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This thing called communitarianism: A critical review of Matolino's Personhood in African Philosophy¹

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The subject of personal identity has received substantial treatment in contemporary African philosophy. Importantly, the dominant approach to personal identity is communitarian. Bernard Matolino's new book *Personhood in African Philosophy* enters into this discussion by way of contesting some of the assumptions underlying communitarian approaches. His own critical assessment leads him to what I believe is an unprecedented objection in the literature; the conclusion that communitarian philosophers are involved in a category mistake when framing the question and articulating the notion of personhood. I intend to present a brief summary of the chapters of the book and reflect on some of the main philosophical issues that the book provokes, noting what I take to be refreshing insights that Matolino brings to the discussion while also engaging critically with the ones I find most contentious. In particular, I briefly assess Matolino's implicit suggestion that an Akan inspired quasi-physicalist account of mind avoids the mind-body interaction problem; I object to the category mistake charge on behalf of communitarians; and lastly, I raise questions about, and propose ways Matolino can refine, his proposal concerning a new way of thinking about personhood, which goes under the rubric of Limited Communitarianism.

Introduction

Given the enormous attention paid to the matter of personhood in contemporary African philosophy, the need for a new volume, it appears, should be made sense of and perhaps judged in terms of what original contribution, if any, it makes to the discourse.² Bernard Matolino's (2014) *Personhood in African Philosophy* enters and probes a subject that is relatively well researched, but a field that is still growing and in need of more published materials. And if originality is the criterion for judging the need for another book on personhood, Matolino attempts to meet it by proposing, even if only its broad contours, a direction that the discussion about personhood in African philosophy can legitimately head in, and perhaps should be heading in.

¹ I am grateful to Olga Yurkivska and Simon Beck for helpful suggestions on this article.

² Representative examples are Kwasi Wiredu's and Kwame Gyekye's *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* (1992), a section of Kwame Gyekye's *Tradition and Modernity* (1997), and more recently, even if only in part, Dismas Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010).

My aims are to reflect on some of the main philosophical issues that the book provokes, noting what I take to be refreshing insights that Matolino brings to the discussion while also engaging critically with the ones I find most contentious. I begin with a brief outline of the central aims Matolino pursues in each chapter of the book and hopefully give the reader a sense of what the book is about. In the process, I also highlight the issues I go on to tackle in subsequent sections. In total, there are three such issues emerging from the book that I believe have huge philosophical significance and that deserve more critical attention.

A summary of Personhood in African Philosophy

The first chapter of the book, titled *The Nature of Personhood*, has as its primary aim the task of defending two very broad ways of cataloguing the many conceptions of personhood in the literature. Along the way, Matolino offers detailed presentations of Placide Tempels', John Mbiti's and Alexis Kagame's conceptions of personhood, noting and correcting several misconceptions about them and ultimately assigning each one a home in his preferred two categories—metaphysical and communitarian. By metaphysical, Matolino means those conceptions that are 'free of communal considerations as primary constituents of the nature of persons' (2014: p. 72) and by communitarian he refers to all those conceptions that require for personhood communal participation and the performance of certain roles and obligations (p. 32). Matolino believes that Tempels' and Mbiti's conceptions belong to the communitarian camp, while Kagame's fall under the metaphysical.

Proposing inventories like these is not uncommon, however. And neither is the suggestion that there are two broad camps with which African conceptions of personhood can identify. Matolino is aware of previous contributions; he offers what I believe are good reasons for rejecting Didier Kaphagawani's three groups of conceptions of personhood, also taking issue with Kaphagawani's inclusion of Tempels' and Kagame's conceptions in categories that are unsuitable and non-existent respectively.

But it is his dismissal of Polycarp Ikuenobe's taxonomy that I found hard to accept. Ikuenobe (2006) had proposed the 'descriptive' and 'normative' categories, which coincides with Wiredu's (2009) 'ontological' and 'normative' categories. The label 'descriptive,' Matolino complains, is misleading when used interchangeably with 'metaphysics.' This is so because 'metaphysics is a far more serious category than a mere exercise in describing entities' (2014: p. 29). Yet it is hard to see what is misleading or unserious about the claim that philosophers, who identify certain intrinsic characteristics that distinguish some entity as persons, are doing work in descriptive, rather than revisionary, metaphysics.

Moreover, Matolino's way of carving up the literature on personhood invites problems of its own. To draw a demarcating line between metaphysical and communitarian is to implicitly suggest that the communitarian proponent of personhood is not engaged in metaphysical inquiry. But this is not necessarily the case. Communitarian approaches to personhood, at least the ones available in the African literature and those Matolino samples in his book, involve important claims about the metaphysical constitution of

persons. What Tempels', Menkiti's and Gyekye's accounts have in common is not just their varying degrees of commitment to the communitarian valuation of community, but also metaphysical claims about the causal dependence of the individual person on the community.

The problem, then, is that the term 'metaphysics' spans Matolino's metaphysical/communitarian divide but not the descriptive/normative categories of Ikuenobe. As such, placing many African conceptions of personhood neatly in Matolino's metaphysical and communitarian boxes can only happen with great difficulty, thus undercutting the rationale for proposing the taxonomy in the first place.

Besides, in the literature on personhood, what sets communitarian conceptions of personhood apart, it seems to me, is not the lack of a metaphysical dimension, as Matolino's distinction implicitly suggests. Instead, it is the normative dimension; that is, the further requirement that personhood is achieved in a social and cultural space—a consequence of the very high moral premium they assign to the community. So, Matolino's protestations notwithstanding, it is Ikuenobe's own taxonomy I find more useful and intelligible.³

But why squabble over a label—descriptive/normative, metaphysical/communitarian? These distinctions, while they may enable easy stock-taking, carry less weight than we may be assigning them. The point, however, is that in the context of the book, Matolino's labels matter. They anticipate and prepare the ground for his subsequent charge, in Chapter Four, that Afro-communitarianism is a very grave mistake—the category mistake. I take up this very important objection in the fourth section of this article.

Besides the category mistake objection, Matolino also criticises Afro-communitarians for holding a rather mistaken belief about what the term 'authentically African' amounts to. The criticism refers to the unsubstantiated claim that whatever is properly African is necessarily based on some idea of the community. It is problematic, according to Matolino, because it is based on an anachronism—by which he means, 'pre-colonial traditionalistic understanding of community' (2014: p. 120). Matolino presents a mini autobiographical narrative, much like Appiah's (1992) in his *In My Father's House*, which pointed to the many grounds in which Appiah is rooted as a cosmopolitan, as a strategy to establish two critical points. First, the idea of community determining a person's identity in any non-trivial sense may not be applicable to everyone. Second, Matolino makes the point that Africa is large enough to accommodate very many ideas about personhood and personal identity, including especially ones that are not communitarian in the way proponents of associated views of personhood imagine. I read Matolino, especially in this chapter, as making the point, and one I share, that the pressures of modernity can impact our understanding of our identity as persons, leading even to the recognition of an atomist, or at least some non-communitarian, conception of personhood as a viable option.

³ As this is a review of Matolino's book, however, I have chosen to stick with his more cumbersome taxonomy in the remainder of the article. It should be clear then, if and when I return to the more appropriate descriptive/normative distinction, that the context of the discussion calls for it.

The foregoing objection was already signalled in chapter three, in which Matolino takes time to defend the idea that the metaphysical view is genuinely African. The chapter titled *The Metaphysical View*, shifts attention away from communitarian approaches to the metaphysical ones. Here, the critical focus is on the Yoruba and Akan metaphysical views of personhood. There are two main points I believe Matolino is keen to drive home right at the outset. First, it is that a metaphysical approach to personhood is properly African. Second, he insists that the metaphysical approach is not communitarian, even if communitarian concerns are often merged with it—a practice Matolino queries in Chapter Four by accusing communitarians of conflating two separate issues. I would like to draw attention to the converse, to which Matolino is committed, that a communitarian view of personhood is, by virtue of being communitarian, not metaphysical. This is the controversial assumption I have promised to probe in the fourth section.

What I find philosophically interesting in this chapter, however, is Matolino's presentation of the debate between Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye on the correct ontological constituents of personhood. The debate becomes heated at the point where Gyekye prefers to identify the *okra*, one of the person-defining features in Akan philosophy of person, as the equivalent of the soul in Western philosophy, something Wiredu frowns upon. Wiredu's take on the matter is nuanced and somewhat unusual. He classifies the *okra* not as an Akan counterpart of the Cartesian soul, but as a quasi-physical entity. And Matolino is not undecided about whom to take sides with. He maintains that there are good reasons to think that Gyekye's reading of Akan metaphysics on personhood is erroneous. I lack the space, however, to rehearse the debate here or to recap Matolino's reasons for siding with Wiredu.

I shall, however, pursue a line of thought that I believe carries huge philosophical significance—the suggestion by Matolino that Wiredu's reference to a quasi-physical entity, rather than a non-physical one as Gyekye does, distances him from Cartesian Dualism and its associated philosophical problems. This is also echoed in his submission that in Gbadegesin's Yoruba account of personhood mental occurrences are grounded in some physical, rather than non-physical, entity (Matolino 2014: p. 87). What emerges then is the suggestion that African discourse on personhood is not beset by the mind-body interaction problem. Might an idea from culture-specific conceptions of personhood in African philosophy hold the key to unlocking the mind-body puzzle? I return to this question in the third section of this article.

Earlier in Chapter Two, which outlines the reasons underlying the communitarian's reasons for holding that the community or some kind of communal structure provides the basis for articulating the idea of personhood, Matolino had attempted to clarify the communitarian notion of personhood by reflecting on the works of Tempels, Mbiti, Menkiti and Gyekye. On Mbiti, Matolino makes the point that the relationship between the two is dialogical (i.e. the two are mutually impacting), contrary to how he is often portrayed in the literature. Two points are worth noting in the discussion on Menkiti. First, his conception of personhood is not purely externalist as some are wont to think, and second, unlike Mbiti, he takes the community to be prior to the individual, thus being caught up in what Gyekye labels extreme communitarianism. And Matolino makes

the point that Gyekye misconstrues radical communitarianism as an oppressive system necessarily to ‘give moderate communitarianism an advantage’ (2014: p. 69). He then launches a further attack on moderate communitarianism—the objection that it reduces to the extreme one Gyekye analyses and rejects.⁴

The final chapter, *Limited Communitarianism*, is Matolino’s proposal of a way of thinking about persons that should take the place of the traditional communitarian conceptions we must now, if his objections go through, reject. I reflect further on this proposal in the final section of this article.

Wiredu and the mind-body problem

As already mentioned Matolino holds that Wiredu’s characterisation of the *okra* as quasi-physical enables him to avoid the problem of mind-body interaction. However, to put the point this way is to oversimplify it. This is so because Wiredu does not think the *okra* is the equivalent of mind. In fact, as far as Wiredu is concerned, mind is not a thing at all. What then is it?⁵

Wiredu holds a cluster of beliefs about the mind and the mental that is not entirely unknown to one who is familiar with the mainstream philosophical literature on mind; I think, then, that it would be useful to try to locate him as best as we can in this literature. One such belief held by Wiredu is that the domain of the mental is marked by intentionality—‘this referential capacity,’ he notes, ‘is the very defining characteristic of thought’ (1995: p. 142). And elsewhere, he points out that the ‘brain is the basis of mind’ (p. 131), which corresponds with what we know empirically that ‘brain states and processes are correlated with thought processes’ (p. 136). Working out the details of this correlation, however, is a scientific rather than a philosophical problem (p. 138). On this account, and unlike identity theorists, the mind is not the brain, however. Wiredu strongly rejects the idea that mind refers to some *thing*, physical or non-physical, and with it all forms of dualism and mind-brain identity theories (pp. 130–131).

We may be tempted to describe Wiredu’s concept of mind as an attribute or a dual aspect theory, insofar as it attributes something distinctive to the mental—intentionality. Wiredu strongly rejects this identification, specifically with the views of Spinoza and Strawson, who put forward a dual aspect theory, because it makes physical and mental categorically comparable, thus running the risk of objectifying the mind. This point notwithstanding, Wiredu wants to say that ‘thought is an aspect of brain process’ (p. 139) and since this aspect of brain processes is marked by intentionality, we can safely say that it is sufficiently special to distinguish it from other brain processes. Wiredu is also committed to the view that mind is, ‘from the Akan point of view a logical construction

⁴ In general I agree with this point of criticism of Gyekye. I have also pointed out elsewhere that if the problem of the relationship between individual and community is properly articulated, then it becomes clear that moderate communitarianism merely restates the problem it sets out to resolve (see Oyowe 2013a).

⁵ Wiredu describes it as the Akan concept of mind. I prefer to describe it as Wiredu’s for the simple reason that he believes that it is not necessarily held by all Akans and ultimately he is the one primarily responsible for it—not any other Akan, who may well disagree with his account of mind or any other subject, as is common among Akan scholars.

out of actual and potential thoughts [...] it is both ideational and dispositional' (p. 131). He goes on to explain that the suggestion that mind is ideational is simply that it is consisting of thoughts, which are conceptual units, rather mind-independent objects. In this sense, mind is not a thing that thinks; instead it is what thoughts are made of. That mind is dispositional is simply that there is in a person (or the person's brain) the capacity to exhibit, presumably in behaviour, what we refer to as thought. 'The dispositional attribution,' says Wiredu, 'implies that if and when the circumstances are ripe, he will display [...] thinking' (p. 131).

Combining the key ideas, namely the distinctive character of the mental; the idea that the mental is neither material (against identity theorists) nor immaterial (against dualists) but simply conceptual (pp. 136, 139, 142); and the idea that mind is a disposition to behave, we can say that Wiredu's concept of mind shares common features with Ryle's logical behaviourism, insofar as it is a non-substance view and takes mind to be dispositional, and holding further that our mental concepts are just that and are not reducible to the physical or non-physical categories.⁶⁶ On Wiredu's view, dispositions to behave, as well as concepts that capture the referential aspects of brain processes.

This account of mind is not troubled by the mind-body interaction problem as Wiredu says:

In truth there is no such problem in Akan thought. The metaphysical problem of the relation between the body and the mind as it exists in Western philosophy is the problem of how a material entity can have any interaction with an immaterial one. Since the Akans do not regard mind as an entity, this question does not arise (1995: p. 134).

But if Wiredu's concept of mind avoids the mind-body problem, it is because like with many other theories of mind, it has produced new problems. For instance, the account does not quite eliminate all the mystery surrounding the mind; in particular the idea that the mental or thought is simply an aspect of the brain is not very revealing. It seems to me that more still needs to be said about this rather peculiar aspect of brain processes and its relation to other processes in the brain. And Wiredu is not unaware of the problem. He notes that it is not because the concept of 'aspect is especially perplexing,' instead the problem is to make clear and thus 'remove the intellectual discomforts' that come with the claim that there is a 'relation between thought and brain process' (1995: p. 139). But the problem is deeper than he makes it since saying that the mind or mental does not belong to the category of the physical or immaterial, and yet claiming that 'thought is an aspect of brain process' makes this aspect of brain processes as mysterious as Descartes makes it. One option is to identify mental processes with brain processes but Wiredu rejects this. But without some positive account of what this very peculiar aspect of brain processes is we have yet to move far beyond where Descartes took us.

⁶⁶ Wiredu actually sees his concept of mind, drawn from ideas associated with the Akan people, as sharing important features with Gilbert Ryle's Behaviourism (1995: p. 140).

A further but related difficulty arises for Wiredu's account to the extent that it is distinguishable from Ryle's logical behaviourism. Although like Ryle, Wiredu holds a non-substance view of mind, unlike Ryle he seems to be committed to the view that mentalistic concepts refer to inner causes of behaviour. This is so because he describes 'thought' (or quite generally, mental terms) as an 'aspect of the brain.' If this characterisation is right, then, there is still a story to be told about the relation of this aspect of the brain to other brain processes. In particular, it still may be asked whether mental processes have causal powers at all. It seems that they could not on this account, or rather that it would be hard to make sense of how they could. If they could, then, moreover, there is the question of how something (i.e. mind or mental) that is purely conceptual can causally affect something of a rather different (physical) category, brain processes. If they could not, then, this aspect of brain processes to which mental concepts refer are very much unlike the states we refer to when we employ mental concepts. All of this means that the claim that there is no question of how the mental and physical interact in Wiredu's account of mind can be made on the pain of admitting that the mental lack causative powers at all. Again, this follows because the alternative solution of identifying the mental with the physical is ignored.

The contention here is that there appear to be deep tensions in Wiredu's account of mind. Although, he seems to get rid of the traditional mind-body interaction problem by resorting to a non-substance view of mind, he surprisingly brings it back in, albeit in a different form, by combining his dispositional account of mind with the claim that the mental is a unique aspect of brain processes. That is, on the one hand, he denies that mind (not being a physical or nonphysical thing) can have causative powers; on the other, he seems to be committed to the causal efficacy of the mental by describing it as an aspect of brain processes. To deny the causative nature of this special aspect of brain processes, and therefore the mental-physical interaction problem, on Wiredu's account, is to be committed to some form of epiphenomenalism. In final analysis, the suggestion that this account of mind in African philosophy is able to get past the mind-body interaction problem must therefore be stated with caution. And this result shows that problems about the mind are difficult ones and will not go away easily, Western though they may sound.

On falling into a category mistake

I have already attributed to Matolino the controversial claim that an Afro-communitarian view of personhood is, in virtue of being communitarian, not metaphysical at all. Perhaps Matolino might protest; but it is not hard to see why he must now own this claim. First, his insistence on drawing a dividing line between conceptions of personhood that are 'metaphysical' and those that are 'communitarian' commits him to the corollary that they are mutually exclusive. To deny this is to admit that the distinction falls away and the central objective of chapter one is undermined. Second, he explicitly makes this claim. In one place, he doubts that the communitarian can give an answer to the metaphysical question, 'what is a person?' Alluding to the communitarians, he writes, 'They think that when they articulate the constituents of a person from a communally oriented metaphysical perspective, they are actually engaged in the metaphysics of personal identity' (2014: p.146). In another place, he is more categorical: 'any form of communitarianism is not capable of saying anything on the metaphysics of personal identity' (p. 171).

So, clearly, the controversial assumption I have been referring to is Matolino's. And from here, the objection that communitarians misidentify the category to which the correct analysis of personhood belongs is easy. This is so because by refusing to grant the Afro-communitarian the benefit of engaging in metaphysics when conceptualising personhood, Matolino with a sleight of hand removes the subject of their analysis from the domain of metaphysics; and he does this in advance of laying the charge of a category mistake. But is the Afro-communitarian guilty of this mistake?

This 'category mistake' criticism is interesting and unprecedented in the literature.⁷ In Matolino's words, 'we say one has committed a category mistake when she ascribes, to a certain entity, a property or properties which that entity *could* not have' (2014: p.142, emphasis mine). So stated it is not clear that the Afro-communitarian has made this mistake. Her problem is that she, in Matolino's words, construes persons as 'moral agents' or as elsewhere, 'attributes descriptive features of sociality' to persons, understood as a metaphysical entity (2014: p.142, 144). But moral agency and features of sociality are not properties that persons *could* not have. Matolino is even more strident claiming that 'the strict identity of an entity known as person does not have such communal attributes. Doing so [i.e. attributing them to persons] is committing a category mistake' (2014:p. 148). This is questionable; I do not see why it is not conceivable that persons are communal in nature, however this is then spelt out in detail. This claim must be false or at best requires justification. So, the Afro-communitarian is not yet the target of the criticism, if a category mistake is understood as just described.

At other times, Matolino appears to mean something different when he employs the term category mistake. For instance, he calls attention to Gilbert Ryle's examples to illuminate the term. A 'foreigner,' Matolino writes, citing one of these examples, 'is taken on a tour of either Oxford or Cambridge. The foreigner is shown the various departments and the other parts of the University. At the end of the tour the foreigner asks where the University is' (2014: p.142). Ryle explains the problem as the foreigner 'mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong' (1973: p. 18). So, one commits a category mistake when one locates some entity in a category it does not belong. Is the Afro-communitarian guilty of this mistake with respect to persons?

Matolino distinguishes two sets of questions—one set addresses the question of 'what a person is' and the other addresses 'socio-moral' questions about persons. The Afro-communitarian's mistake is that she locates persons in the 'socio-moral' category rather than the metaphysical category. Yet, to locate persons in the 'socio-moral' category is not to make a mistake like the foreigner's. Whereas the foreigner thinks of 'University' as belonging to the *wrong* category, the Afro-communitarian has not placed persons in the

⁷ One that comes close to it is Lee Brown's (2004) charge that Afro-communitarian philosophers often fuse metaphysical and normative issues in their conceptions of personhood. While the two can be prised apart, which I believe was Brown's point, it is far from saying Afro-communitarians have mistaken the category to which the subject of their analyses, person, belongs.

wrong category, by virtue of placing them in the ‘socio-moral’ category. Yes, person belongs to the metaphysical category; person is one among many natural kinds in our world. But person straddles the moral and social worlds as well, and identifying person in both categories is not to be involved in a mistake, and certainly not a category mistake.

Again, Matolino’s claim that ‘issues of ethics are not issues of identity’ (2014: p. 157) is not something the Afro-communitarian does not recognise. More correctly, her view is that there are two distinct but related issues of personhood to be addressed—the metaphysical and the normative. If the category mistake charge amounts to not keeping both issues separately, then, an Afro-communitarian who decides to focus on ethical issues does not deny that the issues are separate but simply expresses partiality towards one set of issues over the other. Wiredu puts it this way, ‘The African mind is not oblivious to the ontological aspects of the concept of a person, and has ideas thereto. But ethical issues are more dominant’ (2009: p. 13). To say this is to say just that and not to conflate two separate categories. What emerges is a mega-conception of personhood—one that combines the idea of a metaphysical entity, person, and the normative implications of personhood. This is not a conflation of categories, as Matolino contends (2014: p. 144); it is simply an acknowledgment that there is a relation between the two. To construct a theory of personhood in which two apropos descriptions of persons are related is not to mistake categories. So, the conflation objection, if this is what the category mistake objection amounts to, does not target Afro-communitarians, certainly not a good number of the ones Matolino mentions in his book.

If I am right, then, Matolino’s charge that ‘communitarians have committed a category mistake’ by treating ‘the second category questions as if they were the first category questions’ (2014: p. 154) does not target Afro-communitarians, at least not the ones I have briefly referred to above and who are named in Matolino’s book as proponents of the Afro-communitarian idea of personhood.

So, in what, then, does the accusation that Afro-communitarians are involved in a category mistake consist in? There are various levels to Matolino’s contention that the Afro-communitarian misidentifies the categories to which persons belong. One further level points to his claim near the end of Chapter Four that the Afro-communitarian takes the ‘community’ as ‘one of those things that count as a property that constitutes a person’ (2014: 157). He goes on to explain the claim. ‘The communitarian has to show that the community is in the same category as attributes such as the *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua*.’ These attributes belong (1) to the category of ‘physical’ or ‘psycho-spiritual objects’ and (2) to *each* individual. The ‘community,’ Matolino insists does not share these features with the *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua* [i.e. it is not a thing and is not intrinsic to the person] and so cannot belong to the same category as them. The Afro-communitarian’s mistake, then, is to claim that a person is constituted by a feature that does not belong to the same category as the ones identified by his opponents—i.e. by philosophers, like Matolino, who insist on the metaphysical approach to personhood.

Of course, the objection is tendentious and begs the question because it already privileges the set of constitutive elements of personhood identified by those who prefer the metaphysical approach. Also, it is question-begging because it assumes without further

argument that reference to the *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua* or similar metaphysical constituents of personhood, is the appropriate way to characterise personhood.

Perhaps, this is all unfair. Surely, there is something troubling about a conception of personhood that reifies the community, making it into a *thing*, which it clearly is not. While I am opposed to the idea of community as a mind-independent entity, I wish to advance three possible retorts on behalf of the Afro-communitarian who may hold this view. First, we note that Matolino claims that *okra*, *sunsum* etc. belong to a class of entities to which community does not belong. However, for the argument to get going we must think that they are mind-independent entities. That is, these descriptions must correspond to some facts in the world in a way that the notion of community could not (if *okra*, *sunsum* etc. are merely conceptual entities, then there is no reason to think that they belong in a different category to 'community'). Yet, no argument has been advanced yet for the mind-independent existence of such things as *okra*, *sunsum* etc. to locate them in a separate category from community.

On the contrary, it appears that *okra*, *sunsum* and the like, are merely part of the Akan conceptual apparatus for making sense of personhood. This is clear from how they are characterised—the *okra* is 'that whose presence in the body means life and whose absence means death...' and the *sunsum* is 'that which is responsible for the total effect which is communicated by an individual's personality' (1995: p. 133). And Wiredu is careful to point out that this is merely a *postulation* based on the reasoning that a living being must have an *entity* as the principle of life or personality. He then suggests that a postulation like the *okra* is an 'abstract' entity and that the attempt to 'construe it into an object or entity', by which he means mind-independent entity, is logically flawed (p. 142). The point is that once we see that *okra* and *sunsum* are conceptual units, we have little reason to claim categorically that they refer to mind-independent entities; their title as 'entity' is restricted to the conceptual domain.

The objection to Matolino should now be obvious. So understood, it is not clear how the *okra* and *sunsum* belong to a different category unlike to the idea of community—in truth, they may all be mind-dependent *things*, being part of our conceptual scheme for making sense of the world. Why cannot the Afro-communitarian simply claim that community is 'that which is responsible for the social nature of persons' in the same way that *okra* is that which is responsible for life?

Second, and relatedly, even if we grant that *okra*, *sunsum* etc. are 'psycho-spiritual' or 'quasi-physical' entities, what is to stop that Afro-communitarian from describing 'community' similarly? It seems to me that once the door has been opened to such non-physical, quasi-physical or psycho-spiritual entities like the *okra* and *sunsum*, there is no stopping other ostensibly mysterious entities from being admitted in. The Afro-communitarian who says the 'community' is some psycho-spiritual or quasi-physical entity manifested in actual families, clans, and cultural or ethnic groups is no more incoherent and no worse off than one who refers to quasi-physical and psycho-spiritual entities like *okra* or *sunsum* as constitutive of a person. In both cases, the things described are as mysterious as the terms employed to describe their natures.

The Afro-communitarian should be justifiably appalled that the logical possibility of ‘community as an entity’ is denied within the same discourse that admits of such entities as God, *okra*, *sunsum* and other entities whose existence have not been empirically verified. See, for instance, what Matolino says about God’s place in these matters: ‘if radical and moderate communitarianism are based on the traditional outlook of African societies—they cannot object to either the existence or importance of God’ (2014: p. 181). But if we all must accept God’s existence and role in the constitution of persons as a brute traditional African metaphysical fact, then by the same manner of reasoning we cannot just discard the idea that community is an entity of some sort involved in person-constitution. This role for the community is no more mysterious than the role now being assigned to God in the constitution of persons.⁸

Yet, and this is the third point, the Afro-communitarian need not posit the community as some entity—quasi-physical or psycho-spiritual—in order to make sense of her view that persons are communal in nature. All she needs do is to render intelligible how it is that the community constitutes a person. She might say, like Menkiti, that the individual person is constituted by the community in virtue of the fact that he carries within his nature genes that do not just belong to him but have implications for community belonging and dependence. Or, that he possesses within him the capacity for language which is not explicable except in terms of the fact that he is located within some shared linguistic context. This is what Menkiti, a communitarian and supposed target of Matolino, says: ‘we could say that not only the biological set through which the individual is capable of identification by reference to a communal gene pool, but also the language which he speaks and which is no small factor in the constitution of his mental dispositions and attitudes, belong to this or that specific human group’ (1984: p. 172). My point is that the onus is on anyone who believes the metaphysical view to be the correct approach to show why this and other community-based ways of characterising how persons are constituted are unintelligible. Matolino’s pointing out that a category mistake has been made does not quite do it.

I have been defending the Afro-communitarian conception of personhood against the charge that it is involved in a category mistake. The objection is not surprising, however. The signals were already there when Matolino elected to insist on a methodological gap between communitarian and metaphysical approaches to personhood. The reason why the objection may have appeared to stick was because one was unsuspectingly led, by that unfair taxonomy, to think that what is communitarian is not metaphysical and *a fortiori* a communitarian conception of person cannot be metaphysical. This way the communitarian is incorrectly portrayed as unable to correctly locate the subject of her analysis, person, in the metaphysical category. But as we

⁸ In truth, it is hard to know what kind of things these things are. And I do not deny that they may correspond to things outside the mind. My point instead is that saying that they are ‘psycho-spiritual’ or ‘quasi-physical’ is not very illuminating. These descriptions of them point to things unlike everything else in our world. And given what Wiredu has to say, it is not entirely clear that the Akan mean by these metaphysical features anything more than that they are conceptual units. Moreover, the inability to say exactly what they are puts them in a similar position as the belief that community is some psycho-spiritual or quasi-physical entity.

have seen, not only has the mistake not been made, to represent the Afro-communitarian conception of person in the way Matolino does in lodging the objection is to stage a fight in which it is made sure one's opponent does not show up. That way the criticism fails to hit its intended target.

One loose end needs to be tied. For even if I am right that the category mistake objection does not stick, perhaps a case may still be made for keeping metaphysical and non-metaphysical questions about personhood apart. Afro-communitarians tend to combine the two in one grand account; but a metaphysical inquiry into personhood without reference to community at all—i.e. in the words of Bruce Janz, 'a disinterested analysis of ideas whose pragmatic concerns are irrelevant' (p. 22)—could be just enough. And this is so even if communitarians insist that metaphysical inquiry that does not address practical concerns is dry and meaningless (p. 20).

This way of framing the matter locates it within a much broader debate in African philosophy—the issue of whether or not African philosophy, or otherwise analysis of ideas in African philosophy, should have practical significance. On the one hand, the insistence on a purely metaphysical inquiry seems to contest the relevance of practical concerns (it seems to me Matolino is making the point that these practical concerns, whatever they are, have secondary importance). On the other hand, the communitarian focus takes more seriously the issue of the practical relevance of a philosophical concept, e.g. personhood. This is an important concern about how to understand and do African philosophy, which Matolino does not address in the book but which has a huge bearing on his criticisms of communitarian philosophers for doing *too* much about personhood.

I believe that the practical concerns are important, but they are subsequent to the metaphysical concerns. But this should not lead us to ignore these practical concerns.⁹ Rather than accuse communitarians of a category mistake regarding their accounts of personhood, my approach would be to show that the additional normative requirement in communitarian conceptions of personhood, while logically coherent, is gratuitous because the intuitions (about the practical side of personhood) meant to be captured by the normative requirement can be accounted for without it.¹⁰ But this, of course, requires drawing a line between descriptive and metaphysical (including communitarian) approaches on the one hand and normative approaches on the other, something Matolino is strongly averse to.

A return to communitarianism?

My misgivings aside, it is not hard to see that Matolino's strong point is that the individual side of the personhood story is not given as much attention and importance as

⁹ For further discussion on the practical significance of philosophical analysis, see Kwame Gyekye's book *Tradition and Modernity* (1997). Wiredu also seems to think that philosophical analysis has practical import when he suggests that the African philosopher engage in the project of philosophising with 'an African conscience' (1980: p. x).

¹⁰ Unlike Matolino, my interest is to contest the normative dimension of personhood as I believe that one can logically hold the claim that persons are communal in nature without being committed to the view that it is through performance of certain obligations that personhood is achieved (i.e. the normative requirement). See Oyowe 2013a.

it deserves (2014: p. 161), or alternatively, he wants to say that it is important not to exaggerate the significance of the community when construing personhood (p. 165).

If it is in these respects (i.e. the place of the individual and exaggerating the communal element) that traditional communitarian approaches to personhood have failed, then Matolino wants to fill the gap that his criticisms of them have opened up. Rather surprisingly, and in spite of his very stringent opposition to communitarianism, Matolino prefers to label his alternative view Limited Communitarianism. Although it aspires to place very clear limits on the role of the community in the concept of personhood, it is nevertheless intended to be *communitarian*. In the end, this thing called communitarianism raises its ugly head again, and is never completely banished from talk of personhood.

At any rate, the communitarian influence is intended to be sufficiently weakened in Matolino's alternative, which is offered as a plausible alternative by way of distinguishing it from its alternative, which is offered as a plausible alternative by way of distinguishing it from its predecessors—i.e. the extreme and moderate versions Matolino roundly criticises. My aim is not to argue for a lack of difference necessarily; instead it is to point to potential challenges as Matolino refines and rearticulates the position in the future.

As a point of distinction, and continuing with a theme that runs throughout the book, Matolino notes that Limited Communitarianism begins with the claim that metaphysical talk about personhood must be kept separate from communitarian talk about personhood, the two being mutually exclusive. 'The first type which is a strict matter of identity is one that is articulated by the metaphysical view [...] The second type of identity is a social or communal identity' (2014: p. 166). As I have tried to show, it is not quite obvious that traditional Afro-communitarians have failed to do this. It seems to me that Ajume Wingo, for instance, understands this relationship. Commenting on Wiredu's Akan-based conception of personhood, he notes that 'an individual's human status, [i.e. as a metaphysical entity] then, is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for personhood.'¹¹ Similarly Ikuenobe writes, 'although the African communalistic conception of personhood is primarily normative, it is also dependent on a descriptive metaphysical view of personhood; one cannot satisfy the criteria of personhood if one does not have the descriptive metaphysical features of a person' (Ikuenobe 2006: p. 118).¹² So, it may be said quite generally that communitarians see both identities as distinct but also see a relationship between them. If there is a difference, then, between these conceptions of personhood and the alternative limited one, then it must be in something else.

Matolino seems to say it is in the fact that, unlike its predecessors, Limited Communitarianism removes the idea of community from the level of ontology; community is a purely social phenomena. The claim here can be understood either as the idea that traditional communitarians reify the community or that the idea of community

¹¹ See Wingo (2008) 'Akan Philosophy of the Person'.

¹² Even the most extreme of them, Menkiti, writes that '... what was initially biologically (i.e. metaphysically) given can come to attain socialself-hood' (1984: p. 173).

appears in their metaphysical talk about personhood whereas it is completely absent in Limited Communitarianism. With respect to the former, Matolino is keen to point out that unlike traditional communitarians he does not subscribe to a reified notion of community. The community, he believes, is ‘a set of conventions deliberately created by individuals to serve the social needs of those individuals’. He adds that ‘if this is the case then the reality of the community is temporal and not fixed’ (2014: p. 184). In this sense, the community is valuable, albeit instrumentally (p. 186).

Again, I am with Matolino on this point. Yet, I believe that to make this point is not yet to put forward an argument against those who may subscribe to the notion of community as a substructure for articulating personhood. I have already tried to indicate how the Afro-communitarians can excuse themselves from the first by insisting that one could claim that personhood is defined in reference to the community without committing to the view that the community is a metaphysical entity.¹³

As regards the latter, a little more can be said in favour of traditional communitarians. And it is simply that in many cases what those who wish to limit any talk of community defining persons usually point to as constitutive of personhood implicates a communitarian view even at the level of metaphysics. For instance, when Matolino shows preference for such entity as the *sunsum* in the metaphysical make-up of the person, he unwittingly ignores his own submission that the said *sunsum* derives from the father of the one who possesses it (2014: p. 180), as the Akans believe (Wiredu 1980: p. 47), thereby locating the individual person, even at this level of metaphysical analysis, in a network of relationship. Elsewhere, Wiredu is explicit. ‘Through the possession of an *okra*, *mogya* and *sunsum*,’ he writes, ‘a person is situated in a network of kinship relations’ (1996:p. 158). The same is true in the Yoruba account, as Gbadegesin points out, that possession of the *ori*, one of the constitutive element of personhood, adds a communal and ‘normative dimension’ to personhood (1991: p. 58). All these implicate communitarian considerations even at the level of metaphysics of personhood.

Thus, to say that Limited Communitarianism does better than its rivals in completely eliminating communitarian talk about personhood at the level of metaphysics is to identify person-constituting features that are purely non-communal in their character. But Limited Communitarianism has not yet done this to the extent that it goes with metaphysical features of personhood, as with the Akan and Yoruba that necessarily locate individual persons in a network of relationships with others or as *natural* members of a clan or ethnic group—i.e. community.

The challenge is acute for Limited Communitarianism since it is formulated as a very general theory, that is, it is non-committal about the specific constituents of personhood. Matolino prefers to leave open the candidate features for person-constitution to whatever particular ethnic groups believe to be the metaphysical constituents of personhood (2014: p. 166). This liberalism does not quite distinguish it, however, and

¹³ See, for instance, Masolo (2009) for further discussion on one way of characterising the communal nature of personhood that is not committed to making community into a thing.

invites problems of its own. As shown, to the extent that the Akan metaphysical feature *sunsum*, for instance, is characterised in communal terms, Limited Communitarianism's admission of this constituent of personhood inherits this commitment and implicates it in the communitarian game even at the level of metaphysics. This is bad, of course, because clearly Matolino does not want to play this game, even if his Limited Communitarianism in its present form now unfortunately does allow it.

Another reason why this very general nature of the account does not augur well is that Matolino had promised right at the start 'to build a new conception of person that is not beset with simplistic incoherencies, contradictions and category mistakes' (2014: p. xv). In the end, however, what we have is not a new conception at all. It is simply a reference to the Akan, Yoruba and other culture-specific accounts of personhood. And to this reference is added a statement on the primacy thesis in favour of the individual. Until more details are provided, it is hard to see how this is a new concept of personhood. Limited Communitarianism, it seems to me, must identify, as a start, ontological constitutive elements of personhood that do not bear communal features for it to be sufficiently distinguished from what is already available in the literature.

A crucial point of difference between Matolino's Limited Communitarianism and its rivals is that while the latter variously claim that the community takes precedence over the individual, Matolino holds that the individual takes precedence. The corollary of course is that individual rights take precedence over duties. This also implies for him that the metaphysical approach to personhood carries more weight vis-à-vis the communitarian approach (2014: p. 176). All this is good. But Matolino still needs to work out in what non-trivial sense his account of personhood is then supposed to be communitarian.

The challenge becomes pressing once it is seen that his view appears to be more at home in the liberal, or shall we say individualist, tradition as what is claimed here, and the metaphysical and normative status Matolino assigns to community in relation to the individual is very much consistent with many liberal theorists' stance on the matter. To put it differently, if personhood is, unlike the conceptions Matolino rejects, to be characterised independently of community, and there is a secondary normative status for community in his scheme, perhaps, then, the choice of describing it as a form of communitarianism is misleading. Why cling to the communitarian designation in spite of the obvious liberal commitments about the status of the individual and the secondary normative place of community?

My suspicion is that Matolino's desire to hold on to this communitarian description, even if only in name, relates to a point he sought to rebut--the idea that what is authentically African must in some way be communitarian. Is Matolino's communitarian identification a way of showing his view to retain something authentically African, in spite of his legitimate protest that what is authentically African need not be communitarian? If it is, then, it does not help very much his alternative position with its very strong liberal ties and it undercuts whatever force his argument to the contrary (in Chapter Three of the book) may have had. As it is now, where one perhaps would have celebrated Matolino's position as another triumph for liberalism within African scholarship, as it is without a doubt an

attempt to chart a path significantly different to the other communitarian views, Matolino regrettably stops short of identifying with this tradition, and prefers that his alternative remain an appendage merely to the grand communitarian project.

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