

**CRITICAL COMMENTS ON AFRO-COMMUNITARIANISM:
THE COMMUNITY VERSUS INDIVIDUAL**

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Abstract

This article draws our attention to the centrality of the normative idea of personhood in elucidating a robust Afro-communitarianism. To do so, it visits the debate between the so-called moderate and radical communitarians to argue that the assertion that a community takes priority over an individual is not an implausible position. It argues that this assertion, given a nuanced moral interpretation, can offer a promising African perspective on how to secure a life of dignity without necessarily appealing to rights but to the normative idea of personhood. It submits that the idea of personhood entails a morality of duties that prioritizes the well-being of all. It is this prioritization of the well-being of all as the proper moral-political goal of Afro-communitarianism that moral-theoretically captures the essence of the assertion that a community takes priority over an individual.

Keywords: Afro-communitarianism, Duties, Personhood, Rights, Ubuntu.

Introduction

I find the literature on Afro-communitarianism to be particularly inadequate to the task of spelling out a clear alternative moral-political vision that can stand neck and neck with a Western system of rights (MASOLO 2004). African scholars' insistence that Afro-communitarianism is distinct from its Western counterpart is generally elusive with regards to the theoretical details of what constitutes this difference (BUJO 1998; MASOLO 2004)¹. A somewhat promising change of fortunes for a robust Afro-communitarian thought emerged in the light of the debate between the so called 'radical' and 'moderate' communitarians (MENKITI 1984, 2004; GYEKYE 1992; 1997; MATOLINO 2009).

¹For example, Bujo (1998, 12) notes that a notion of a community as used in Afro-communitarianism is expansive enough to accommodate the not-yet born and the living dead (ancestors). This does not necessarily render Afro-communitarianism clearer or even attractive, it simply adds more members into the community.

This debate is framed in terms of two disparate theses, roughly: (1) ‘the community takes priority over an individual’ – radical communitarianism (MENKITI 1984: 171); and, (2) the individual and community enjoy the same status – moderate communitarianism (GYEKYE 1997, 41). There is general consensus in the literature that radical communitarianism is flawed because it prioritizes the community over the individual to a point of (allegedly) denying them their rights (GYEKYE 1997; MATOLINO 2009). On the other hand, scholars are equally dissatisfied with Gyekye’s solution that equalizes the good of the community to that of an individual since these two will tend to clash (FAMANIKWA 2010; METZ 2012; OYOWE 2014). If both of these theses are thought to be unsatisfactory then how shall we proceed to defend and espouse afro-communitarianism?

In this article, I defend the first proposition that understands the community to take priority over an individual obviously after offering it a nuanced normative interpretation (MASOLO 2004). I argue that this claim roughly amounts to a moral-political theory that prioritizes the well-being of all as taking priority over separate/private individual interests. What is novel about this article is that it is an attempt to give a “robust and prescriptive status” to the communitarian thesis that a community takes priority over an individual; whereas African scholars usually focus on metaphysical considerations (MASOLO 2004, 488). By ‘defense’, here, I intend to develop a philosophical account that clarifies the nature of Afro-communitarianism.

I observe that the proposition that a community takes priority over an individual has not been done moral-theoretical justice by its own proponents (MBITI 1969; MENKITI 1984); and, it has not been construed in the most charitable light by its detractors (GYEKYE 1992; MATOLINO 2009; OYOWE 2014). A proper clarification of this proposition, I believe, will demonstrate that it is not as unattractive as some would have us believe. The problem, I observe, has been two major straw-mans in the literature.

Elsewhere, I argued that it is not correct to construe Menkiti’s analysis on the notion of personhood to amount to radical communitarianism (Molefe, 2016a). It was crucial to offer this kind of defense so as to cast doubt on the view that a moral-theoretical interpretation of communitarianism that relegates rights to a secondary status is necessarily implausible. I think the normative idea of personhood as defended by Menkiti is crucial for understanding Afro-communitarianism² and how it promises to secure a life of dignity. I will

²The idea that there is a distinction between being merely human and being a person. The first is a biological or descriptive fact that tracks one’s as

also rely on this idea of personhood to give moral-political content to the idea of a community taking priority over an individual.

I also observe that it is a straw-man on the part of African scholars to usually talk of a 'community' as if it is a *thing* that enjoys an ontological status of its own to a point that it can be paired or matched against or with an individual as in the proposition defended by Gyekye of moderate communitarianism. Moderate communitarianism claims that the individual and community have equal moral status (GYEKYE 1997, 41). I will argue below that a 'community' cannot have moral status in a way that an individual can because a 'community' does not have the (moral)-ontology that an individual has.

I think, as part of arriving at a promising conception of Afro-communitarianism, one will first have to remove conceptual and theoretical obstacles by clarifying some of these misconceptions with regards to the status of a 'community' and 'personhood' in African moral thought. To that effect, I divide this article into two main sections.

I begin by looking into the discussions about the community and an individual in light of Menkiti's and Gyekye's debate to trace what is considered to be a problem and what is posited as a solution. Here, I consider several conceptual issues, specifically, how the debate is unfruitful because these scholars are talking past each as they are employing different notions of a 'person'. And, I will also show how a talk of a 'community' is also a cause for confusion. Secondly, I revisit the assertion that a 'community takes a priority over an individual'; I construe this assertion as a moral-political philosophy amounting to a response to the question – what is a good society? Part of the answer, as I will elaborate below, is a function of a normative idea of personhood, which is at the heart of an Afro-communitarian vision of a good society. I will conclude by highlighting possible future research that is crucial for developing a morality of duties that is comprehensive and complete.

The Individual versus Community?

Kwame Gyekye's critique of Mbiti and Menkiti departs from a stance that these are working with an exaggerated understanding of the role of the community in the definition of a person. Gyekye notes:

being born of human parentage and it is a feature that is equally possessed by all human beings. The other is a normative notion that refers to human beings who are leading truly human lives insofar as their lives radiate with moral virtue or excellence. The idea of a person is a morally commending term; it says one is morally praiseworthy (See, MENKITI 1984; 2004; WIREDU 1992; 2004; 2009; DZOBO 1992; IKUNENOBE 2006).

... for it is possible to assume offhandedly that with its emphasis on communal values, collective good and shared ends, communitarianism invariably conceives of a person as wholly constituted by social relationships; that it tends to whittle down the moral autonomy of the person ... (1992, 102)

In the same chapter, he further observes that ‘radical communitarianism’

... is a view that gives an exaggerated conception of the community, wherein the community is construed as always prior to the individual and this conception of the community fails to recognize the individuality of the individual and the rights that naturally belong to a human person insofar as a person is essentially autonomous (108)

According to Gyekye, the major problem with Menkiti (and others) is that they consider the community to be always prior to the individual. He also believes that defending the idea that a community always takes priority over an individual threatens certain crucial features of an individual like her autonomy. On Gyekye’s view, the upshot of radical communitarianism is a flagrant violation of what is special about human beings and, as such, individuals will be sacrificed on the altar of promoting the communal good. Gyekye observes that such an overstated conception of a role of a community is an “unsupportable” view of communitarianism that does “not allow room for the exercise of individual rights” (104). To respond to such an exaggerated understanding of a community and its threat to individual human rights, Gyekye proposes ‘moderate communitarianism’. Gyekye notes:

The restricted communitarianism offers a more appropriate and adequate account of the self ... in that it addresses the dual features of the self: as a communal being and as an autonomous, self-determining ... (GYEGYE 1992, 113)

Moderate communitarianism is to be favoured because it is grounded on a plausible conception of the self. To solve the problem of overstating the importance of a community, an approach that threatens human rights; Gyekye’s solution centrally involves proffering a better conception of human nature, where it is conceived as constituted by two facets, sociality and autonomy. According to Gyekye, moderate communitarianism “... requires the recognition of communality and individuality ... I think the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the

status of equal moral standing” (GYEKYE 1997, 41, emphasis mine). This idea of balancing communal and individual facets is well captured by Michael Eze (2008, 386), thus: “the individual and community are not radically opposed in the sense of priority but engaged in a contemporaneous formation ...The individual is not prior to the community and neither is the community prior to the individual”. Thus, both the community and the individual are equally important.

So, the solution offered by Gyekye is that we need to create room for the community as much as we should for the individual, and these two should be understood as deserving equal consideration.

Well, here, we may pause and ask: is Gyekye correct to observe that Menkiti and others are working with an exaggerated notion of community in relation to an individual? I am personally not convinced. Let’s visit some of the assertions that give the impression that informs Gyekye’s critique. Note that John Mbiti (1969, 108 - 109, emphasis mine) claims:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes this existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group ... whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am”. *This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.*

It is crucial to note that Mbiti is elucidating on what he refers to as a ‘cardinal point in the understanding of man’. To understand Mbiti we need to be clear about what he means by the idea of ‘man’ in this passage. A similar view (of ‘man’) is also defended by Menkiti who is the direct target of Gyekye’s criticism (1984, 171, emphasis mine):

On the African view ... *man* is defined by reference to the environing community ... the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be.

On the face of it, it appears blatantly true that here we are dealing with two African scholars who were defending stances that overstated the role a community plays in its conception of personhood. But, let’s pause and reflect on what is really happening here. It appears to me that Mbiti and Menkiti are giving an account of personhood *qua* personal identity

that generally characterizes communitarian thought. And, insofar as they are after a cardinal view of ‘man’; they appear to be giving an account of how human beings become the kinds of persons they end up being. It seems that these thinkers are pursuing the idea that personal identity is a function of being embedded in a community as an incubator for socialization. The community plays a decisive role in facilitating personal identity development. This kind of a claim strikes me as a *metaphysical* one, as it merely gives us an account of how human beings come to form personal identities.

And, this metaphysical view of ‘man’ or ‘personhood’ *qua* personal identity is a common one among communitarians whether Western or African. For example, Neale et al (1990) draws a distinction between “contingently” and “essentially” shared relations in the process of personal identity formation. The liberal view defends contingently shared relations and communitarian view the essentially shared ones in accounting for personal identity. ‘Contingently shared relations’ is the view that personal identity formation ultimately is a function of some internal feature of a human person whilst not denying a limited role for relationships (or, the community). And, ‘essentially shared relations’ accounts for personal identity by largely invoking these relationships in which one is caught up with others as its constituting features. If truly Mbiti and Menkiti talk of ‘a community taking priority over an individual’ is a claim about personal identity, I struggle to see how this is such a big problem³. Here, Menkiti *et al* are simply giving us an afro-communitarian conception of personal identity, which emphasizes relationships as essential for its formation.

This communitarian view of personal identity is generally endorsed in the African philosophy literature. For example, Wiredu (2008, 324 - 328) notes:

African societies are founded on kinship relations, which begin from the household and expand to lineage and clan proportions. This is structurally speaking. 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”(See also METZ 2009, 324 - 328)

In other words, one understands her personal identity in terms of a structure of relationships wherein she is naturally sharing bonds with

³May be we can simply say they are wrong to claim that these relationships entirely constitute personal identity. A moderate position is to say that relationships partially constitute personal identity.

others⁴. Hence, Dirk Louw (2004) notes that personal identity in an African tradition is understood in terms of “being-with-others”⁵. And, Metz (2007, 323) also observes that “one’s identity as a human being causally and even metaphysically depends on a community”.

Further, there is a more interesting idea of personhood to be found in Menkiti’s analysis that has nothing to do with what Gyekye thought is an overstated notion. This idea of personhood refers to moral achievements one gains in a moral arena. This notion refers to a human being that has been able to lead a life characterized by moral excellence (MENKITI 1984, 172, 173 & 176). African scholars converge on the point that Menkiti’s analysis is ultimately after this normative idea of a person (WIREDU 1992; 2004; 2009; IKUENOBE 2006; BEHRENS 2013; MOLEFE 2016b). At least in light of this cloud of witnesses, it is safe to conclude that Menkiti is ultimately after a normative notion of personhood: this is an agent-centred notion since it is preoccupied about what agents ought to do to perfect their own humanity (BEHRENS 2013). Menkiti himself gives us a reason to believe that he is after a normative idea of person when he restates his take on personhood in 2004. The title of his revised 2004 article is: ‘On the Normative Conception of a Person’⁶.

This normative idea of a person is not immediately interested in what elements constitute a human being, be it autonomy and/or sociality – these considerations are not relevant in this kind of analysis. The concern here is identifying what human lives are morally praiseworthy insofar as they have developed good characters (WIREDU 2009; GYEKYE 2010).

So, a charitable way to interpret Mbiti and Menkiti is to understand them as making claims about the metaphysical issue of personal identity. And, more, at the heart of Menkiti’s analysis, putting

⁴Metz’s (2007, 334 - 336) idea of ‘identity’ captures more precisely this understanding of personal identity prevalent in an Afro-communitarian setting. He understands it to have three features. One, an individual conceives of her identity in terms of WE rather than I. This means that she makes sense of her personal identity in terms of relationships she shares with others. Two, there are goals that she holds in common with others. And, lastly, they work together to achieve their goals.

⁵The idea of ‘ubuntu’ refers to a moral theory prevalent among the Bantu speaking people, and it is typically construed in terms of the maxim: ‘a person is a person through other persons’. Ubuntu also appears to conceive of personal identity in terms of relationships with others.

⁶I advise the reader to note Kevin Behrens (2013) article that distinguishes between two normative notions of personhood, one dominant in African context and the other in Western one.

aside his comments on personal identity and other questionable claims he makes⁷; he is ultimately after a normative notion of personhood. A notion thought to be plausible and definitive of African moral thought (WIREDU 2004; MASOLO 2010; METZ 2012). So, what is the target of Gyekye's critique in Menkiti?

It is also crucial to note that Gyekye's solution of moderate communitarianism introduces a whole new concept of a 'person'. The idea of 'personhood' or what he refers to as a 'self' that is constituted by individuality and sociality is reminiscent of 'philosophical anthropology' especially in the naturalist tradition of rights (See DONNELLY 1982a). In a naturalist tradition, rights are construed as a function of some understanding of human nature. Some facet of human nature, human dignity, grounds rights (FEINBERG 1970). Hence, Gyekye identifies autonomy as an intrinsic feature of a human being in virtue of which she has rights (GYEKYE 1997, 61). So, Gyekye and Menkiti are employing different notions of a 'person'. Gyekye's notion of a self takes its influence from a Western naturalist tradition of rights, which is overtly individualist; whereas Menkiti's one is an elaboration on a purely moral idea of what is to count as a genuine human life-moral virtue-in Afro-communitarian thought.

The notion of personhood that is considered to be African is the one employed by Menkiti, where personhood is some kind of moral achievement. So, the two notions of personhood found in Menkiti i.e. personhood *qua* personal identity and personhood *qua* moral achievement are not properly a target of moderate communitarianism. Note, these two notions of 'personhood' do not even appear to be related to rights in any way or even to undermine them in anyway⁸. This lack of conceptual clarity and a misplaced criticism of Menkiti led Gyekye to come with an unnecessary solution and many scholars have noted this in the literature.

I submit that at the heart of Gyekye's solution there is a straw-man. What does it mean for African scholars to claim that the 'community' takes priority over an individual? This statement can be

⁷I advise the reader to note that Menkiti introduces his notion of personhood in terms of two contrasts. The first contrast, I submit, refers to a metaphysical idea of personhood *qua* personal identity and the second contrast refers to a normative notion of personhood as something that can be achieved (Molefe 2016a).

⁸ I am not arguing that personhood *qua* personal identity and personhood *qua* a morally sound human life cannot be related to rights. I am simply bringing to our attention that it does not appear to me that Menkiti *et al* when they used these two distinct senses of 'personhood' they had rights in mind or they intended to denigrate or deny them.

interpreted in several ways and has been available to misuse in the literature. Because of this statement, Gyekye *et al* have thought the best way to proceed is to re-order the relationship between a community and an individual so that they enjoy equal moral standing. But, there is something fundamentally flawed in this kind of approach. It makes sense to speak of an individual as having some value. An individual human being is a sort of a thing, ontologically, that can be a bearer of moral value, for example, as a bearer of dignity (WIREDU 1992). A human being can have properties that will render her morally valuable (DARWALL 1977). But, it strikes me as strange to impute such a value to a community. It is to speak of a community as if it is a thing, ontologically; and, a community is not a thing that can be bearer of value in a way that individuals are. I think some African scholars have taken the idea that a community is important in African thought too literally.

An influential African philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, is aware of this tendency to take too literally the idea of the importance of a community in African cultures. Wiredu talks of this tendency in terms of *hypostatizing* the notion of a community. In this light, Wiredu (2008, 334) notes:

Moreover, we must not hypostatize the notion of the community. The community is simply a certain contextualization of individuals with respect to their locations and to their perceptions of their interests and of those of others. Communitarianism and individualism are both just different ways of arranging the pursuit of the interests of *individuals*. The difference is that there are many more issues of human well-being regarding which an individual has obligations and rights in a communitarian society than in an individualistic one.

In other words, strictly speaking, to talk of a community is not to talk of a *thing* that exists in and of itself in relation to individuals. It is simply to make a claim about how individuals, in a particular locale, come to recognize their interests/goods and organize themselves to achieve those shared ideals. To say some society is 'communitarian' is not to imply that one is talking about two things, a community on the one side and an individual on the other. No, it is to talk about how individuals socially arrange themselves and distribute roles, responsibilities and benefits to address whatever individual issues thought urgent. Thus, 'communitarianism' refers to a society that underscores the importance of social relationships in the process of addressing human issues, wherein one is expected to engage "more and more deeply" in these

relationships in making sense of her own identity and responding to social issues (SHUTTE 2001, 14). And, ‘individualism’ refers to a society that de-emphasizes these relations in a quest to address individual interests (MASOLO 2004).

To say one society is communitarian and another is individualist is to talk about the essentiality or lack thereof of relationships in the pursuit of the human good. All this talk of some societies being communitarian and others being individualistic, at least so far, is mightily descriptive, one has not yet given us a way to weigh which is better between the two ways of organizing society (NEALE 1990). For example, think of these two sorts of lives. Imagine a married couple, where they define themselves as the Ndlovu family, they work together to secure shared goals and all of that. Or, imagine a hermit; she stays alone out of the cities and avoids any kind of human contact. One life can be said to be communitarian and the other individualistic, but we are not in a position, at least with these details, to say which is better. To be able to make moral judgements, about which life is better between the two, we need to attach a normative package to these orientations so we may be able to weigh them morally.

If this analysis of a talk of a ‘community’ is correct then it appears to be a confusion to talk of it and an individual being equal as if one is talking about two *things* that can be compared. To talk of ‘community’ is to talk about how we organize ourselves in a quest to address human issues. Or, it is to talk about the importance of social relationships as a socio-moral tool for responding to individual issues or lack thereof. Thus, individualism and communitarianism are two competing conceptions of addressing human issues.

So, when African scholars talk about the community being prior to the individual, or it being equal to the individual or the individual being prior to the community, unless they are very precise about what they mean, they will add to the confusion in terms of clarifying Afro-communitarianism. And, a talk of communitarianism can be construed to amount to a claim about social arrangements that take relationships with others to be essential or even decisive in making sense of a good society. Further, I also observe that to talk of a community as equal to an individual is a big confusion; as such, I find Gyekye’s thesis of moderate communitarianism to be misguided (unless it is interpreted charitably⁹). I proceed now to shed some light on the idea of a community taking priority over an individual.

⁹ In an unpublished article, I attempt such a charitable re-interpretation of Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism. I can avail it upon request.

Normative Interpretation of ‘Community as prior to Individual’

Here, I proffer what I consider to be a promising philosophical interpretation of the claim that ‘a community takes priority over an individual’. Above, I noted that this claim has generally been construed as a metaphysical one about personal identity insofar as it is either partially or entirely constituted by relationships. I generally find metaphysical elucidations less interesting. Here, I seek to offer a normative interpretation of this claim. I take this to be a normative claim about what constitutes a *good* society as envisaged by a communitarian order. To unfold my interpretation of this claim, I open with the following quotations.

Muxe Nkondo (2007, 90), a South African public intellectual attempting to ground public policy on African moral thought, avers: “the supreme value of society, the primary importance of social or communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual”. More famously, Menkiti (1984, 180) commenting on rights in an African context, observes:

In looking at the distinction just noted, it becomes quite clear why African societies tend to be organized around the requirements of duty while Western societies tend to be organized around the postulation of individual rights. 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.

Two central insights may be gleaned from the above quotations with regards to Afro-communitarianism. On the one hand, these thinkers recognize the supreme value or the primacy of the community; or, in the words of Menkiti, they affirm that African societies tend to give priority to the duties of the collectivity. I understand these two African scholars to be calling our attention to the high regard placed on social relationships in securing the needs and well-being of human beings. The insight here is that a certain kind of relationship is crucial for defining the entire gamut of morality, and uncovering this relationship is crucial for understanding a good society.

Secondly, these thinkers also converge on the idea that rights, in this axiological system, will be relegated to a secondary status. This relegation of rights to a secondary status must not be rashly construed to imply that afro-communitarianism is radical or excessive. It is urgent that we engage in a robust and rigorous analysis of a non-rights based Afro-communitarianism to ascertain what it may contribute to our

approaches to securing a good human life. We must keep in mind that rights are not the only way to create or imagine a life truly befitting beings of dignity (DONNELLY 1982b). Afro-communitarianism has its own way of securing individual goods. Below, I give content to how Africans secure a dignified life for human beings by appeal to the idea of personhood¹⁰. Instead of appealing to rights, Afro-communitarianism invokes the idea of personhood to give content to an African approach to securing a life of dignity.

As an entry into this analysis of how to secure the individual goods without appeal to individual rights, I begin by noting that African scholars imagine a good society as a communitarian one (WIREDU 1992, 198 - 200; 2008, 336 - 340; GYEKYE 1992, 101; METZ 2007, 331; GYEKYE 1992, 101; MBIGI 2005, 75). And, this idea of communitarianism is usually connected to the idea of personhood (ibid). For example, Wiredu (2008, 336) notes:

However, no thought experiment is going to reveal to us the components of the communalist ethic¹¹. It is therefore of a matter of great interest that some of the basic communalistic values of traditional African society can be read off the traditional conception of personhood.

In this particular passage, Wiredu is attempting to unfold values characterizing a communitarian system. Wiredu informs that the idea of personhood can give us some of the values characterizing Afro-communitarian societies. It is important to note that Wiredu thinks this fact of accessing these values through this idea of a person is of 'great interest' and the values to be gleaned from this idea are said to be '*basic communalistic values*'. I understand the reference to these communalistic values as being 'basic' to imply that they are foundational in the architecture of a good society, though not necessarily exhaustive of it. Put simply, Wiredu is of the view that an analysis of the idea of a person will give us a sense of the foundations of a good society in African moral-political thought.

So, in what follows, I will elaborate on personhood. I distinguish between two facets of this notion. On the one hand, we look

¹⁰My elucidations here are cursory, but they are important in emphasizing the direction of where we can expect to get answers.

¹¹Here, Wiredu uses the idea of communalist and communitarian somewhat interchangeably to refer to how Africans organized society (See, WIREDU 2008, 335).

into the nature of personhood; and, on the other, we look into the means necessary for acquiring it (METZ 2013; TSHIVHASE 2013).

I start with idea of the nature of personhood. The notion of personhood is a moral idea that is usually interpreted within a *self-realization* model, where a moral agent is expected to realize her genuine or true human nature (MAGESA 1997; BUJO 2001; SHUTTE 2001). The idea of personhood makes it the agent's sole and chief moral goal to perfect or realize her true humanity (Van NIEKERK 2007). In this light, Metz (2009, 83) notes "The ultimate goal of a person, self, or human in the biological sense should be to become a *full* person, a *real* self, or a *genuine* human being, i.e., to exhibit virtue in a way that not everyone ends up doing". To say one is a person is to claim that they have achieved a status wherein their lives are characterized by moral virtue (BEHRENS 2013). As such, to refer to a human being as a person, it is to commend her or to praise her for manifesting moral excellence (WIREDU 2009). Tutu speaks in this fashion about human beings who have attained this life moral virtue:

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "*Yu, u nobuntu*"; "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours (TUTU 1999, 35).

To say one has *ubuntu* is one and the same thing to say they are persons (Louw 2004). It is important to note that the virtues associated with one who has *Ubuntu* are strictly *relational* or other-regarding. In other words, these are virtues that throw one into relationships with others. A person, in a moral sense, is characterized in terms of relational virtues like kindness, generosity, friendliness and so on. The relational nature of these virtues is crucial since it speaks to the second facet of the idea of personhood, the issue of means necessary for acquiring such a status. African scholars converge on the idea that one can *only* realize her true social nature by relating positively with others by way of exercising her duties towards them (BUJO 2001, 88). In other words, the moral goal of life is achieved by one actively promoting the welfare and good of others (SHUTTE 2001, 24). Metz (2012, 102) summarizes the literature on how to become a person thus:

What might be unfamiliar, however, is that characteristic sub-Saharan ethical thought, at least as philosophically interpreted, maintains that self-realisation is *exhausted* "through other

persons”, that is, *through community alone*. It is typical for African theorists to maintain, or at least to suggest, that the *only* comprehensive respect in which one can live a genuinely human way of life is by communing.

So, the *only* way to realize one’s true social nature is by relating with others, and this relation with others is characterised by one discharging her other-regarding duties (virtues) towards them. It is important to note that Metz is unequivocal that one can only realize her true humanity through the community *alone* or self-realization is *exhausted* “through other persons”. In other words, this moral-political theory emphasizes duties that connect agents’ to others. This connection is effected and maintained by other-regarding duties (METZ 2009). Put simply, I can only realize my true humanity by discharging my other-regarding duties to others. My personal goal of moral perfection and other-regarding duties are married in this idea of personhood. What is beginning to emerge is that the idea of personhood entails a pure other-regarding morality, wherein a moral agent understands herself to have duties to promote others’ welfare in her quest to achieve the ideal of her leading a truly human life.

In this light, we begin to realize that the idea of a ‘community’ taking priority over an individual’ amounts to a normative philosophical interpretation that says that my greatest good as a human being, to achieve a status of personhood, is entirely dependent on how I discharge my other-regarding duties. It is for this reason that Wiredu notes that one’s status of personhood depends on the extent to which her actions intentionally and perpetually attempt to secure the well-being of others (WIREDU 1992, 200). Here, it might shed more light in our discourse if we can be specific about who is the target or even scope of our other-regarding duties so that we are clear about what we mean when we talk about our duties to the ‘collectivity’.

African scholars are generally clear that the target of our other-regarding duties is *all* human beings. African scholars make sense of all human beings in terms of what they call the ‘common good’ (GYEKYE 1992; 2010; WIREDU 1992; MASOLO 2004). Ghanaian philosophers elucidate on this idea of the common good by invoking a Siamese crocodile with two heads and one stomach. Wiredu (2009, 10) comments thus on this allegory:

My own favourite among the art motifs I have found in Akan culture is that depicting a crocodile with one stomach but two heads locked up in a fight over food. I think this symbol captures both the most fundamental problem of ethics and its

solution. The problem is that although we all as individuals have our own legitimate interests (symbolized by the two separate heads), excessive fixation upon those interests could lead us to lose sight of the fact that, ultimately, we all share the same interest, namely, our common well-being (symbolized by the common stomach). That loss of perspective is the root of conflict, and its restoration should facilitate that agreement on the sharing of assets which recognizes the interests of all parties concerned.

This art motif, Wiredu informs us captures the fundamental problem and solution to ethics. The problem arises as a result of our legitimate interests that put us at war with each other, which are represented by the two heads. He thinks the solution is to be found in looking beneath these legitimate differences, where we will see that there is a fundamental moral truth that ultimately we share the same interests; and, he refers to these commonly shared interests as well-being. The solution to secure our common well-being requires agreement on sharing assets that recognize the interests of all human beings.

Typically, African thinkers do not emphasize differences among individuals as one will find in a liberal moral-political discourse (KYLIMCKA 1990). In fact, the central intuition in this tradition is that “the individual differences in liberal conceptions of the good are often exaggerated by individualist ... thinkers in the West (GYEKYE 2004, 92). African scholars insist that there are basic needs all of us have in common and the task of morality is to secure those basic needs for ordinary or basic human functioning or even flourishing life (WIREDU 1992; GYEKYE 2004; LUTZ 2009). The task of morality is to secure those basic needs shared by all human beings¹². So, when African scholars talk of ‘the community taking priority over individuals’ they have this normative insight in mind of securing the basic needs of all as taking priority over our own (private) goals and interests¹³. So, our other-regarding duties’ target is securing the basic well-being of all human beings.

¹²African scholars do not tell us what exactly these basic needs are, but we need not be clear and definite about these to get a sense of Afro-communitarianism.

¹³It is interesting to note that African scholars take the basic stuff that have to do with our own lives as individuals to be so obvious and mundane that it does not fall within the scope of morality. It is taken for granted that one will handle her own business. Morality is understood as concerned with “social living” (WIREDU 1992, 2000; Gyekye 2004, 92).

So, the idea of a community taking priority over an individual implies a normative political theory that makes it our chief goal to secure the well-being of all and thereby realize one's true humanity. The ultimate individual good, personal perfection, is possible only when we prioritize the well-being of all human beings. A dignified life (i.e. a life where the basic necessities for one to lead an ordinary life are promised by this other-regarding morality of duties and obligations to others) is secured by these other-regarding duties. Now, it begins to make sense why rights are considered to be secondary because they may pose a serious threat to an axiological system that prioritizes the securing of the well-being of all human beings¹⁴.

Nowhere is this fundamental clash between rights and duties better demonstrated than in Gyekye's own moderate communitarianism. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism ultimately fails to take off because after arguing for the relevance and primacy of rights in Afro-communitarianism, he keeps returning to the idea that rights will be superseded by duties in case these clash (MATOLINO 2009; OYOWE 2014). This clash is natural to these opposing moral orientations, rights-based systems put emphasis on the good of the individual and leaves it to her to secure her own well-being – negative freedom; and, a duty-based one puts emphasis on a morality that is primarily concerned in its essence with securing the well-being of all (BERLIN 1958; AKE 1988). A rights-based system sees each human person as naturally separate and potentially in conflict with others; whereas the other sees one as naturally caught-up in relationships with others (AKE 1988; TUTU 1999). The rights-based system sees duties as a response or reaction to the rights we owe the right-holder; the duty based system sees duties as function of what I owe others in the quest to realize my true humanity (FEINBERG 1970; MENKITI 1984).

It is for this reason that Gyekye (2004, 99) in his later moral-political philosophy appears to be jettisoning his initial project of moderate communitarianism to a moral-political system that entirely embraces a morality of duties. This morality of duties is characterized by showing “sensitivity to the needs and well-being of others; it is as “an other-regarding and capacious morality” (ibid). In his full recognition of a morality of duties entailed by a communitarian system and its central concept of a person, Gyekye (2010) makes the following observation:

¹⁴The tension here is a function of competing moral-psychological orientations of rights and duties. Whereas rights are concerned about what is due to me; morality of duties is concerned about securing the well-being of others (FEINBERG 1970; GYEKYE 2004).

A morality of duty is one that requires each individual to demonstrate concern for the interests of others. The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being, which are counted among the principles of the communitarian morality, primarily impose duties on the individual with respect to the community and its members. All these considerations elevate the notion of duties to a status similar to that given to the notion of rights in Western ethics ... In this morality duties trump rights, not the other way around, as it is in the moral systems of Western societies. The attitude to, or performance of, duties is induced by ... their needs and welfare.

Several things are worth noting about a morality of duties as defended by Gyekye in his later political philosophy. A morality of duty is a purely other-regarding morality that puts emphasis on relational duties or virtues. By 'relational duties', I mean, 'values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being'. Central to this morality are duties that throw us into relationships with others and in these relationship we are primarily concerned about promoting the well-being of all, an activity that is simultaneously crucial to one securing personhood. Secondly, these relational duties are so central that they are represented as equal with rights. But, it may sound contradictory on the one to claim that duties are equal with rights, and at the same time also claim that duties trump rights. I think the best way to construe Gyekye is to understand him as evaluating what each system values most and that is what he considers to be equal. The West values rights and Africa values duties; and, as such, it is the weighting that each axiological tradition ranks as high that is equal.

Moreover, Gyekye is unequivocal in his assertion about the normative force of duties in Afro-communitarian thought that, in case of a clash, they supersede rights. In other words, should what others owe to me in terms of rights clash with what I owe to them in terms of promoting their well-being; duties will naturally prevail. So, the moral insight entailed in statements like, 'a person is a person through other persons', 'I am because we are' and such like formulations in African thought remind us that in African moral thought the well-being of *all* takes priority over (competing) individual goods, whatever these may be. It is this moral-political insight that the well-being of each counts and counts equally that relegates rights to a secondary status. It is this moral-political insight that invokes duties as central to Afro-

communitarian thought. It is for this reason that Gyekye (2004) talks about 'Universal Declaration of Human Duties'.

So, to talk of a community taking priority over an individual is not to denigrate or degrade an individual's worth as a bearer of dignity; rather it is to proffer an alternative approach to secure a life of dignity from an African perspective. A Western system offers a list of human rights to give content to secure or even guarantee a life of dignity. An African system, alternatively, offers the ideal associated with achieving personhood as a way to reach out to others and help them secure their well-being – I can only achieve personhood by manifesting virtues or exercising other regarding duties to the community. Metaphorically, the well-being of all is promised or even guaranteed by the warmth of the community.

Conclusion

This article was centrally interested to clarify and elaborate on the normative content of an oft-made assertion that Afro-communitarianism is captured by the idea that 'a community takes priority over an individual'. In the first section, I revisited the debate pivotal in African political philosophy between the so-called radical and moderate communitarians. Here, I clarified several distinctions with regards to the notion of 'personhood'. I indicated that this idea can be metaphysical insofar as it offers an account of personal identity; or, an account about human nature as typically found in the naturalist tradition of rights.

I also discussed it as normative insofar as it is typically used in African thought to capture a moral claim about the quality of one's character. I showed that central to Menkiti's notion is the latter concept and Gyekye is employing a naturalist interpretation of this notion to ground rights. I further clarified that it is a mistake to talk of a community as if it is a thing. The idea of a community simply refers to ways human beings organize themselves to make sense of their existence and interests. I concluded by offering a normative interpretation of the idea that 'a community takes priority over an individual'. I observed that this idea entails a moral-political theory that makes it our duties to secure the well-being of all. Central to my analysis was the normative idea of personhood.

In future, it will advance African moral-political philosophy to offer philosophical perspicacity and substance to the ideas of 'duties', 'needs', 'welfare' and 'common good' as imagined within this axiological tradition. It will also give us a better understanding of the nature of duties in this moral-political theory to visit the idea of 'options' and 'supererogation' in African thought. I also believe it is important to revisit the thesis of the 'correlativity of rights and duties'

from an African perspective. These are *some* of the crucial conceptual and philosophical work that still needs to be done towards a more comprehensive and complete account of a morality of duties in African political philosophy.

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