinka's works, in particular his play, *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1975), as well as to his lectures in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Appiah draws attention to what he sees as problematic in Soyinka's view of the role of the writer. First, and with regards to the play, Appiah contends that there is a tension between what Soyinka's play actually reveals and what he says about it. The relevant play seems to clearly explore the relationship, or perhaps we should say, clash between the Colonial worldview and African tradition—something which Soyinka expressly denies in his commentary on the play. 'The Colonial Factor', he writes, 'is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. . . . The confrontation of the play is largely metaphysical'. The tension shows, Appiah argues, that Soyinka conceals 'the ideological role he sees for the writer' (1992:83), for it is only if African writers play the role that Soyinka sees for them, that is, advancing an African metaphysical solidarity by 'drawing on an African metaphysics', that 'the colonial experience *would* be a "catalytic incident merely" . . . the impetus to uncover this metaphysical solidarity' (83).

The central point here is that the tension between Soyinka's plays and his interpretation of them enables Appiah to detect what Soyinka thinks is the role of the African writer. But more importantly—and this is the second point—the assumption of an African world, cashed out in terms of metaphysical unity and solidarity, is one, Appiah argues, that we ought to revolt against. In his view, 'The reason that Africa cannot take an African cultural or political or intellectual life for granted is that there is no such thing.' (1992:80). It is a fiction. According to Appiah, one way in which Soyinka takes for granted this fictional African world is by presenting Yoruba mythology in his lectures in *Myth, Literature and an African World* as exemplifying the African case. He does this by drawing 'confidently on the resources of his tradition' (79), on *Africa's shared metaphysical resources*. Appiah contends that the presupposition of an African world is misguided. It is a response to the 'European conception of Africa as what Soyinka elsewhere nicely terms a "metaphysical vacuum"' (81). But it is the wrong kind of response. He argues that 'even if these economic and technical similarities were to be found in Africa—and they aren't—they would not, even with the similarities in colonial history, justify the assumption of metaphysical or mythic unity, except on the most horrifyingly determinist assumptions.' (81). The correct answer, Appiah contends, is that Africa is 'richly populated with the metaphysical thought worlds of ... "myriads of races and cultures"'. So, although 'the socio-historical situation of African writers generate a common set of problems. . . it is precisely not a metaphysical consensus that creates this absurd situation.' (81).

Appiah's rejection of Africa as a metaphysical category, of the engulfing 'we', is unequivocal. For our present purposes, it is crucial to notice, as I have already suggested,

that what Appiah comprehensively lays bare as fiction—viz. the idea of an African metaphysical solidarity—is equivalent to the notion of self as a metaphysical collectivity. The underlying theme uniting Soyinka’s African world and the philosopher’s self as metaphysical collectivity is a presupposition I have already drawn attention to—the presupposition of metaphysical unity and solidarity made concrete by its apologists in the name of the metaphysics of an independently existing community. Just as Soyinka is shown to assume an African world of which the various cultures on the continent are representative examples, so also the apologists of the collective self must assume metaphysical unity among individuals who are believed to proceed from a common metaphysical stock. Just as Soyinka takes Yoruba cosmology as an instance of the African world, so the African philosopher takes each individual as an instance of the collective.

My aim is to argue that a rejection of Africa as a metaphysical category entails a rejection of belief in the idea of self as a collectivity since both ideas hinge on a reified notion of the collective. If I am right that it is the presupposition of metaphysical unity that unites these two discourses—on African world and self as collectivity—then a rejection of that presupposition with regards to the first entails its rejection with regards to the other.

One potential objection stands in the way of this conclusion. Although Appiah revolts against presupposing an African world metaphysically construed because there’s no such thing as a deep, metaphysical solidarity among Africans, he nevertheless shows sympathy for the idea that the geographical area that is Africa is ‘populated’ by several ‘metaphysical thought worlds’ (1992:81). This concession is crucial but also ill-advised. It

is crucial to the argument I wish to advance because it implies that a rejection of Africa as a metaphysical category is not yet a rejection of the metaphysics of community as an independently existing thing. This is so because even if, as Appiah cautions, Africa should not be thought of as a metaphysical whole, it may nevertheless be the case that each of the myriads of cultures that exist within that geographical area constitute a metaphysical whole—or, to use Appiah's term—thought world. The idea of a metaphysics of community remains, therefore, even if not at the level of Africa. And although an individual self may not be constituted out of an African metaphysical ancestral storage because there is no such thing, it could be constituted out of a Dogon or Yoruba metaphysical ancestral storage. Since I wish to argue not only against thinking of Africa as a metaphysical category but also the idea of a metaphysical ancestral storage, which produces or creates individual selves, I shall now show why we should also revolt against the latter and not think of the myriads of cultures in Africa as 'metaphysical thought worlds'.

The beginning of this response is already in Appiah's discussion. He argues, correctly I think, that what binds the various cultures in Africa is not metaphysical unity, but merely a shared socio-historical situation which, I should add, is basically contingent. But if the contingency of a shared socio-historical situation is not strong enough to bind Yoruba, Asante, Dogon, etc. into a metaphysical aggregate that is Africa, then it is hard to see how a shared cultural heritage, which is equally contingent, can sufficiently unite individuals who subscribe to Yoruba or Asante or Dogon customs in such a way that each cultural group constitutes a metaphysical unity. Appiah's insistence that Africa should be seen as

populated by metaphysical thought worlds leaves ample room for doubt as to why we should revolt against metaphysical solidarity at the level of Africa. If Appiah is right that there is no such thing as an African metaphysical solidarity, ‘an African worldview’, ‘even at quite a high level of abstraction’ (1992:82), then by the same token there cannot be Yoruba, Dogon or Asante metaphysical solidarity. This, of course, does not mean we cannot speak of a Yoruba or Asante worldview. As Appiah notes, ‘In denying a metaphysical or mythic unity to African conceptions, then, I have not denied that “African literature” is a useful category’ (81). The point is that the usefulness of these categories, whether at the level of Africa or some specific culture, doesn’t instantiate metaphysical unity or community, in the sense of being a *thing*, something over and above, separate and distinct from individuals, or a part of the basic furniture of reality.

This line of thinking has gained currency in contemporary philosophical thinking, with a number of African philosophers holding similar views. Masolo has interrogated the idea of the metaphysics of ‘community-dependence’ of the individual (2004:493). Elsewhere, he has argued for a rethinking of the notion of community; more specifically, he shows sympathy for the view that we should jettison the idea of community as an entity, fixed and unchanging (2009:51–52, 67). Paulin Hountondji has argued that ‘the concept of Africa’ is above all ‘an empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one’ (1983:66). More recently, Hountondji (2002) has called for the re-interrogation of the idea of community as a fixed and unchanging entity. What’s interesting about this position is that by removing ‘community’ from the realm of metaphysics, by casting doubt on its conception as an entity, these philosophers have also cast doubt over the idea that the

individual self is metaphysically dependent on the collective; that is, on the thesis Mbiti proposed. Sadly, however, there has been an unwillingness to replace it. Instead, it is asserted as an abiding truth.

But if we must jettison the idea of the metaphysics of community, then it seems that we must give an account of what should take its place. Again, Appiah's work is instructive. He argues that it is the metaphysics of individual self that must replace it. In his view, the tension between what Soyinka's play shows and what he says about it is fundamentally a tension between a private, independent self and a 'public commitment' (1992:78), and ultimately points towards 'the challenge of a new mode of individuality'. 'Soyinka, the individual ...' Appiah writes, '...outside the traditional, more certain world of his Yoruba ancestors, struggles with the Soyinka who experiences the loss of that world ... the "I" seeks to escape the persistent and engulfing "we". (83). The tension, and the inevitable transition from the "we" to the "I", is a function of the 'of changes in social life as well as in the technology of the word' (84).

Thus, we arrive where we started—at the 'novel self' that is both 'individualist and atomistic'. And this is necessarily so, because the idea of self couched in terms of a metaphysical collectivity is no longer rationally tenable. In other words, having rejected the idea of the 'metaphysics of community', in the guise of belief in an African world and the theory of self as a metaphysical collectivity, we are now rationally compelled to recognize a novel way of thinking about self; a way of thinking that aligns self closely to

the metaphysics of the individual. And, as Appiah is keen to stress, ‘... if we cannot escape it, let us celebrate it.’ (1992:84).

7.3. Individual Mind as the Basis of African Philosophy

Coincidentally, another type of discourse in the history of African philosophy also compels the shift towards the metaphysics of the individual self. I have in mind the discourse on the status of ethnophilosophy; a trend in African philosophy that emerged against the backdrop of the colonial representation, or more appropriately, misrepresentation of Africa and its peoples, which misrepresentation was mediated chiefly by means of Western philosophical and anthropological prejudices. At the centre of the colonial project was the categorical denial of a rational mind to the African subject. Philosophy, being the highest expression of the use of the faculty of rationality, was said to be non-existent in Africa. All this, of course, was a consequence of the ethnological tradition spawned by Levy-Bruhl’s work on ‘primitive mentality’.¹⁷⁴ In any case, given this intellectual climate, it becomes interesting to see what the original uses of ethnophilosophy were in contesting previously received notions about Africa and the rational capacities of its people.

Beginning with Placide Tempels, and given further expression by Alexis Kagame and John Mbiti, the foundational claim of ethnophilosophy was that a coherent system of thought, eligible for the title of philosophy, was always present in Africa, at least among the Bantu, and such a philosophy was always couched in the worldviews of African peoples. Initially, Tempels’ project of linking the idea of ‘philosophy’ to African worldviews appears to be

¹⁷⁴ See his book ‘Primitive Mentality’ (1923) in which he categorically denies rationality and the possibility of developing concepts to primitive cultures, which to his mind operate through mythic representations.

noble. Even so, it is worth pointing out that Tempels' motives have since been interrogated and doubts remain as to how much he had propagated the very colonialist representations of Africa he had sought to repair.¹⁷⁵ Beyond the interrogation of the suspect motives underlying the ethnophilosophical project, however, there have been criticisms and counter-criticisms directed at the theory itself. And no one has been more fierce and unrelenting than Paulin Hountondji in contesting and subsequently rebutting the ethnophilosophical premise that philosophy in Africa was a function of a collective mind. In the brief excerpt that follows, I draw on Barry Hallen's insightful abridgement of what Hountondji takes to be the distinctive characteristics of the ethnophilosophical programme:

- (1) It presents itself as a philosophy of *peoples* rather than *individuals* ... Ethnophilosophy speaks only of Bantu philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Akan philosophy; as such its scope is collective...
- (2) Its *sources* are in the past, in what is described as authentic, *traditional* African culture of the *pre-colonial* variety...
- (3) From a methodological point of view, ethnophilosophy therefore tends to present the beliefs that constitute this 'philosophy' as things that do not change, that are somehow timeless. African systems of thought are therefore portrayed as placing minimal emphasis upon

¹⁷⁵For representative examples, see Hountondji (1983), who argues that *Bantu Philosophy* was aimed at a European audience in such a way as to further the colonial and missiological objectives of Europe and Matolino (2011) who argues that Tempels' work betrays an underlying racialism.

rigorous argumentation and criticism in a search for truth... (Hallen 2010:75, emphasis as in the original)¹⁷⁶

These three central claims constitute the core of Hountondji's discontent with ethnophilosophy. The first underlines what, I shall argue, was always the crux of Hountondji's criticism—that ethnophilosophy obfuscates the meaning of philosophy by eliminating the individual and therefore the possibility of a meaningful discourse from its very definition. By challenging the idea that philosophy resides in the 'authentic, *traditional* African culture', Hountondji sought to locate it elsewhere, in a discourse spurred by critical and rigorous thought. Accordingly, he was keen to emphasize that ethnophilosophy plays down the importance of 'rigorous argumentation' and 'criticism'. He describes what he has in mind as the appropriate definition of philosophy as 'the deliberate, explicit and *individual analytic* activity' (1983:63). He objects to how the 'thesis of a collective African philosophy works: it is a smokescreen behind which each author is able to manipulate his own philosophical views' (62). Consequently, 'The individual', Hountondji writes, 'must liberate himself from the weight of the past as well as from the allure of ideological fashions' which makes possible '...discussions between *free and intellectually responsible individuals*' (68–69, emphasis added).

The debate on the status of ethnophilosophy, as an expression of African philosophy, however, is intricate and many-sided. On one level, it was a debate about whether

¹⁷⁶ See also Appiah's summary presentation of ethnophilosophy, which is based on what he describes as the factual and normative assumptions underlying this approach to African philosophy. The factual claim is that 'there is some central body of ideas that is shared by Black Africans quite generally' and normative one is that 'the recovery of this tradition is worthwhile' (1992:95).

traditional thought can count as a philosophy in the most robust sense of the word. At another level, the theoretical wrangling was about indigenous knowledge systems and whether they can and should play a role in the global production of knowledge. These issues fall under the longstanding debate over universals and particulars—in particular, whether philosophy was a universal enterprise or must be defined by reference to the specificity of culture. Those African philosophers who saw philosophy as always present in African traditional and indigenous systems and who insist on philosophy as primarily a cultural enterprise, perceived in the criticisms of ethnophilosophy anti-traditional and anti-indigenous, which for them really meant anti-African, tendencies in the intellectual leanings of opponents of ethnophilosophy. Unsurprisingly, then, there were lively protestations against Hountondji's assault on ethnophilosophy.

Yet, ultimately, these protestations almost always affirmed implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the crux of Hountondji's criticism—the indispensable role of the responsible individual in producing a philosophical tradition. Consider, for example, how Odera Oruka, and to some extent Kwame Gyekye (1995), contested Hountondji's position that African traditional cultures, which were predominantly non-literate, lacked a philosophy in the robust sense of the word. Oruka set out to prove that critical thought, and therefore philosophy, was a feature of African traditional and non-literate societies contra Hountondji. He did so by identifying non-literate sages, who exhibited a 'philosophic capacity'. 'As sages,' Oruka argues, 'they are versed in the beliefs and wisdoms of their people. However, as thinkers, they are rationally critical and they opt for or recommend only those aspects of the beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny.'

(1990:44). Notice, though, that the objection, valid though it may be, doesn't dispute Hountondji on the issue of where philosophy is to be found or the subject of its attribution— which, of course, is not the myths and collective worldviews of *peoples* but the responsible *individuals* who engage in critical thought.

For while Oruka may have succeeded in showing that philosophy was a feature of African culture contra Hountondji, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that he had gone out in search of *individuals*, in the guise of sages, who exemplified critical thought in African cultures. So, even while contesting the early Hountondji's position that Africa's predominantly non-literate cultures lacked a philosophy, Oruka explicitly confirmed another aspect of Hountondji's claim namely, that philosophy was not to be found in the myths, songs, poetries and worldviews of African peoples *as such* but rather in the exercise of critical thought by *individuals*, or shall we say, sages.

Similarly, Sodipo and Hallen (1986) sought to show that despite Hountondji, philosophy was always a feature of traditional African societies, in particular Yoruba culture. The methodological approach they employed targeted the everyday meanings of words in that language system. They arrived at the conclusion that Yoruba language, as must be the case with other language systems, generates a specific set of criteria for the application of concepts unique to that language system. For them, this pointed not only to the cultural dimension of any correct definition of philosophy, but also to the fact that rationality itself is relative. This conclusion naturally challenged what critics perceived to be the 'universalist' tendencies in Hountondji.

Even so, it is crucial to observe that Sodipo's and Hallen's methodological approach to African philosophy could only get off the ground when they, like Oruka, consulted traditional healers and masters of medicine, who, as it turns out, are cultural analogues to Hountondji's responsible *individual* engaged in rigorous thought. In other words, they go about determining the everyday meaning of words in Yoruba language not by consulting ordinary users of the language but individuals they consider to be specialists in the language—i.e. traditional healers and masters of medicine—who, much like Oruka's sages, have the responsibility of decoding what words and concepts in Yoruba language mean. The crucial point is that Sodipo's and Hallen's challenge to Hountondji notwithstanding, they implicitly affirmed the latter's fundamental claim that philosophy is not to be found in the collective worldviews of peoples, which is unanimous, anonymous and passive, but is the product of critical and rigorous thinking by responsible individuals.

Further, Kwasi Wiredu, who himself contested some aspects of ethnophilosophy, took issue with Hountondji's position on the role of tradition and indigenous knowledge systems in understanding African philosophy and production of knowledge quite generally. He contends that it is crucial that African philosophy is done with a deep understanding of the traditional African conceptual scheme (1980: x), thus underlining the fact that the elements of traditional culture can provide the material for philosophical reflection. Yet, he disagrees with ethnophilosophers that merely rehashing such schemes amounted to a philosophy, African philosophy included. The defining ingredient in transforming such cultural materials as it were into a philosophy is the work of the *individual* subject who

makes possible and engages in critical discourse. Hountondji's recent clarifications on his position (2002) bears striking resemblance to this position and drives home the point that his original criticism of ethnophilosophy was not a criticism really against employing the resources of indigenous culture but was against the ethnophilosophical premise that philosophy was possible *anonymously* and *unanimously* by the deliberate omission, or rather submersion into the whole, of the individual subject and the critical discourse he makes possible through the rigour of reflection.

Hountondji's clarification notwithstanding, the core of his criticism of ethnophilosophy remains—this is the idea that an unreflective, uncritical reproduction of African worldviews could not pass as a philosophy and, *a fortiori*, the activity of philosophizing was not a function of a collective mind but primarily the activity of individuals. It is this enduring aspect of Hountondji's assault on ethnophilosophy that stirs philosophical interest. It is enduring precisely because in spite of the disagreements and oppositions, there is a growing consensus among many contemporary African philosophers, including a number of those who opposed Hountondji (Odera Oruka, Sodipo and Hallen etc.) that philosophy appropriately construed must be characterized by discursive reasoning made possible by the critical and rigorous reasoning of individual philosophers. It is the consensus that philosophy is not the property of whole communities but the product of individual minds. The twin problem of ethnophilosophy was the attribution of philosophy to the collective and the subsequent omission of the individual in the subsequent definition of philosophy. Ultimately, then, recognizing the indispensability of the role of the individual subject as opposed to the collective in the making of a philosophy is the climax

of a long and rewarding journey of African philosophy's inquiry into its own nature and possibility.

What, then, shall we make of this? It seems to me that all along in some important respect the debate over the status of ethnophilosophy was really about the role of and how best to construe the individual subject. Masolo has recently made this point. He observes that while philosophers wrestled over the status of ethnophilosophy, there was beneath the surface of the criticisms and counter-criticisms another type of discourse fermenting. It had to do with the individual subject. More specifically, it had to do with competing ways of representing the individual subject. This is how Masolo makes the point:

...even the notorious critique of ethnophilosophy by Paulin J. Hountondji was a function of the opposition between two views of the individual, namely that between, on the one hand, the individual as a transcendental Subject whose cognitive activity could be explained solely by understanding the phenomenological structure of consciousness, and, on the other, the individual as a subject, yes, but rather one whose distinguishing characteristics, including developing and using reason, are always binding from without, not only in moral matters, but in every domain (Masolo 2009:45).¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷Bruce Janz (2003) also expresses the point powerfully when he observes that 'The issue of personhood ... has been conceived very differently in ethnophilosophy and in professional philosophy...' with the former analyzing 'personhood in ways that limit the importance of individual agency'.

There are a number of interesting points that emerge from this distinction. First, if Hountondji's view of the individual subject was not of one '...whose distinguishing characteristics ... are always binding from without ...' and if this was the view his critics preferred, then we must investigate what it is that binds. We begin to get some sense of what it is when Masolo later explains that the critics of Hountondji decried in his representation the omission of the role of the community in defining the individual. They favoured the representation of the individual necessarily embedded in the matrix of communal relationships, which must necessarily define the individual. Although the individual is mentioned in their characterization, it is the individual that is defined by reference to facts external to her, from *without*. And these external facts that 'bind', or perhaps we should say 'determine', the individual are held to be definitive *in every domain*—moral, epistemic and metaphysical. This is perhaps one reason why Hountondji's critics were vehement in their opposition, why they found his position hard to believe. Suppose, then, that we momentarily put aside Hountondji's way of representing the individual. We are then left with the alternative—the conception of the individual as produced by and therefore dependent on the collective. It is a familiar one; it is Mbiti's individual 'produced' or 'created' by the community.

With these insights in hand, we can now begin to fully appreciate the point that when Hountondji holds up to scrutiny that aspect of ethnophilosophy that takes philosophy to be the property of whole peoples, or the collective rather than the individual, he was really on to something. It was about how best to construe the individual subject, or more appropriately, repositioning the individual as the basis from which something as crucial as a philosophy,

or the discursive engagement which it makes possible, should spring. But if we must reject Hountondji's depiction of the individual in favour of the alternative that construes the individual as dependent on the community, then we must investigate the notion of community that is being invoked. Indeed, the other side of Hountondji's project was the interrogation of the idea of community that is at issue in the ethnophilosophical supposition that philosophy is the property of peoples, or the whole, rather than the individual. This idea of community is as a *thing*, an entity that can exhibit such properties that are usually thought of as belonging to individuals. This is because it is unintelligible to construe the community as the determinant of the individual without first locating the community at the level of metaphysics. In other words, it involves conceptualizing community as *that which produces or binds the individual*. For, as I said earlier, what produces must be prior in any kind of ordering, metaphysical or otherwise, and so must be *thingified*, in the sense of having an independent existence, or having essential properties, in order to be made sense of as determiner.

I have already argued against this idea of community by rejecting, as Appiah does, the notion of the metaphysics of community, and with it the idea of self as metaphysical collectivity. So we must now turn our attention to the question of how best to construe the individual—and this cannot be done properly without reminding ourselves that we have already rejected the idea of community as entity.

Masolo puts forward two opposing possibilities that emerged from the discourse on the status of ethnophilosophy. However, it is not at all clear that these two representations

exhaust all the possibilities emerging from that discourse with regards to how best to represent the individual subject. If critics of Hountondji were vexed by the apparent absence of community in his representation the individual subject, then, perhaps an alternative construal of the individual subject, a middle ground, as it were, between the foregoing two characterizations is possible. For it is not at all clear that a rejection of the early Hountondji's notion of a transcendental subject, as Masolo describes it, logically entails embracing the alternative characterization of the individual as having her value and all that is essential to her constitution as binding from without. The logical gap, therefore, begs to be filled in. The third possibility should explain what the role of the community should be in our conception of self; but this need not imply that the constitution, authority and value of the individual, including its distinguishing characteristics, lies in some further extrinsic fact.

I wish to briefly explore this third possibility in an indirect way by first observing that African philosophers as a matter of course are quick to dissociate themselves from the idea of community as an entity, fixed and unchanging. Indeed, it is a rather difficult position to defend. Yet with the exception of a few, there is a widespread disinclination to reject the corollary thesis that the individual is dependent on, in the sense of being produced by, the collective. Instead, the dependency thesis is asserted as a given. One philosopher that epitomizes this reluctance is Masolo (2009 and 2010). In the relevant article, he argues against the idea of community as an entity but goes on to show sympathy for the view that the individual is defined in every domain by the community. He then attempts to clarify by stating that 'What is important to keep in mind is that the view that community is not an

“entity” with fixed reproducible characteristics does not compromise communitarianism as a principle of thought’ (2009: 67).¹⁷⁸ My view is that it certainly compromises a view of communitarianism that holds that the individual is metaphysically dependent on the community, which Masolo affirms, since I do not know how such a claim can be made intelligible without presupposing community as an independently existing thing, something Masolo wants to reject.

If we must reject the early Hountondji’s conception of the individual subject, because the individual is entirely dislocated from a community of dialoguers, as well as that of his critics, then we must show what it is that should replace them. As already noted, Hountondji has since clarified his stance that while he wanted to underscore the importance of philosophy as a discursive activity in which the individual was at the centre, he was concerned about re-conceptualizing the idea of community. The answer, then, is to re-think the idea of community in a way that privileges the individual not only as far as the meaning of African philosophy is concerned but beyond. What I propose is a reversal of the order of dependence, so that in this metaphysics of the individual, the community, important as it always is, is not an independently existing thing, but always the product of the activities and movements of individuals, who always remain fundamental. If what was problematic about ethnophilosophy was granting priority to communal thought over individual thought when making a case for a tradition of philosophy in Africa, then the denunciation of that aspect of the trend must imply a reversal of the order of priority in

¹⁷⁸See his *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010:163, 174, 218, 245–246, 265) for several references to his endorsement of the individual dependence relation to the community—in *every* domain (metaphysical, moral etc.).

favour of the individual. Thus the paired recognition of the individual as the basis of philosophical activity, even if that activity is directed at cultural data, and of the community as not an entity, ‘with fixed reproducible characteristics’, should give rise to a soft notion of community, a fluid one, which fluidity implies that community is no more than the product of individual movements, activities and choices.¹⁷⁹

Some threads need tying together. I have argued that the core of Hountondji’s assault on ethnophilosophy was to lay bare the implausibility of the idea that philosophy was the property of whole communities rather than individuals. I maintained that in spite of the oppositions, there was always a consensus among many African philosophers that in some fundamental sense philosophy was a product of individual critical enterprise, even if the material on which critical reflection is applied belongs to a people’s culture. I see in Hountondji’s emphasis on the fundamental role of the individual in producing a tradition of (African) philosophy a powerful confirmation of the emergence a modern, individualist self. The two discourses intersect—Appiah stumbled upon the novel self by reflecting on the new mode of individuality that ‘changes in social life’ and the ‘technology of the word’ have brought about and Hountondji makes a case for this new mode of individuality by advocating the liberation of the individual from behind the smokescreen of the collective through the location of philosophy in the critical discourse spurred by the rigour of individual thought. Thus, just as philosophy cannot be found in the collective worldviews of a people, since it is fundamentally an individual activity, so also the self cannot be found in the idea of a metaphysical collective.

¹⁷⁹I discussed this latter point in Chapter One and Chapter Four of this thesis.

It seems to me that current thinking about the self is headed in the direction of a conception of self that fits in with this third and alternative possibility of construing the individual subject. This led me to the conclusion that we must return to the metaphysics of the individual, as opposed to the community, in thinking about self.

But what, then, becomes of community? There seems to be an unstated but also unhealthy demand on African intellectuals to account for the communal dimension of the propositions they defend. And, sometimes, uncritical references to ‘communal’ and ‘communitarian’ basis of a particular view are seen as guarantee of authenticity and validity. On the specific subject of selfhood, it appears as though a conception of self must be communally construed for it to pass as African and valid. Recall how Didier Kaphagawani rather cynically observed that

The scholars of African difference were so much steeped in articulating the ideological divides between African and Western worldviews that they lost the real self in their analyses in pursuit of something else, perhaps an esteemed value such as community. The concepts of the self adopted by these scholars are chosen strictly with this goal in mind: they are concerned not with what concept best captures the manifold experiences of the self but with what concept best allows them to both promote difference and derive the

ontological values of the vital forces as well as communalism
(2000:74).

I believe that the way of thinking, about which Kaphagawani is critical, veers dangerously towards the very presuppositions that underlie what we should be revolting against. At any rate, in a conception of self that takes the individual as fundamental, the community still remains important, of course, but its importance must be derivative. Human beings thrive well and flourish in concert with others. The benefits of commerce, technology etc. are a result of human cooperation and mutual support. But these benefits accrue to *individuals*, and not to community thought of as something separate, an independently obtaining fact. Community is important *for* individuals, or individual selves, but never an end in itself. It is indeed valuable, but the idea that it is valuable in and of itself is misguided, since the veracity of that proposition falls away with the rejection of a reified notion of the collective.

I have been contending that the internal coherence of the discourses I have been examining compels a shift from the metaphysics of community to the metaphysics of the individual (self). But that is not all. There are additional pragmatic reasons why we must turn directly to a conception of self that is grounded on the primacy of the individual. This relates to the demand for individual liberties in our modern-day culture. The potential tension between the acceptance of what I have been describing as the metaphysics of the communal self and the demands of individual liberties is not lost on African philosophers. Kwame Gyekye (1997) indicts 'extreme' communitarians for downplaying the importance of individual

rights, autonomy and other personal attributes in favour of communal good and values. He sees these individual values as essential to modernity and Africa's post-colonial development. Even so, he concludes that communal good should override these claims to rights and autonomy as 'moderate communitarianism cannot be expected to be obsessed with rights' (36, 65). On his part, Kwasi Wiredu (2003) believes that the recognition of rights is a central aspect of communalism as it has been practiced among the Akans in Ghana and elsewhere, and he cautions against the 'authoritarianism' entwined with the communitarian vision while calling for its elimination (1980:5). More recently, DA Masolo (2010) has impressed upon the minds of Africans the need to recognize the demands to respect individual liberties. But it is never clear where Masolo's liberal commitments begin and where his communitarian ones end.

In any case, these philosophers, along with many other African philosophers, seem to think that sufficient regard for individual liberties is possible under a dispensation in which the collective is granted priority. But, as Chukwudum Okolo rightly observes in an incisive article, under a communal dispensation, 'This cognizance of an individual, unique self notwithstanding, the truth remains that violence is done to its status as an individual, as an independent self-consciousness. Self remains dominantly opaque, seen from the 'outside', so to speak, and in relationships with others' (2003:253). He further adds that, '...the seeming 'freedom' which the individual enjoys is ultimately and in reality a derivative one, dependent on and largely determined by the other, that is to say, by the community. He contends that it is virtually impossible for the individual to exercise 'initiative, spontaneity, responsibility, autodecision, autodetermination, etc. which individuals cherish as

individuals and which are the hallmarks of true liberty and autonomy' (254). Yet, recognizing and respecting these liberal values is the hallmark of our modern day culture.

The alternative way of thinking about self, cashed out in terms of the metaphysics of the individual self, as opposed to the communal one, is appealing as a promising foundation for grounding human rights claims in contemporary Africa. This is so because such liberties are first and foremost the entitlements of individuals and so they can be fully accounted for only in a conception of self that assigns priority to the individual; a conception of self that defines the individual by reference to *intrinsic* rather than extrinsic facts concerning the community. This type of pressure, in the guise of demands for liberties, towards the metaphysics of individual self is, to quote Appiah again, '...no longer something that we in Africa could escape even if we wanted to. And if we cannot escape it, let us celebrate it' (1992: 84).

Conclusion

I have been exploring issues emerging at the points where the themes of personhood, communitarianism and human rights intersect. But it is hard to escape the point that many of these issues fall under the broader debate on tradition and modernity in African philosophy. More specifically, the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is closely aligned with traditional thinking on self while a conception that is more individualist would be closely aligned to aspects of modernity (e.g. respect for human rights) or so I have maintained. In this way, the two approaches to personhood may be aligned with either side of the tradition-modernity divide.

Jay Ciaffa (2008) has suggested that there are two broad perspectives emerging from the debate on tradition and modernity.¹⁸⁰ Following Gyekye's (1997:233) description, Ciaffa describes the first perspective as 'cultural revivalism' and defines it as a 'reverential attitude toward the African cultural heritage', a 'revitalization of African cultural norms' with the aim of achieving 'genuine modernization in Africa' (2008:121–122). It is, as Eze explains elsewhere, 'an attempt to (re)discover in the African precolonial past resilient forms of social and political organization that, with proper reworking, would lead some African countries out of their current self-destructive patterns of political existence' (1997:313).¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰Jean-Marie Makang (1997) makes a similar point, distinguishing between an approach to tradition that 'mystifies' it and another that 'demystifies' it (325).

¹⁸¹Indeed, Eze identifies this 'model' with many of the African philosophers whose positions on personhood, communitarianism or human rights I have been contesting—including especially Kwasi Wiredu, Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere (313).

The other perspective ‘assumes a more critical attitude toward the indigenous heritage’, also with the aim of modernization in Africa.¹⁸² While it is not always helpful to locate oneself within these sometimes restrictive discursive categories, I believe that the arguments advanced in the chapters of this dissertation bring my position on personhood, communitarianism and human rights in African thought closer to this latter perspective. I have approached the communitarian and normative conception of personhood and the conception of human rights it ultimately engenders with a critical eye. In doing so, I advanced a number of objections. Let me summarize my main points.

I begin with an observation by Bruce Janz that is germane to the concerns and objectives of this dissertation. He writes,

Several strategies have emerged over the last few decades for articulating the nature of the person in Africa. One might be called the ‘essentialist’ approach. This is the attempt to find the particular feature of African existence that makes it unique. So, one might appeal to ... community (‘I am because we are’), tradition, culture, language or something else ... culturally intrinsic and unique that can provide the starting point for reflection on Africa and the African person (2002).¹⁸³

¹⁸²There are various shades of this position ranging from those who demand a critical approach to tradition to those who implicitly suggest a ‘clean break’ from tradition (Hountondji 1996:48), although Hountondji has clarified his position more recently as involving not a rejection of tradition but a critical approach to our understanding of tradition and its uses (2002).

¹⁸³See Janz Bruce (2002) ‘Framing the Issue’ in <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6039>

The first three chapters of the dissertation examined the idea of personhood that emerges from this starting point—the community or the maxim ‘I am because we are.’ And Janz notes that protestation against this view is a protestation against a conception of personhood ‘which must take community as a generative and fundamental feature’ (Bruce Janz 2002). Throughout the dissertation, I consistently highlighted, in relation to personhood and later on human rights, various objections to the belief that a conception *must take community as a generative and fundamental feature.*

For instance, towards the end of Chapter One of this dissertation I argued that a proper analytic defense of the idea that community is the basic feature of an African worldview has not been advanced. In that discussion, I noted that attempts to establish the communitarian orientation of African worldviews by appeal to the idea of personhood emerging from these cultures, or to the attitudes of peoples of African culture, are question begging. This is because that worldview is held to give traction to the communitarian and normative idea of personhood and the communal attitudes people. The obvious implication, I argued, is that the ensuing conception of personhood is not yet motivated insofar as the communitarianism upon which it hinges has not been sufficiently defended.

I continued my protestations against the idea that community is basic in Chapter Four in which I explored the question of what the appropriate relationship should be between individual and community. There, I argued that thinking of the community as basic in the context of this relationship holds less promise for the goal of grounding the liberal ideals of

autonomy and human rights that are given central place in modern African communities. I further highlighted a number of tensions in the attempt to hold them in balance noting especially that such an attempt, rather than resolving the individual-community dilemma, actually reaffirms it. The crucial aspect of Chapter Four is my contention that the individual should be taken as basic in that relationship. In order to establish this point, I contested the attempts to show the individual to be derivative in that relationship by appealing to independently holding collective facts. In particular, I argued against the view that there are fundamental wholes exhibiting properties that are independent of their parts. By contesting the metaphysical independence of wholes in relation to parts, I was well positioned to suggest that a community, as a special case of a whole, is not independent of or prior to individuals construed as parts. Extending the logic, I claimed that collective facts like group language or Menkiti's collective gene pool can be made intelligible only when individuals are taken to constitute their base.

Although the question of whether community is independent of and prior to individuals is addressed in some detail in Chapters One and Four, it is important to note that I continue my protestation in other chapters as well. In these other chapters, I aimed to show that because of the assumed priority of the community in the definition of personhood and human rights several tensions are noticeable in the ensuing conceptions.

But before summarizing these points, I wish to indicate that in the discussion alluded to above Bruce Janz goes on to detect a tension in the approach to personhood that is grounded on the community. He writes that 'it is worth noting that there is a tension here,

between establishing uniqueness and continuity with the rest of the world.¹⁸⁴ He thinks that there is a tension in the desire to conceptualize personhood as always a *particular* phenomenon since such an approach may be at odds with a *universal* conception of personhood or the desire for such a conception. Indeed, Janz's discussion of personhood is located within the universalism-relativism discourse. I have not explicitly framed the discussions in the various chapters in these terms; even so, I have concerned myself with the task of identifying some of the tensions internal to the African communitarian and normative conception of personhood and other tensions relating to its ability to ground individual human rights.

In Chapter One, I attempted to make clear a similar kind of tension. There I observed that the complete conception of personhood in African thought construed as a two-tiered phenomenon betrays a tension that goes into the heart of that conception. This tension, I argued, has to do with the observation that the two-tiered conception of personhood integrates two conflicting intuitions about where fundamental value is. On the one hand, the first-tier of personhood identifies value as something intrinsic to the individual person by appeal to such notions as dignity, divine speck, okra, emi etc. which are held to ground an individual's worth qua individual. On the other hand, the second-tier implies that an individual's dignity or worth lies elsewhere—in some facts about the community e.g., relationships, communal norms etc. all of which are extrinsic to the individual person. I then suggested that the first-tier is able to capture what seems to motivate a second-tier of

¹⁸⁴See Janz Bruce (2002) 'Framing the Issue' in <http://www.hnet.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6039>

personhood; this led me to suggest that positing a second level of personhood is somewhat unnecessary.

I acknowledged that proponents of the two-tiered conception of personhood could argue that although there are two places in which an individual person's worth may be grounded, it is the community that takes precedence. Therefore, the two tiered conception sees the truth worth of the individual not in facts intrinsic to the individual but ultimately in the individual's place within the community. This response seems to eliminate the tension. However, I suggested that this stance, although it seems appealing initially, makes the two-tiered, community-focused conception of personhood less able to ground individual rights and autonomy. This is so because it shifts attention directly away from the individual and focuses on the community as a 'generative and fundamental' feature of personhood.

Moreover, as I contended in Chapter Two, by assigning ultimate value to the community in the definition of person, and by extension giving higher premium to the collective-based features that constitute the lives of individuals in community, this view of personhood is unable to explain how it is that persons are morally equal. I noted that this observation is crucial because the equality of persons and the egalitarian nature of traditional communalistic societies is one of the credos of many philosophers and African theorists. In that chapter, I particularly argued that since community life is organized around such categories as gender, seniority and socio-economic status, all of which are modes of power-relations, a conception of personhood that gives high premium to community must equally place greater emphasis on the factual inequalities that constitute the lives of

individual persons. This I suggest makes it less likely for that conception to be able to explain why it is that persons are morally equal or why the equality of persons is a moral ideal.

My discussion on the relation between communitarian personhood and gender in Chapter Two dovetails nicely with the issues that occupy my attention in Chapter Three in which I explored that relation further. In Chapter Three, I explored the attempt to ground the communitarian and normative idea of personhood in fiction. There I gleaned a number of important lessons about that view. For example, it became clear from the examination of the fictional Umuofian culture that this idea of personhood is really about a deeply gendered phenomenon. I held the view that insofar as the means to acquiring personhood in community involve deeply gendered processes, the resultant acquisition is to that extent gendered. I then argued that because gender is typically a category of social domination, it seems to follow that this idea of personhood is trapped within this ideology of domination and perhaps tends to legitimize it. In this connection, female-personhood may be regarded as inferior to male-personhood to the extent that inferiority attaches to the female gender. I should point out that in reaching this conclusion I paid some attention to some of the voices objecting to the idea gender is a social category in African traditional societies and/or that there were gender inequalities.

Notice that by contesting these positions, I was able to reinforce my position that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood is fundamentally gendered. I see this conclusion as a critical moment in the discussion. This is because the extent to which

the communitarian and normative conception masquerades as a conception of personhood is a further indication that it is not plausible—a point that powerfully reinforces my subsequent urging that we move towards a more individualist conception of self.

The other important lesson about the communitarian and normative conception of personhood that I gleaned from my consideration of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* relates to the criteria by which the success or failure of individuals at personhood is assessed. After considering various characters in the novel that are supposed to fail or succeed at personhood, I argued that the criteria are sometimes too restrictive (i.e., it excludes individuals, for example Unoka, who would otherwise succeed at personhood). I also argued that they are sometimes too loose (i.e., it admits as successful candidates for personhood, individuals who, like Obierika, seem to display outward conformity while inwardly protesting against the norms and practices, in short the criteria, on which their success is judged). Lastly, I argued that these criteria are sometimes simply unreliable (as in the case of Okonkwo who although faithfully conformed to the criteria of success in Umuofia is ultimately adjudged to be a failure).

All of these features, I maintained, make the communitarian and normative conception of personhood less attractive. And they result directly from the valuation of community integral to the communitarian and normative conception of personhood. Thus, I see these arguments as an extension of my general claim that the communitarianism that is held to underpin the conception of personhood I have contested in this dissertation is a problematic feature of that conception.

My discussions of communitarianism and its role in underpinning the communitarian and normative conception of personhood are further highlighted and clearly linked in the discussion on human rights, which take up my attention in Chapters Five and Six. This is so because the discussion on human rights begins from the communitarian conception of the individual or human person to the exploration of the idea that communitarianism can ground human rights. In Chapter Five, I spend some time making good my suspicion that there is no such thing as an African conception of human rights, where African refers primarily to the communitarianism or collectivist feature constitutive of that conception. It is that aspect of an African conception of human rights that I take issue with. More specifically, I contest the claim that there is a plausible communitarian grounding for human rights and that this amounts to a distinctive African conception of human rights.

I should point out that it is in this chapter that the issue of universalism and particularism, which emerges in the reference to Janz above, receives explicit mention. In this connection, I examined three examples of African conceptions of the individual or a human persons vis-à-vis the community, showing how each one engenders a communitarian or collectivist conception of human rights. In each case, I argued that the emerging conception fails to convince.

I pointed out that the last of these examples, which is due to Thad Metz, is the most recent. In addition, it appears to be a more comprehensive conception. This is because it includes a clearly defined African theory of morality, an underlying conception of human nature, by

way of a conception of dignity, and subsequently attempts to integrate such liberal ideals as individual autonomy and rights. Because it promises to do more than its predecessors, and ostensibly circumvent the difficulties associated with the latter, this account by Metz, I noted, deserved further attention.

Consequently, in Chapter Six, I advanced what I believed to be conclusive reasons why Metz's communitarian conception of human rights is not plausible. In particular, I argued that the communitarian status of the theory of morality he proposes is suspect and that this is a result of his attempt to account for the liberal ideal of individual human rights within a communitarian framework. Relatedly, I also contended that all possible ways of integrating liberal individual ideals within his African communitarian conception of morality do not succeed. Finally, I contended that in the process of accounting for both, Metz inadvertently construes individual rights as duties. I held that this outcome is problematic since rights and duties are two distinct, even if related, concepts—a point I took some space to make in Chapter Five. Throughout I have maintained that communitarianism is not consistent with human rights; in particular, that the African communitarian and normative conception of personhood cannot provide a plausible foundation for human rights.

While the conclusions reached in each chapter are important contributions to each of the discourses on communitarianism, personhood and human rights, as well as to these themes considered together, it is important to point out that along the way some new and related areas of future research have emerged. Many of these are beyond the immediate scope of the dissertation, which is to critically examine the communitarian and normative

conception of personhood with special reference to its potential to ground human rights. However, I have already gestured towards some of the issues that may be explored further. In particular, I have indicated that a more plausible conception of personhood is one that is more individualist than the communitarian and normative one I have rejected. Given that I have provided several considerations against the latter conception, the need to provide an alternative conception is pressing.

In this thesis I have not provided a substantive conception of personhood to take the place of the communitarian and normative one. One central area of future research would involve articulating a substantive conception of personhood that is not susceptible to the criticisms I have levelled against the communitarian conception. This study should be able to describe what makes some entity a person in a way that substantially differs from the communitarian one. For instance, it should be able to articulate some non-gendered feature in terms of which personhood can be defined. It should be able to account for that in terms of which the identity of persons over time can be accounted for. It should indicate clearly in virtue of what the dignity of persons, particularly human persons, is grounded. Significantly, it should be able to plausibly ground human rights and account for the moral equality of persons. Additionally, that conception should clearly define the role, if any, of community in a conception of personhood.

Towards the end of Chapter Seven I indicated very strongly that a plausible conception of personhood (and human rights) would assign a less prominent and derivative role to community. There I suggested that just as there have been calls to rethink the fundamental

role assigned to community in the understanding of self (here I referred to Appiah's defense of an individualist self) and the definition of philosophy (here I referred to Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy), so too we need a rethink of the role of community in a plausible conception of personhood. This plausible conception of personhood will be focused on the individual. The details of that conception are the focus of future research on the themes discussed in this dissertation.

Other areas of future research relate to the subject of human rights. In particular, some of the key questions around which future research may be based are: (1) how can we better conceptualize human rights in Africa if the relative, collective versions proposed by philosophers are inadequate? (2) Would some modification on the relativist account suffice to make it acceptable or do we have to reject it completely? (3) Can a Universalist conception of human rights, based on an individualist conception of personhood, withstand the charges of Relativists? (4) In what ways is the individualist conception of self resistant to the charges of individualism that have been levelled against conceptions of personhood that revolve around the individual? (5) In particular, in what ways will the individualist conception of self differ from other available conceptions so as not to inherit the difficulties already associated with them?

All these recommended areas of future research hinge heavily on a well-articulated and detailed conception of the individual self—the self that, according to Appiah, we can no longer escape.

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