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The Arc of Personhood: Menkiti and Kant on becoming and being a Person[1]

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I. Introduction

My aim in this article is the better to understand one normative conception of

personhood by engaging it with another: the better to understand that of

Nigerian philosopher Ifeyani Menkiti by engaging it with that of Kant. The idea is

not to adjudicate between them; I assume that different conceptions of

personhood are equally possible. It does not follow that one can simply choose

one's preferred conception. I take different philosophical conceptions of

personhood to be extrapolations from contingently diverse social contexts,

rooted within the wider moral and metaphysical beliefs of those whose self-

conceptions and conduct they guide. In practice, most of us live by those

conceptions, which our particular contexts make available to us. (Lear 1998,

Velleman 2013) I also believe, however, that any philosophical conception of

personhood claims general communicability in some sense, so seeks in some

sense to make itself accessible even those who cannot share it in practice. (Wiredu 1996) To engage Kant with Menkiti – and Menkiti with Kant – is then to explore different possible ways of being a person. This kind of engagement need not issue in a grand consensus, let alone the truth about personhood.

Granting all this one might still ask why I have chosen to engage Kant and Menkiti in particular. In part, my reasons for this follow from the above considerations: if philosophical thinking about personhood begins from particular social contexts which such thinking seeks nonetheless in some sense to transcend, cross-contextual engagement is indispensable to it. To date, Western philosophical thinking has engaged very little with African traditions of thought. Indeed, when it comes to personhood, the Western tradition has for long periods of time barely accorded Africans the status of persons at all. Kant has been implicated in that failure. (Bernasconi, 2001; Eze 1997) Modern African thinking on personhood in turn developed in conscientious opposition to the perceived individualism of Western thought, often emphasizing the communal orientation of traditional African conceptions of personhood. (Appiah 2004; Gyekye 1987, 1992; Gbadegesin 2003; 2006, Masolo 2006) Since Kant is widely associated with a form of individualism, and since Menkiti is widely read as a 'radical' communitarian about African personhood, one might regard them as irredeemably at odds with one another. Instead, I am struck by a certain affinity between Kant and Menkiti, namely their common moderate anti-Cartesianism: both reject the idea of introspective self-knowledge, yet both also endorse that of reflexive self-awareness. While Kant's rejection of introspective self-knowledge moderates his individualism, Menkiti's endorsement of reflexive self-awareness moderates his communitarianism. At least on the individualist-versus-

communitarian axis, the two are closer than standard cultural prejudices encourage one to presume.

I shall employ Kant and Menkiti's moderate anti-Cartesianisms in order to engage them on an issue on which they are further apart. This concerns the moral significance of a person's afterlife. When I first came across Menkiti's articles on personhood, I was drawn to his account of ancestors as 'the living dead' – as persons who, though biologically dead, continue to exist non-physically as moral members of their communities. Menkiti's social account of a person's afterlife put me in mind of Kant's now neglected but to Western ears still intuitive conception of the immortality of the soul and its role in the moral afterlife. While I am attracted to Menkiti's social conception of the afterlife, I also believe that Kant offers the more sophisticated defence of moral belief in the afterlife. So in what follows I shall engage Menkiti and Kant on the idea of a person's afterlife. I begin with summary overviews of each their respective conceptions of personhood and of the role of the afterlife in them (sections II and III). I then problematize Menkiti's under-argued defence of warranted belief in ancestral existence and go on to ask whether Kant's distinction between knowledge and belief (Glaube) can provide the basis for a better defence (section IV). Similarly, I problematize Kant's singular focus on the soul's afterlife, asking whether Menkiti's social perspective does not offer a more integral account of the moral connection in the life and death of persons (section V).

I appreciate that the strategy of engagement here proposed may well please no one. African philosophers may complain that I am elevating Menkiti's controversial conception of personhood to the status of general validity for the African context. Kant scholars may complain that my narrow focus on the

Critique of Practical Reason fails to do justice to Kant's ever-developing views on the afterlife. I can only reiterate that my aim here is neither to evaluate the social pedigree of Menkiti's conception of personhood nor to conduct a comprehensive Kant exegesis. My aim is to engage individual representatives of the African and Western philosophical traditions productively with one another. I hope to show that, despite the unavoidable compromises that need to be made, such cross-cultural philosophical engagement can be productive. I shall conclude with some brief remarks on the need for greater such cross-cultural engagement in general (section VI).

II. Menkiti on Becoming a Person

In 'On the Normative Conception of a Person', Menkiti describes personhood as a temporally bounded 'ontological progression from an it to an it' (Menkiti, 2006: 324; see also Menkiti 1984). Individual human life begins from infancy, and ends with the passage from ancestor status into the domain of the nameless dead. The 'mystery of personhood' happens in-between these two stages of non-personhood. Personhood is achieved through moral membership in communal life. As individuals pass from infancy to early childhood and adolescence they gradually acquire social responsibilities and corresponding entitlements. In adulthood, persons mature morally as middle age gives way to the wisdom of old age. After their biological deaths, persons (may) acquire ancestor status.[2]

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[2] Ancestor status is not necessarily guaranteed; its achievement may depend both on a person's general conduct in life and on the community's performing the relevant burial rites. I abstract from these qualifications here. Again, it is worth noting that not all African thinkers class ancestors as persons, even

Ancestors are 'the living dead': they continue to be non-physically present and continue to play an active life in the moral community. Only with the passage into 'nameless death' do ancestors cease to be persons. Menkiti's initial account thus invokes the image of personhood as an arc, marked by an ontological ascend and descend either side of a midpoint peak.

Menkiti has been much criticised for his failure to assign infants the status of persons, (Gyekye 1992; Matolino 2011) though I don't myself find his position on this score especially contentious. Menkiti distinguishes between being a human being and being a person. He regards them as closely related: to become a person one must be a human being. An infant is a human being with biological needs and wants which the community is called upon to satisfy for it. However, an infant does not as yet play an active moral role in the life of the community. Perhaps more importantly, the infant as yet lacks the capacity for reflexive self-awareness, so cannot as yet say, 'I am because we are'. On Menkiti's account, a person must be conscious of herself as a participating community member. Since infants as yet lack reflexive self-awareness they are not yet persons.

It should be acknowledged that Kwame Gyekye's deeper worry concerns the power a community wields over its members when it has the authority either to assign or to withhold their status as persons. But that worry begs the question. Why not emphasize communal responsibility instead? A community tasked with reliably making persons out of infants will fail itself where it fails to succeed in

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though most do not class them as deities. Similarly, in many African ontologies the class of non-physical but this-worldly beings includes more than ancestors. All of which underlines the importance of not conflating Menkiti's position with 'the African view' in general. My thanks to Martin Odei Ajei and Uchenna Okeja for discussion.

that task more than occasionally. The relevant conception of community matters here. Given the conception of personhood Menkiti describes, it is reasonable to suppose the corresponding conception of community to be one that has a moral interest in making persons out of infants.

But Gyekye is anyway mistaken when he infers Menkiti's radical communitarianism from his non-essentialism about personhood. Menkiti emphasises reflexive self-awareness: 'I am because we are'. He borrows this formulation from John Mbiti, who originally affirmed it in opposition to Cartesian introspective self-knowledge (Mbiti 1969: 141).[3] Intentionally or not, Mbiti's formula nonetheless retains Cartesian reflexivity: it is I who recognise myself as a member of my community, so I who confer socially mediated personhood status upon myself. This makes Mbiti a moderate anti-Cartesian at best, and Menkiti follows him in this regard.

Compared to infants, the case of ancestors is more interesting. An infant cannot as yet say, 'I am because we are'. However, the infant is biologically alive. Others expect it to develop morally over the course of its increasingly active engagement in the community. Indeed, Menkiti insists that there is a 'deep connection' between biology and normativity. While biological existence is not sufficient, it appears to be necessary to attaining personhood. But in the case of ancestors, that biological connection is severed. Should this not affect ancestors' status as persons? To the extent to which he is a person, the ancestor must be able to say, 'I am because we are'. Yet in the biological sense of his being, he no longer is.

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[3] Mbiti's full formula is 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am'. Menkiti cites only the first half.

Other community members might say of the ancestor, 'she (still) is (morally) because we are'. The ancestor might live on metaphorically in the community's collective memory of her. But now the constraints of reflexive self-ascription kick in. Of biologically live persons, Menkiti says that,

> The force of the statement, 'I am because we are', is not such as to directly translate into another set of statements, for example, 'he is because we are', or 'you are because we are'. Its sense is not that of a person speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, another, but rather of an individual who recognizes the source of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's own standing as a person. (Menkiti 2006: 324)

This is hardly the language of a radical communitarian: my own recognition, *with internal assurance*, of my community as the source of my humanity confers personhood status upon me. But what holds for living persons must hold for ancestors also: the community cannot assign personhood status to ancestors in their behalf; ancestral existence must be self-affirming.

Perhaps ancestral existence is a matter of projective self-ascription. Consider another of Menkiti's remarks. On his conception of personhood it makes sense to say, 'I am looking forward to my own past'. (Menkiti 2006: 325) This suggests that personhood is in fact cumulative: the older I get the more of a person I become – in fact, Menkiti does at one point speak of a

'maximal' conception of personhood. This disturbs the initial image of personhood as an arc: the cumulative conception suggests that personhood peaks at the point of gaining ancestor status before fading away into nameless death. Still, the cumulative conception shows why a person may be looking forward to her own past: she may anticipate her life beyond biological death and may look forward to becoming an ancestor. A biologically live person who looks forward to her future status as an ancestor might be able to say: 'I will be because we are'. She may speak now in behalf of her future self. Yet while this satisfies the demand for reflexive self-ascription, it fails to account for Menkiti's repeated claims in behalf of ancestors' mind-independent, spatio-temporal though non-physical existence. As we shall see below, Menkiti owes us a better justification for ancestors' non-physical existence than he offers. I shall ask to what extent Kant's doctrine of the postulates may be able to help him out in this respect. Before returning to the question of ancestors' ontological status in section IV, I turn now to Kant.

III. Moral agency and the afterlife in Kant

I shall focus on Kant's treatment of the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the *Critique of Practical Reason*; he there introduces it in connection with the problem of the Highest Good.[4] Kant's second *Critique* argument for the Highest Good is widely regarded as unsatisfactory – the fact that Kant repeatedly returns to it in his subsequent writings may be indicative of his own dissatisfaction with it. (Beck 1960; Silver 1959; Mariña 2000) I

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[4] Page references to the second *Critique* are to volume and pagination of the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's collected works. The translation used is Beck 1993.

nonetheless here restrict myself to the second *Critique's* account because it represents Kant's first sustained attempt to incorporate the idea of the moral afterlife into his practical philosophy; besides, I do not believe that Kant ever wholly repudiated that early attempt. Even within this narrow focus on the second *Critique* I shall discuss the Highest Good only to the extent necessary to explicate the function of the immortality of the soul in relation to it. As noted, I am struck by the contrast between Menkiti's social account of the afterlife and Kant's singular focus on the soul. Since the singularity of that focus additionally strikes me as standing in some tension with the social orientation of his moral theory in general (Darwall 2006), I begin with some brief remarks on Kant's moderate anti-Cartesianism: aside from the noted affinity between Kant and Menkiti on this score, Kant's treatment of the moral afterlife seems to me to carry a certain Cartesian remainder.

Kant's anti-Cartesianism is primarily associated with the paralogism chapters and the refutation of idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – he both rejects our possible knowledge of the soul as a simple substance and insists that awareness of oneself as subject presupposes awareness of objects as distinct from one. Both arguments are generally thought to repudiate the idea of objective self-knowledge. In her analysis of the relation between Kant and Descartes, Beatrice Longuenesse argues that the problem of objective selfhood, which Kant incurs in the course of his engagement with Descartes, nonetheless remains a live issue for him. Longuenesse notes that while Kant rejects Descartes' inference from the proposition, 'I think' to the self as knowable object, he concedes that affirmation of the former commits one to there being *something or someone* that thinks. (Longuenesse 2008) The

problem is how to conceive of that something or someone in other than objectifying terms. Longuenesse proposes to treat the proposition 'I think', 'as an assertion, where the content of the proposition is made true by the individual act of asserting it, and known to be true by the agent of the act referred to be 'I'. (Longuenesse 2008: 24) The basic idea is of a kind of performative self-positing. I am not sure how persuaded I am by this, in part because I am not sure that I understand how the content of any proposition can be 'made true' by the act of asserting it. However, I am here interested more in Longuenesse's general point that Kant remains in some sense stuck with the problem of objective selfhood as a result of his very engagement with Descartes' 'I think'. Although the problem originates in Kant's theoretical philosophy, there is clearly systematic continuity between the paralogism chapters of the first *Critique* and the second *Critique's* doctrine of the postulates. I believe that while Kant's account of everyday moral agency avoids commitment to objective or objectifying selfhood,[5] his appeal to the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the context of the Highest Good reintroduces remnants of the Cartesian idea of an objective self.

Admittedly, my contention that Kant's account of everyday morality avoids reference to an objective (i.e. knowable) moral self conflicts with a widespread current reading of his moral theory as affirming a robust self-understanding of our supreme moral worth as rational agents. Particularly influential in this regard has been Christine Korsgaard's interpretation of

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[5] More specifically, I believe that Kant's account of our awareness of ourselves as agents is analogous to his account of our awareness of ourselves as knowers of objects: our consciousness of ourselves as moral agents is a function of our consciousness of the unconditional demands of duty upon us.

Groundwork's humanity formula in light of what she regards as our intuitive moral self-conception. According to Korsgaard, I bestow (subjective) value upon particular objects or activities through my choices and pursuits of them. Although my particular choices and pursuits are contingent, the fact that I choose at all is not. Korsgaard identifies my capacity for choice in general as the unconditioned condition of my contingent choices; she further argues that I cannot but value that in virtue of which I am able to bestow subjective value, and she concludes that *Groundwork's* humanity formula is best read as giving philosophical expression to our intuitive self-worth as rational end-setters. (Korsgaard 1996a) Relatedly, Korsgaard argues that I should take an interest in others' capacity for choice, that I should pursue my own choices consistently with others' pursuing theirs, and that I should assist others in their pursuit of their rational choices: this is how we realise the kingdom of ends. (Korsgaard 1996b)

Korsgaard's reading has been criticized on both systematic and on substantive grounds: systematically, for its erosion of the distinction between conditional and unconditional willing; (Ameriks 2000; Langton 2007; Timmermann 2006) substantively, for its tendency to conflate the first-personal agential perspective with the self as object of moral concern. (Darwall 2006; Flikschuh 2009; O'Neill 1989). Nor can Korsgaard's account of Kantian everyday morality accommodate the idea of a moral afterlife. (Hare 2000; O'Neill 1996) According to her account, we do possess a kind of objective moral self-knowledge: we know the source of our moral worth and are able, moreover, to perfect ourselves immanently. This is not what Kant believes.

Kant's discussion of the Highest Good in the second *Critique* takes off from the observation that a finite moral agent cannot repudiate his hope for material happiness. Indeed, such repudiation cannot be a legitimate demand of practical reason: 'happiness is also required, and indeed not merely in the partial eyes of a person who makes himself his end but even in the judgement of an impartial reason.' (5:110) This observation is responsive to the concern that Kant's account of everyday morality demands precisely that finite rational agents act from duty even at the cost to them of their happiness. In everyday moral experience, morality and happiness typically are at odds – the fact that they are is the most decisive indicator we have of our moral capacity for freedom. And yet happiness and morality must be reconcilable. This is the antinomy of practical reason, which the idea of the Highest God is meant to resolve.

Although the problem of happiness in proportion to virtue is a real one for Kant, his account of the Highest Good fails to offer a convincing solution to it. One difficulty lies in the fact that, tasked with reconciling 'two unequal elements', i.e., sensible happiness and non-sensible morality, the Highest Good is strictly speaking realizable neither transcendently nor immanently. From the standpoint of the finite moral agent, the reconciliation presupposes the postulate of God's existence: only the Supreme Being can effect the requisite reconciliation. But if happiness in accordance with virtue is a transcendent good attainable only in the afterlife, it is not clear how the finite being's hope for sensibly conditioned happiness can form a constituent part of it. If, on the other hand, the Highest Good is realizable immanently, it is not clear why

either the idea of God or that of the immortal soul should be practically necessary presuppositions of its attainability.

The ambiguity concerning the transcendent or immanent realization of the Highest Good is forecast in Kant's uneven discussion of the relevant conception of happiness at issue. That justified hope for happiness must conform to the moral law as its supreme condition goes without saying. (5:109) Even so, for the ensuing antinomy to be real, it must be sensibly conditioned happiness that is at stake. But although Kant begins from the finite agent's hope for material happiness, he moves progressively closer to a Stoic conception of moral self-contentment as 'an analogue' to the happiness of 'sensuous gratification'. (5:117) He insists that, 'consciousness of [the] capacity of pure practical reason through a deed (virtue) can produce a consciousness of mastery over inclinations and thus of independence from them, [bringing] forth a negative satisfaction with one's condition, whose source is contentment with one's own person.' (5:118) Later, he shifts back towards a more Epicurean conception, such as when, in the context of the postulate of God, he notes that happiness is a state in which 'everything goes according to [the subject's] wish and will'. (5:124)

Kant's uneven treatment of the relevant conception of happiness impinges on that of the soul, whose existence, and that of God, we must postulate in connection with the Highest Good. A postulate of practical reason is 'a theoretical proposition which is not as such demonstrable, but which is an inseparable corollary of an a priori unconditionally valid practical law.' (5:123) A postulate is thus a theoretically indemonstrable proposition, which is defensible on practical grounds. That defence depends on Kant's distinction

between knowledge and faith as a distinctive species of belief (Glaube); I shall discuss it in the context of the next section. Here I want to consider the function of the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the light of the foregoing remarks on happiness.

As noted, the finite moral agent cannot himself effect the Highest Good – for this, God's assistance is required. We are thus permitted, on practical grounds, to postulate God's existence. The finite agent can however ensure that he merits the Highest Good. The subjectively necessary condition for meriting the Highest Good is complete purity of will. Kant concedes that complete purity of will 'is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable'. (5:122) We are thus further permitted to postulate the immortality of our soul and to envisage the soul's 'endless progress to that perfect fitness under the presupposition of an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being.' (5:122) Even my soul's endless striving necessarily remains incomplete, as even the soul remains a dependent being. Only 'the infinite Being, to whom the temporal condition is nothing, sees in this series, which is for us without end, a whole comformable to the moral law.' (5:123) God can see the completeness of my (soul's) striving, so can judge my moral merit.

The picture that emerges is of the soul as a kind of noumenal agent that strives beyond the finite agent's biological death in behalf of the Highest Good conceived in terms of happiness in proportion to virtue. This picture is unsatisfactory in numerous respects, most obviously so in respect of the soul's noted unsuitability in contributing to the finite agent's hope for sensibly conditioned happiness. But even if the requisite conception of happiness is

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that state analogous to bliss, there is an odd shift of attention from the finite

agent's moral focus on her duties towards others to the soul's concern to

being deemed morally meritorious in the eyes of God. There is something

unattractively self-regarding about this latter concern. Granted, the idea of the

Highest Good cannot *motivate* this-worldly moral agency but must rather

arise from moral agency itself; granted further that moral merit in the eyes of

God depends on conscientious discharge of worldly duties towards others.

Even so, it is God's judgement of moral merit that secures the soul's (not the

finite agent's!) happiness (as bliss). It is difficult to avoid the impression of a

fairly decisive shift from an earthly moral life shared with finite others to a

morally primary relationship with God. Given these worries, one may be

tempted by Korsgaard's immanent reconciliation of happiness and morality.

And yet, for Kant, the idea of the Highest Good arises out of an

acknowledgement of the stringently non-self-regarding demands of this-

worldly morality. It is the very focus on our duties towards others that gives

rise to the hope for happiness in the afterlife. So although they are in tension,

there is also a deep connection between the other-personal orientation of

this-worldly morality and the soul's focus on moral merit in the afterlife.

This leaves us with two puzzles: the puzzle of ancestors' non-physical

but this-worldly moral existence on the one hand and that of the immortal

soul's moral turn upon itself. Over the next two sections, I shall engage

Menkiti and Kant on both these puzzles. I return first to Menkiti's inadequate

defence of ancestral existence, asking whether Kant's doctrine of the

postulates could provide the basis for a more plausible, practical defence. In

section V I return to the moral solitude of the soul, asking whether Menkiti's

account of ancestral existence does not offer a morally richer account of a person's afterlife.

IV. Practical Belief in Ancestral Existence

In returning to ancestors' non-physical status it is important not to confuse them with other-worldly souls or deities: ancestors are non-physical persons who continue to exist in the world of the living – the only world there is, according to Menkiti. (See also p'Bitek 2011) Other-worldly immaterialism about souls or deities presupposes some form of world-external dualism; this-worldly non-physical existence involves commitment to what I shall call a world-internal dualism. Although I find a world-internal dualism no more counterintuitive, on the face of it, than I find a world-external dualism, Menkiti's theoretical defence of ancestors' ontological status strikes me as unsatisfactory: his eventual description of ancestors as 'quasi-material' beings implies a reductivism he is simultaneously keen to avoid. I shall draw on Kant's doctrine of the postulates to consider the possibility of an alternative, *practical* defence of ancestral existence.

Return to Menkiti's characterization of personhood as 'an ontological progression from an it to an it'. The claim is that the life of a subject takes off from an initial state of thinghood (infancy), and eventually passes into a second state of thinghood (nameless death). The initial image of personhood as an arc encourages the idea of a person's *return* to its initial state of thinghood. On reflection, it is evident that the two 'its' at either end of this ontological journey are non-identical. (Matolino 2011) Yet while the thinghood of infancy is relatively unambiguous, that of the nameless dead is

less clear. The thinghood of the infant consists in its physical presence as a biological organism. By contrast, the thinghood of the nameless dead cannot consist in their physicality: ancestral status precedes nameless death, and ancestors are already non-physical. If thinghood denotes physical or material existence,[6] can the nameless dead be any 'thing' at all? Is the ontological progression of personhood not better conceived as a progression from an 'it' to 'nothingness'?[7]

The ontologically uncertain status of the nameless dead redounds on that of the ancestors who, though biologically dead, continue to live morally. Indeed, according to the maximal conception, ancestors are at the peak of moral personhood; they are both least physical and most moral. One might account for this asymmetry in terms of ancestors' transcendence of the initially necessary biological basis of personhood. However, given their mind-independent existence, the case for ancestors' world-internal transcendence of their physical being cannot be made with reference to either communal memory or a person's projected future existence as an ancestor. We are owed some account of how ancestors' this-worldly non-physical existence is possible.

In 'Physical and Metaphysical Understanding' (Menkiti 2004), Menkiti contrasts the 'African metaphysical temperament' with Western metaphysical thinking. The latter is said to feel a strong pull towards (world-external) dualism. This yields the problem of interactionism, which recent Western

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[6] I here follow Menkiti in using the two terms interchangeably.

[7] Of course, this is no less problematic in certain other respects but it may nonetheless be a more accurate specification of what Menkiti's means.

thinking seeks to resolve by resort to various forms of reductivism. Menkiti

further notes the Western tradition's fascination with scepticism and its

related tendency to mistrust ordinary experience. By contrast, African

metaphysics 'is guided by the epistemic temper of the village'; it looks for

common-sense explanations of observed phenomena, and 'steadfastly refuses

to open a can or worms where nothing can be gained by doing so'. (Menkiti

2004; 121) In relation to ancestors, the temper of the village counsels

acquiescence of belief in their non-physical existence irrespective of a

satisfactory explanation of its possibility.

　　　While Menkiti's demand is reasonable, that metaphysical explanation

be guided by ordinary experience, such guidance cannot equate to

acquiescence in unreasoned common-sense. Menkiti's endeavour to shed light

on ancestors' ontological status is hampered by his acquiescence in

unreasoned common sense. In answer to the question he himself raises as to

how one might 'reconcile belief in material agency with belief in [ancestors']

non-material agency', Menkiti attributes to traditional African society 'a belief

system that is fully committed to material agency but that trades on an

extended notion of what is embraced by the material universe'. (Menkiti 2004:

121) I find this unhelpful; it is not clear to me how one can be both 'fully

committed to a material universe' and embrace an 'extended notion' of the

same? However one specifies materiality, it cannot contain its negation. If

ancestral existence is non-material, it will remain so on an extended notion of

materiality. Perhaps for this reason Menkiti goes on to say that members of

traditional African societies would give a 'material or quasi-material account

of non-material agency'. Unlike 'non-materiality', the idea of 'quasi-material'

entities suggests that ancestors are like material entities in some respects. We are then owed a specification of the extent of that likeness. More to the point, while giving a material explanation of non-material agency looks like a contradiction in terms, a quasi-material explanation of non-material agency resembles a reductivist move – precisely what Menkiti rejects in Western metaphysics.

A little later Menkiti says that while there are facts about the material universe that we do understand, there are also facts about it that we do not yet understand. (Menkiti 2004: 123/4) Here he may be pushing against reductivism: that we cannot explain non-material agency in material terms does not entitle us to discount the possibility of its existence. Alternatively, he may be moving towards reductivism: eventually, what we currently take to be non-material agency will be explicable in material terms. Either way, Menkiti fails to shed light on the matter.

Menkiti may have dug himself in. He borrows the notion of 'quasi-materiality' from Kwasi Wiredu. However, Wiredu employs it in the service of a conclusion that runs counter to Menkiti's intentions. Like Menkiti, Wiredu rejects so-called Western dualism; he takes members of his own cultural group, the Akan of modern Ghana, to be disposed towards what he calls 'a level-headed empiricism' according to which 'the universe is ontologically homogeneous'. In this universe, 'everything that exists exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking'. (Wiredu 1996: 49) Wiredu concedes that the Akan do believe in ancestral existence; he coins the term "quasi-material" to refer to 'any being or entity conceived as spatial but lacking some of the properties of material objects.'

(Wiredu 1996: 53) Again, like Menkiti, Wiredu emphasizes ancestors' *this-worldly* existence: 'the extrahuman existents of Akan ontology do not belong to the category of the spiritual in the Cartesian sense of non-spatial, unextended.' (Wiredu 1996: 53). But Wiredu goes on to challenge the consistency of Akan belief when he says, 'it is a legitimate question whether there is adequate evidence that [quasi-material] entities exist'. Given the broadly empiricist thrust of the Akan worldview, this must be a question of empirical evidence. Although Wiredu counsels against the dogmatic assertion of such entities' empirical non-existence, he notes that 'the plausibility of quasi-material existence claims tends to dwindle in the face of advancing scientific knowledge' (Wiredu 1996: 54). In contrast to Menkiti, Wiredu thus employs the notion of the quasi-material in order to debunk the plausibility of belief in ancestral existence.[8]

Wiredu's debunking is not necessarily the end of the matter. One could argue that knowledge of ancestral existence rests on this-worldly but extra-sensory perception, where the extra-sensory perception of ancestors requires a special kind of training reserved for experts, such as soothsayers and priests. (Ajei 2014) Though suggestive, I want here to explore an alternative,

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[8] One of the journal's referees has pointed out to me that Wiredu's understanding of empiricism is unlikely to be acceptable to contemporary Western empiricists; that Wiredu appears to conflate empiricism and materialism. I read Wiredu as rejecting what he designates as 'quasi-material' beliefs within the general empiricist thrust of the Akan framework of belief – he wants to excise such belief from an otherwise broadly empiricist framework. For discussions in defence of quasi-materialism see Sogolo (2003) and Kwame (2006).

Kant-inspired, practical vindication of ancestral existence. Return to Menkiti's

insistence that metaphysical inquiry be guided by ordinary human experience.

The question is: at what level of experience do ordinary Africans affirm

ancestral existence? From what Menkiti says, ancestral existence matters

morally. Attempting a theoretical vindication of ancestral existence may then

be misguided; what matters is practical vindication. These considerations

resonate with Kant's own practical defence of traditionally speculative ideas.

In the third antinomy of the first *Critique's* transcendental dialectic

Kant evaluates the respective positions of thesis and antithesis regarding the

idea of an uncaused first cause. He concedes the thesis' illicit inference from

reason's demand for completeness of explanation in the order of given

phenomena to rational knowability of an uncaused first cause. However, Kant

equally rejects the 'dogmatic attitude' of the antithesis when it 'confidently

denies whatever lies beyond the sphere of its intuitive knowledge.' Such

dogmatism is 'all the more reprehensible owing to the irreparable injury

which is thereby caused to the practical interests of reason.' (CPR A471/

B499) The thesis harbours a legitimate *moral* interest in relation to the idea of

an uncaused first cause. An analogous response to Wiredu may be open to

Menkiti: in making the case for ancestral existence depend on empirical

evidence Wiredu overlooks the interests of morality in these existence claims.

Kant's later doctrine of the postulates takes on board the critical

conclusions of the transcendental dialectic, making room for reasoned faith in

our ideas of freedom, God, the soul even whilst rejecting all possible

knowledge claims in regard of these ideas. Recall Kant's specification of a

postulate of practical reason as a 'theoretical proposition which is not as such

demonstrable, but which is an inseparable corollary of an a priori

unconditionally valid law'. (5: 122) Notable is the insistence upon a *theoretical*

proposition vindication through *practical* reason. Practically, it matters that

we be entitled to affirm that the soul *is* immortal, that we *are* free, that God

does exists. Yet while effective moral agency requires an assertoric

propositional attitude (Willaschek 2010), practical warrant for adopting that

attitude also requires acknowledgement of its objective insufficiency: in

affirming God's existence on grounds of practical reason we must

simultaneously acknowledge our lack of knowledge in this regard.

Kant's difficulty lies in defending the assertoric mode on practical

grounds even whilst restricting the proposition's epistemic status.

Interpreters disagree whether or not he succeeds in this regard. (Beck 1959;

Chignell 2007; Gardner 2006; Willaschek 2010) In his analyses of Kant's

distinction between knowledge and belief Andrew Chignell distinguishes

between them as two distinct modes of *Fürwahrhalten* (holding to be true).

While knowledge is a holding to be true based on non-voluntary epistemic

assent, belief (*Glaube*) is based on voluntary non-epistemic assent. (Chignell

2007a; 2007 b) Ordinarily, we do not decide to believe; relevant available

evidence usually determines our judgement as to whether or not X is the case.

In the case of practical belief, by contrast, we do in a sense 'decide to believe'.

We do so non-arbitrarily, i.e. on the basis of non-evidentiary practical

considerations. For the same reason, the critical demands of practical belief

are especially stringent: while assent on practical grounds can be rational, and

while '"commonsense" people will have a lot of [practical beliefs]', critical

such assent should include reflective acknowledgement of its epistemic

insufficiency. (Chignell 2007a: 56). Chignell's contrast between non-voluntary epistemic assent and voluntary non-epistemic assent echoes Kant's own qualification in the second Critique that 'the righteous man may say: 'I *will* there to be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding, and finally that my duration be endless'. (5:143, emphasis added) At the same time one may remain unconvinced that to will oneself to believe really is to believe, not least if its critical component lies in withholding judgement as to the truth – or falsity – of that belief. (Gardner 2006)

In one sense, this last consideration may pose a greater challenge in relation to practical belief in *this-worldly* ancestral existence than in relation to practical belief in *other-worldly* souls. Kant says that it is a necessary condition of our warrant for the postulates that affirmation of their propositional content be practically necessary. Arguably, affirmation of ancestral existence is practically necessary (I say more on this in the next section). However, it is a further condition of the postulates' practically warranted affirmability that their propositional content not conflict with the conditions of sensible knowledge. Postulating the existence of God, the soul, freedom, meets that condition on the assumption that their non-sensible existence or non-existence is theoretically undecidable. By contrast, ancestral existence is this-worldly, so must by Kant's lights be susceptible to our possible sensible experience. This may seem to take us back to Wiredu's conclusions about the inadmissibility of belief in this-worldly ancestral existence. And yet that conclusion fails to acknowledge the legitimate interests of morality.

Menkiti's affirmation of ancestral existence thus shares with Kant's postulates the practically necessary grounds of its affirmation. However, given ancestors' this-worldly existence, it violates Kant's 'unity of experience' condition. And yet it seems odd to deny the legitimacy of a moral interest on grounds of the this-worldly nature of the content of that belief: why should the legitimacy of a moral interest depend on embracing a *world-external* dualism? If the moral interest is defensible as such, should a practical vindication of ancestral existence not remain permissible even if that belief is based on a *world-internal* dualism? My basic impulse here is to answer in the affirmative, though its possibility requires further defence. For now, I conclude that even if Kant's defence of practically warranted belief cannot take Menkiti all the way, it may open up the possibility of a practical vindication in some form of ancestral existence.

V. Souls, Ancestors, and Moral Community

I said that I am drawn to Menkiti's social account of an ancestral afterlife. The account requires acceptance of a this-worldly, non-physical existence claim. While ancestors' this-worldly non-physical existence may strike many as a sufficient reason for rejecting belief in them, I have argued that their moral function constitutes a good prima facie reason for practical belief in their existence. I shall now argue that, compared to souls, ancestral existence offers a more integrated conception of the moral unity of personhood in life and after.

Recall: ancestors are biologically dead but morally alive. They exist non-physically in the same world as biologically live persons; they are

persons, not deities, i.e., revered for their wisdom but not worshipped as omniscient or omnipotent. How might belief in ancestral existence impact a person's moral self-conception? One who believes in ancestral existence will hope one day to become an ancestor herself. This hope will guide her throughout her biological life: I call this 'living towards ancestral status'. One who believes in ancestral existence will also believe herself to be surrounded by ancestors whose moral claims upon her she must give due consideration: I call this 'living with ancestors'.[9]

One can think of *living towards ancestral status* as constituting the overall criterion for a morally successful life. Someone who looks forward to becoming an ancestor will regard attainment of that status as the successful completion of her personhood. Given ancestors' general function of moral support for the community, living by the ancestral criterion means that a person's goals for herself and her interest in the good for her community will be consonant with one another; it will be impossible successfully to complete the journey of personhood in essential conflict with one's community. This does not mean that there cannot be friction. A person is reflexively aware of herself as a community member, so her sense of self is distinct from albeit bound up with that of her community. She will have a mind of her own, will exercises her own judgement in relation to matters concerning community and self. Nonetheless, such a person's overall moral orientation will lie towards achieving a harmonious relation between the interests of self and

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[9] The following draws on my more extended discussion in chapter 6 of Flikschuh, forthcoming.

those of community: discord between self and community will simultaneously constitute discord within the self.

In Western contexts, we are apt to see such a communal orientation as indicative of a failure of moral autonomy. This is largely prejudicial: a person's concern to integrate personal and communal good need be no more indicative of a lack of moral autonomy than a person's readiness to discard communal constraints need be a sign of moral maturity. The principal point here is that one for whom moral completion takes the form of post-mortem moral existence as a revered member of the community will work hard to achieve a sense of self through engagement with community, not apart from it.

More is at stake here than pious afterthoughts about the virtues of a less than *wholly* self-regarding life – of the virtue of *also* considering the claims of community. To see this, consider *living with ancestors*, i.e. living in the belief of being in the moral company of non-physically present ancestors. African philosophers often fail to elaborate on the moral significance of living with ancestors. They emphasize the moral reverence, which those alive feel for ancestors; the invocation of ancestors at important social functions; ancestors' general role in providing moral guidance. These functions may well be consistent with ancestors' mind-dependent existence: we *invoke* them when the need arises. Yet if ancestors are persons, not mental phenomena, their non-physical everyday reality must impinge on our everyday moral deliberations. Granted, non-physical ancestors lack many of the morally relevant interests of embodied persons: presumably ancestors have no need

of shelter, food, medical care, and so on.[10] Ancestors do however have an interest in being accorded respect. They have an interest in not being insulted and in their counsel not being ignored. They have an interest in counting as communal members in uneventful everyday moral life. It is the daily non-physical presence of ancestors, not their special invocation at important public functions that interests me. Their daily background presence adds a moral dimension that moderates interaction even among the living. In taking into account the moral interests of ancestors, the interests of the living need not win out invariably. To the contrary, the moral interests of the ancestors may at times be given precedence over those of the living. Community members may at times reach moral decisions of a kind they would not reach if they did not have to take into account, in their moral deliberations, the ancestral dimension of communal morality.

Again, we may be inclined to interpret the inclusion of ancestral moral claims as indicative of social backwardness – of attachment to superstitious belief and as a bar to social development. Again, however, this is largely prejudicial. What is philosophically interesting about the added ancestral dimension is its impact on the moral self-understanding of the living. To put the point somewhat aphoristically, the ancestral dimension within everyday moral deliberation makes death integral to moral life: if the dead remain persons, our acknowledgement and treatment of them as such establishes an on-going moral connection between the living and the dead that deepens our sense of our moral interdependence in general. That dependence is seen as

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[10]Though traditionally, food is often left out for the ancestors; at burial the dead are also given many utensils of which it is believed they may need them.

essentially positive; it is not conceived as a lack or a limitation: the dead look after the living and the living look after the dead – together, they secure communal continuity across time.

Turning from these unavoidably incomplete reflections on ancestral existence to Kant's immortality of the soul, one striking contrast is that between a sense of moral completion within community and of an infinite horizon beyond it. At the point of a person's physical death the soul parts company with the living and embarks on a timeless path towards God. The telos becomes moral communion with God. This is evidently Christian eschatology; Kant's aim in the second *Critique* is to give that eschatology a moral orientation. One can hardly fault Kant for his moral engagement with Christian eschatology – to the contrary, it reflects a practical concern which, like that of Menkiti, is guided by ordinary moral and religious experience. Still, the final orientation towards the divine must impact on a person's moral self-understanding overall.

I noted the ambivalence in Kant's conception of happiness in relation to the Highest Good, and the more general problem of bridging the gulf between freedom and nature – I set these issues aside here. What interests me here is the implied relation within a person's moral self-understanding between living others, the soul, and God. It strikes me that Kant resolves the issue of human finitude in a significantly different way from Menkiti. Ultimately, it is God, not others, who sustains the dependent soul. How, then, does the soul's sensibly embodied bearer relate to others through its dependence on God? Put differently, which relation has moral primacy: that between embodied temporal moral agents, or that between soul and God?

The idea of some sort of Cartesian remainder, mooted earlier, is relevant here: I suggested that while Kant's insistence on the moral agent's opacity to itself is continuous with the first *Critique* rejection of introspective self-knowledge, the postulate of the soul re-invokes the idea of the self as a kind of noumenal agent that can pursue and even partake of a kind of happiness. We commit to this idea as no more than a practical belief. Nonetheless, even if in merely *willing* our souls to be immortal we will no more than the possibility of our sustained moral agency in the face of earthly adversity, the idea of the soul is the idea of a something or a someone *that* abides – ultimately, in God. If the real moral self – or even only the thought of such – ultimately seeks or abides in God, what is the moral significance of others, co-humans, to the this-worldly, self-effacing moral agent? Does the presence of God as ultimate sustainer of the moral self not threaten to render this-worldly inter-human moral relations insufficient onto themselves?

That, at any rate, is the worry that emerges in the light of Menkiti's conception of a this-worldly, altogether human moral afterlife. In reflecting on this worry one should remember the deep connection I noted between what Kant diagnoses as our sense of the world's moral recalcitrance and practical faith in the Highest Good: the idea of the Highest Good is a response to that recalcitrance, not an alternative to it. Thus, in turning to the Highest Good and with it to soul and God we do not turn away from the world and others. We rather sustain our moral faith in them even despite plenty of empirical evidence to the contrary. And yet, we need God to be able to do so. While it would be mistaken to read Kant's doctrine of the postulate as indicative of a moral turn away from others and towards God, it also appears that the soul's

turn to God is needed to prevent a collapse of moral faith in oneself and others. In contrast to Menkiti's account, there is an extra-human dimension within human moral affairs the absence of which would undermine human moral relations. I find that thought morally unsettling in a way in which I do not find Menkiti's contrasting account unsettling, and I wonder whether belief in non-physical, this-worldly ancestral existence is not a price worth paying.

VI. Thinking Cross-Culturally

Let me summarise the principal results of the above discussion before concluding with some brief remarks on the general need for greater cross-cultural philosophical engagement. I began from what struck me as a limited affinity between Kant and Menkiti regarding their common moderate anti-Cartesianism. The ensuing discussion showed this affinity to reach further into a shared appreciation of human finite and, relatedly, a shared interest in the moral afterlife. Neither Menkiti nor Kant repudiates as fallacious, superstitious or outdated the metaphysically problematic beliefs of 'ordinary persons' in this regard. Both seek to develop these commitments into philosophically defensible conceptions that are capable on the one hand of guiding contextual action and on the other hand of eliciting wider philosophical interest.

I suggested that Menkiti's under-argued defence of mind-independent ancestral existence might be better developed along the lines of Kantian practical belief. This is not to say that Menkiti can take on board Kant's doctrine of the postulates in its entirety. Similarly, it would be foolish to expect Kant to replace regulative yet nonetheless transcendent ideas about

soul or God with more immanent conceptions of the moral afterlife: there is a plethora of reasons, both practical and theoretical, why Kant requires the noumenal dimension and why its retention is indeed fruitful. Still, consideration of alternative conceptions of the afterlife to Kantian noumenalism is both interesting in itself and may alert us to the constraints of our own contextually conceived ideas about personhood. Belief in ancestral existence may not be available to us in practice, but we may be able to admire its moral depth nonetheless.

This last remark returns me to the more general point with which I began this article and on which I want to say a little more in the limited space left. Western philosophical thinking has to date engaged remarkably little with non-Western philosophical traditions. The reasons for this failure are varied, with some less salubrious, morally and politically, than others. (Hountondji 1983) One may of course reject the assumption, from which I began, regarding the unavoidably contextual starting point of philosophical thinking about personhood (and other phenomena): one may believe there to be a truth about personhood deducible, perhaps, by mere powers of reason. And yet where persons or cultures cannot find their conceptions of self reflected in those purported philosophical truths, the onus of correction is on the latter: for the very simple reason that everyday conceptions of personhood are action-guiding in ways in which statements of purported truths about personhood cannot be. No conception of personhood can speak to someone who cannot practically recognise herself in it. (Velleman 2013)

As noted at the outset, Western philosophers have for long stretches of time barely accorded those of African descent the status of persons at all, Kant

included. While we now acknowledge philosophy's historical failings in this regard, mere acknowledgement of past failings is no guarantee against the possibility of our own. It may not be enough to say that philosophical conceptions of personhood that previously excluded some now include them. Acknowledgement of past philosophical failures must include acknowledgement of the possible inadequacies of some basic categories of philosophical thinking in the Western tradition. In the case at hand, Western conceptions of personhood that centrally appeal to the idea of the soul – and many in fact do – cannot bear out their own claims to general validity.

This need not be disastrous. To the contrary, openness to different philosophical traditions opens up fresh avenues of philosophical inquiry, so can be re-invigorating for one's own tradition even if one cannot expect the straightforward incorporation of one set of philosophical beliefs into another. One may wonder whether affirmation of the possibility of cross-cultural philosophical engagement and simultaneous denial of the ready translatability of one set of beliefs into another is not to commit the incoherence of philosophical relativism. I do not think so: others' often quite markedly different beliefs need not be unintelligible to us just because we happen not to share them. Nor need we array them along some axis of historical development in order to render them intelligible to ourselves as the sort of superstitious beliefs we ourselves once held: these are outmoded responses to the fact that not everyone thinks alike. We are meant to live, today, in a world of different cultures' moral and political equality – we regard our own political principles as chief purveyors of that commitment. If so, our philosophical thinking will have to accommodate itself to that commitment. (Flikschuh

2014) Is this merely a plea for political correctness, as some have suggested to me in responses to earlier presentations of this paper? I prefer to think of it as a plea for greater intellectual curiosity. Will serious intellectual engagement with the thoughts of others spell the end of the Western philosophical tradition, even of Western civilization? Of course not – persistent failure so to engage with the thoughts of others in a rapidly changing moral and political world is much more likely to achieve that particular result. What will we gain? Exposure to interesting ideas unfamiliar to us, such as the idea of ancestral existence, and the philosophical fascination they are able to exert on us even if we cannot share them in practice.

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