Molefe on the Value of Community for Personhood

Abstract:

In his book, *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics* Motsamai Molefe defends a character-based ethics where the goal of morality is to achieve personhood (in the African normative sense of the term) (2019). He moves away from many in the African tradition by contending that community is instrumentally valuable in that it is the means by which agents achieve personhood. According to Molefe, if the community is intrinsically valuable then there will be intuitively unacceptable trade-offs between individuals and the community. I argue that Molefe faces an unpalatable dilemma: Either it is logically impossible to achieve personhood apart from community or it is not. If it is logically impossible then the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental collapses and his account is susceptible to the unacceptable trade-offs, he claims for accounts that hold community is intrinsically valuable. If it is not, then it's difficult to understand the primacy of community in his account when there are other ways of achieving personhood.

1. Introduction

In African political and moral philosophy, the term 'personhood' is typically an evaluative term intended to make moral judgements about the character of another human. On this view though every human may have a dignity and be worthy of basic respect simply in virtue of being human, not everyone achieves complete personhood in the moral sense.[1] Debates about the precise nature of personhood are longstanding in the African philosophical tradition.[2] In his book, *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics* Motsamai Molefe defends a character-based ethics where the goal of morality is to achieve personhood (2019). He breaks with many in the African tradition by contending that community is instrumentally valuable in that it is the means by which agents can achieve personhood. According to Molefe, if relating to the community is intrinsically valuable or constitutive of good character then there will be intuitively unacceptable trade-offs between individuals and the community.[3]

My purpose here is to challenge Molefe in just one specific place. Namely, I'm going to argue that his defense of community as instrumentally valuable with respect to achieving personhood faces an unpalatable dilemma: Either it is logically impossible to achieve personhood apart from community or it is not. If it is logically impossible then the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental collapses and his account is susceptible to the problems that he associates with accounts that say community is intrinsic to personhood. If it is not, then it's difficult to understand

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[1] I speak of basic respect, but the reader may interpret this as 'basic rights' if they are so inclined.
[2] One of the key debates that started this literature is between Menkiti 1984 and Gyekye 1992. See Molefe 2019, Ch.2.
[3] It's worth noting that Molefe has done a service for the philosophical community in synthesizing a large amount of the African philosophical literature on personhood in Chapters Two and Three of his book. I recommend it as a useful resource for readers wanting to become familiar with the debate on personhood in African philosophy.

why he emphasises community so much when there are necessarily other ways of achieving personhood.

In Section 2 I briefly explain what is meant by 'personhood' in the African philosophical tradition (which is notably different from how it is used in the west, for example). Section 3 explains Molefe's general project and in Section 4 I turn specifically to this position on the value of community. In Section 5 I outline why his position is susceptible to an unpalatable dilemma. Finally, in Section 6 I examine potential replies some of which may point the way forward for Molefe. I conclude in Section 7.

2. Personhood as a Moral Concept in the African Tradition

Readers steeped in the western philosophical tradition may be unfamiliar with how the term 'personhood' is often used in the African philosophical tradition. On one hand, the terms personhood or person just refers to biological humans. This is a *biological* conception of personhood. Another category of personhood is about *personal identity*. What makes a person the same person over time? Physicalists might say that a person is identical to their brain or certain psychological states. Theists historically say that a person is identical to with an immaterial soul. Finally, an underexplored notion that might be appealed to in this context from the African tradition is that a person is continuous with their life or vital force. Additionally, in the African tradition simply in virtue of being a biological human (and whatever other criteria might be necessary for it), each person has a basic dignity and hence is entitled to respect. However, neither of these understandings of personhood are what African philosophers, including Molefe, typically have in mind in discussions of personhood.[4]

The African philosophical conception of personhood is *normative*. It is typically an evaluative term used to make moral judgments about a person's character.[5] When someone is said to exhibit personhood they are being judged positively. To say that someone is lacking in personhood or even a non-person is to pass negative moral judgment on them. Furthermore, personhood is not an on/off notion; it comes in degrees. For example, Nelson Mandela is thought to be more of a person in this normative sense than most other people. Someone can, and ought to, work on developing personhood over the course of their life. This is why in African culture elders are revered. Elders have had enough to time to develop as persons more fully.[6] Finally, the word 'ubuntu' is often taken to be equivalent to 'personhood'. Mandela exemplified ubuntu when he transitioned South Africa to the post apartheid era. It is this normative or moral conception of personhood that concerns Molefe.[7] I now turn to the role that community plays in becoming a person on this account.

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[4] This isn't quite how Molefe carves up the different notions of personhood, but he does 'ontological' conceptions and 'normative' conceptions. See Molefe 2019, 38-44.

[5] Traditionally, talk of personhood has to do with character, though in recent years some working in African ethics have tried to shift focus to right action. For example, see Metz 2007 and Metz forthcoming.

[6] For more on these ideas see Tutu 199, 34-35 and Menkiti 2004.

[7] Oft cited papers on the African conception of personhood include Gyeke 1992; Menkiti 2004; and Wiredu 2004

3. Molefe's Project

Molefe says that the purpose of his book "is interpretative rather than argumentative. The aim is not to argue that the idea of personhood, in and of itself, embodies the most plausible way to think about morality and politics" (2019, 9). Furthermore, at the beginning of "Chapter 3: An Exposition of Personhood as Moral Theory" Molefe also says that the goal of the chapter is to "proffer a philosophical exposition of personhood as a moral theory" (2019, 37). And he also elaborates that:

> The aim of this chapter is to expound on personhood as a moral theory, and no more. Specifically, I intend to give the reader an overall sense of the moral theory entailed by the idea of personhood. Pursuing this kind of aim, however, is not the same thing as espousing the view that such a moral theory is plausible, or that it is better than extant moral theories both in African philosophy and other philosophical traditions. It is not within the ambit or focus of this book to defend the plausibility of personhood. The chapter takes an expository and an interpretative posture for the sake of pursuing under-explored moral and political views of personhood in African philosophy. I intend, however, to present what I take to be the most promising (if not necessarily plausible) interpretation of personhood as a moral theory (Molefe 2019, 38).

Thus, on the one hand Molefe is explicit in that he isn't defending personhood as a plausible moral theory as such. He's merely providing a conceptual framework for such a theory. However, it's important to see that he is clearly defending what he takes to be the most plausible view of personhood. He is making judgments about how we should understand the normative conception of personhood and in this way he really is arguing for a specific position. He just does not take the additional step of applying his preferred understanding of personhood to moral problems or showing why it is superior to alternative moral theories. It is therefore Molefe's defense of a particular understanding of the normative conception of personhood that I seek to problematize.

4. Molefe on the Value of Community

In the African philosophical tradition 'community' (also sometimes called 'relationality' or 'sociality') is inseparably connected to debates about the normative conception of personhood. Here's why: In African philosophy (and indeed in African traditional thought more generally), personhood can only be achieved within the context of community.[8] A natural next question regards the precise nature of the relationship between community and personhood. Molefe holds that there are two competing explanations of this relationship. The first says that community is intrinsically valuable and the second claims that it is instrumentally valuable. In what follows I explain why Molefe endorses the latter.

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[8] While in places Molefe discusses different conceptions of community, he never explicitly tells the reader what he himself means by it. The most straightforward reading of him is that by community he just means something like 'group'.

According to Molefe many accounts of personhood hold that community is intrinsically valuable.[9] This equates personhood with positive social relationships. So positive social relationships are the end that ought to be pursued (Molefe 2019, 55). Personhood just *is* community. Molefe instead argues that community is only instrumentally valuable in that it helps individuals to achieve personhood. Part of his reason for endorsing this view appears to be his rejection of the intrinsic account. The main argument he offers in this regard is that treating community as the end itself will lead to unpalatable trade-offs between the individual and community (Molefe 2019, 60). For example, if community is intrinsically valuable then an individual may not be justified in spending her money on her education if it cannot be shown to directly benefit the community.[10] In other words, "[t]he point […] is to recognise that the communal view exaggerates the role of social relationships. And, secondly, it misses the basic point that the focus of personhood is ultimately *personal* development" (Molefe 2019, 61). Thus, for Molefe "the goal of personhood is for the individual to achieve a sound character; and the social relationships serve as incubators where individuals carve out their personhood" (Molefe 2019, 61).[11] Last, Molefe's "perfectionist egoistic moral theory locates the good in what the agent achieves (moral perfection) and it posits relationships as the single most important instrument to achieve such an end" (2019, 62).

According to Molefe, social relationships are what help to bring about the development of personhood. This is because they tend to emphasize other-regarding virtues. And it is by exercising such virtues that one is able to enter into (positive) social relationships (Molefe 2019, 62).[12] Such relationships are the way that individuals become persons. Molefe further explains that "it is ultimately *the individual* that achieves personhood. In the light of the provisions made available by the community, the individual is expected to try, to exert herself, to fight temptations, to deal with limitations in her society, to make something out of herself morally speaking" (2019, 63).

5. The Dilemma for Molefe

While there is much to consider in Molefe's analysis of personhood, including his contributions to the topics of partiality, dignity, and duties, here I focus on the distinction between community as intrinsically versus instrumentally valuable. Part of my motivation for this is because community is a fundamental building block in African thought, particularly its relationship to personhood. Thus, clarity on it is essential before moving to other topics in African philosophy, particularly in ethics and politics. I argue that Molefe's explication and defense of the idea that community is instrumentally valuable faces an unpalatable dilemma. Before explaining the dilemma, however, I want to first note an important and rather glaring ambiguity in Molefe's account.

5.1 An Ambiguity

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[9] Before we continue it's worth observing that much of the literature in question is not sufficiently clear on the intrinsic/instrumental distinction. Molefe notes that this is observed by Metz 2013a, 145. See also Molefe 2019, Ch.3.

[10] Metz has criticized what he calls self-realization views, which is similar to the one advocated for by Molefe. See Metz 2007 and also 2013a, b. Molefe (2019, 58-61) responds.

[11] See also Bujo 2001, 88

[12] See also Wiredu 1992, 200; Gyekye 1992, 192; Lutz 2009, 314.

In one place Molefe writes that "I [Molefe] can *only* perfect myself as an individual by contributing to the well-being of others, in terms of exercising my other-regarding duties towards them. Essentially, it is in this exercise of other-regarding duties that I realise my true humanity and assist others to do the same" (Molefe 2019, 63 emphasis mine). This quote implies that community is logically necessary for the achievement of personhood because it is the *only* way it can be achieved. Yet elsewhere he writes that:

> The *best* way to pursue self-regarding duties of self-perfection is by investing in social relationships with others via other-regarding duties. In other words, the best way to realise one's true human nature is by being embedded in social relationships with others. All things being equal, on this view, self-regarding duties are not diametrically opposed to other-regarding duties. It is by relating positively with others that I realise my true self (Molefe 2019, 64).

This quote, on the other hand, suggests that Molefe holds that community is the best way to achieve personhood. But it does *not* follow from the fact that something is the best way that it is the only way. Hence, this quote suggests that community isn't logically necessary for personhood. Given what Molefe says throughout the book, I'm inclined to take the latter interpretation which says community is logically necessary for personhood. Still, I invite Molefe to clarify this point in his future work since as we'll see this distinction matters when assessing the relationship between community and personhood. I will come back to this in Section 6, but I now state the dilemma that Molefe faces.

5.2 The Dilemma for Molefe on Personhood

The Dilemma

Starting Point:

(1)   With respect to personhood either community is intrinsically valuable, or it is instrumentally valuable.

Horn #1: Intrinsic Value:

(2)   If community is intrinsically valuable then it is *logically impossible* to achieve personhood without community.

(3)   If it is logically impossible to achieve personhood apart from the community then the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental collapses into intrinsic value.

(4)   If (3), then the problems raised by Molefe associated with intrinsic value remain (i.e. the unpalatable trade-offs between individual and community).

Horn #2: Instrumental Value:

(5)   If community is instrumentally valuable then it is *logically possible* to achieve personhood without community.

(6)   If it is logically possible to achieve personhood apart from the community then, necessarily, community may not be a great good after all.

(7)   If (6), then Molefe's account is either false or uninformative.

(1) is just the truism that something is either intrinsically valuable or instrumentally valuable. It cannot be both. Of course, this isn't to say something which is intrinsically valuable cannot be useful. It could be used to achieve some end but that isn't *why* it's valuable. The two horns require further explanation.

5.3 Explanation of Horn #1

(2) is true because in this dialectical context to say that community is intrinsically valuable is to say it is literally equivalent to personhood or at least largely constitutive of virtue. They are one and the same end. Since it is logically impossible to have personhood without personhood, it is likewise logically impossible to have community without personhood. There is no other way for personhood to be achieved. I'll comment on (3) in the next section as it is relevant to the second horn, but needless to say the value of community is not instrumental on Horn #1. So, it follows that (4). The problems that Molefe associated with the intrinsic account apply here. These were the unpalatable trade-offs between individuals and community. Notice too, that if the first interpretation of Molefe in 5.1 is correct then he is committed to this horn of the dilemma.

5.4 Explanation of Horn #2

(5) is true because in this dialectical context to say that community is instrumentally valuable is to imply that it is *not* identical with personhood. It is the tool which is used to achieve personhood. (6) is more controversial and hence requires more explanation. It says that if (4), then community may turn out not to be such a great good. Why is this the case? Well, it implies necessarily that there are other ways one could achieve personhood. Now, the natural response here is to say that even if community isn't the only way in which an individual could achieve personhood, it is the best way. But here's the rub: the person employing this strategy has to tell us why community is the best way to achieve personhood *without simultaneously implying that it is the only way*.

I suspect that as reasons in favour of community are elucidated it will turn out to be implied that it really is the only way to achieve personhood. If this is right, then such a strategy can't be pursued (at least not in addressing Horn #2). But then we can rightly ask: why place such an emphasis on personhood in the first place? This leads to (7) which says that Molefe's view is either false or uninformative. It is false if it turns out that to defend the place of community on his account, he really needs it to be the case the community is necessary for personhood and hence is intrinsically valuable. If community turns out to be intrinsically valuable, then Molefe's account is false. Or, it is uninformative if it really is only instrumentally valuable because then it's unclear why Molefe (and all those in the African philosophical tradition who would follow him) place such a great

emphasis on community in the first place. Since neither (4) of Horn #1 nor (7) of Horn #2 are palatable options for Molefe, a serious objection has been raised to his preferred account of personhood.

5.5 A Possible Third Horn

There's an additional worry for Molefe that could perhaps be used to generate a third horn and hence a trilemma for his view. I'll only briefly mention it here. If community is not intrinsically valuable, then it is not constituted by communal relations. Rather, it's caused by such relations. But then, what is the nature of personhood here? What is *it* that is getting caused by such relations in the first place? It's difficult to see how Molefe can give an account of personhood where community isn't necessary for it. If he's able to give a description of personhood entirely apart from community then even the instrumental value of community can be called into question. While my focus here is on the role and value of community this is a related area that could cause problems for Molefe's account.[13]

6. Potential Replies and Ways Forward

In this section I examine some potential replies and where possible I point to ways forward where Molefe might modify and defend his account.

6.1 Dealing with the Trade-Offs in Horn #1

The main reason why Molefe doesn't want to say that personhood is intrinsically valuable is that he claims that such a view leads to unacceptable trade-offs. One way forward is for Molefe to circle back to this view and instead of rejecting it, to explore ways of dealing with such trade-offs.[14] However, given what Molefe says it is perhaps doubtful that he would want to pursue this approach.

6. 2 Logical Impossibility and Instrumental Value in Horn #2

A different response targets (2) and (3) in Horn #1. Molefe might try to defend the idea that even though it is logically impossible to achieve personhood without community, it doesn't follow from this that community is intrinsically valuable. It could be logically impossible to achieve personhood without community, but community could still only be instrumentally valuable. This response perhaps best explains the apparent tension in the quotes mentioned in 5.1. Ultimately, however, this response won't do. For notice that it implies that there are *no possible worlds* where an agent could achieve personhood apart from community. If this is true, then this is evidence for (3) because it shows the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value collapse together. Why? Because even if Molefe could technically maintain that community is

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[13] Thanks to [Removed] for bringing this worry to my attention.
[14] No doubt the communitarian nature of African ethics has long faced similar objections and as such there are resources in the tradition to help here.

instrumentally if it is logically necessary for personhood then the unacceptable trade-offs he worries about come back into play. An individual is forced to give primacy to community, in the way Molefe worries about, if it is literally the only context in which she can achieve personhood.

6.3 Community as Best

Another potential reply available to Molefe says that it is logically possible to achieve personhood outside of community, but in our particular world it happens to be the very best way of achieving it. This is another way of dealing with the apparent tension in the quotes from Section 5.1. This reply entails that it is only a contingent fact that community helps achieve personhood. But notice that this amounts to an incredibly strong empirical claim about that nature of our world. Why think that we are in a very good epistemic position to know its truth? Here Molefe might point to the other-regarding virtues that one needs to foster in order to become a person to show why this is the case. The claim is that one is best able to foster them in the context of community. Yet observe that Molefe here cannot say that they are the *only* way since that is not the claim on this interpretation of his account (see above). Furthermore, I think that if Molefe were to begin building his case for why such other-regarding virtues are best developed within the context of community it would quickly become apparent that the claim really is really that it is the *only* way. But then my response in 6.2 or the Dilemma itself kicks back into play.

Moreover, to argue for this weaker claim means comparing the instrumental value of community to various other ways of achieving personhood. For instance, in many ways solitary meditation in the Buddhist tradition could be thought to foster other-regarding virtues. On this view pain and suffering are the result of striving. The goal of meditation is let go of such striving and in this way lose one's self (in some sense). This type of selflessness certainly fosters quite well at lest some of the other-regarding virtues that Molefe has in mind. There are other examples. Suppose that one's consciousness could be uploaded to a CPU. Free from all physical bodily needs, it might be much easier for one to develop other-regarding virtues in an online world. This could be accomplished even if there no other human consciousnesses in the online world in question. An individual could be acquiring other-regarding virtues by interacting with artificial intelligences. Thus, one could develop other-regarding virtues and hence personhood apart from community with other people. Of course, the easiest way to avoid these types of worries is for Molefe to simply maintain that community with other people is the only means by which personhood can be achieved. But as stated, this leads right back to 6.2 or the Dilemma itself.

7. Conclusion

Much more remains to said about the function of community in relation to personhood. I am inclined to think that the most promising way forward for Molefe is to shift his view and say that community is intrinsically valuable. If such a change were made the key would then be to show how such a view can avoid the unacceptable trade-offs between individuals and community that concern Molefe. While this option is unlikely to be palatable to Molefe, another possibility is to focus less on a character-based ethic and more on an ethic of right action. Thaddeus Metz champions the view that an individual has value inasmuch as they have the *capacity* to be the

subject and/or object of friendliness (i.e. of solidarity and identity). As such, actions are right inasmuch as they are friendliness (i.e. solidarity and identity) (Metz forthcoming). Notice that this account may well lessen worries about the way in which community is needed to achieve personhood since value is located in the capacities of persons. In any case, accounts of African-based ethics that focus on right action deserve more consideration in the future.[15]

Finally, while I do think his view faces an unpalatable dilemma none of this should be taken as a decisive refutation of Molefe's view. Rather, this is an invitation for him to respond to the Dilemma by providing us with more details about how he understands personhood and its relationship to community. Molefe is part of a young generation of African philosophers who are writing in an analytic style which is thus accessible to a wider, more global audience. This bodes well for those of us who would like to see African philosophy brought to the wider world. I look forward to seeing what Molefe has to say about the Dilemma, in addition to his future work on personhood and community more generally.

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[15] In correspondence [Removed] rightly observes that there are accounts that combine action-centered approaches with agent-centered approaches. For instance, on Metz's account its plausible to think that friendliness is a way to develop personhood. But this is also consistent with friendliness as a theory of right action.

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