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Motsamai Molefe, *African Personhood and Applied Ethics.* South Africa: African Humanities Program (NISC), 2020. 138pp. ISBN: 978-1-920033-70-5.

Reviewed by: Joseph Balatedi Radinkudikae Gaie, Associate Professor, University of Botswana, Botswana.

The Text's Title

The title "African Personhood and Applied Ethics" is both appropriate and inappropriate too; as regards its inappropriateness, it could mislead the reader if he/she is reading its contents from traditional western philosophical perspectives. The word "personhood", for example, might give the impression that the book deals with what can be referred to as "the self" (Chaffee 93ff) or personal identity. "The self" deals with the metaphysical question of what makes an individual the entity that it is. Even though the book deals with this to some extent, its main focus is ethical; and this will be made clearer later. The second issue is the use of "African personhood" instead of "Ubuntu," which in the end is what the author is, in fact, talking about. The reason not to use 'Ubuntu' in the title is not clear since he says "I take the ideas of ubuntu and personhood to be continuous, if not synonymous" (Molefe 9).

The title is, however, otherwise appropriate in that it shows what the book is dealing with. Applied ethics and discussions of women, animals and development with reference to Ubuntu or African traditional thought are very appropriate. Most importantly, he buttresses the point that Ubuntu is a moral theory. This gives moral philosophers an opportunity to examine the theory to determine its place at the universal/international table of academic exchange. The book constitutes a clear contribution to the literature in African Philosophy; and this especially so since the author hails from the southern part of the continent where this concept has been widely understood.

Moral Philosophy

Ubuntu is not just a moral philosophy in the sense of emphasizing community at the expense of individual rights and responsibilities as suggested by some scholars. Molefe rather argues that "it is equally important to recognise that any construal of ubuntu that does not take it to be a self-realisation view of morality will not necessarily be equivalent to the idea of personhood prevalent in African philosophy" (Molefe 10).

The book begins with an excellent introduction by way of undertaking a review of the relevant literature. What I consider to be valuable is the clear distinction that he makes between ontological and normative personhood. This is important because uncritical consideration of Ubuntu might assume that making a moral assessment of a person (that for example, personhood is 'acquired' over time) is the same as stating the nature of a person (that they are communal, interdependent, and so on). One of the most important contributions of the book, in my view, is Molefe's statement that his book "suggests one way to speak to Wiredu's (2009, 15) observation that the idea of personhood has a 'legion of implications' that are yet to be philosophically unfolded" (Molefe 9). This is consistent with the idea that Ubuntu or botho has metaphysical as well as epistemological elements (Gaie).

Contribution

Molefe rightly criticises the view that personhood is inegalitarian and marginalizes women on account of the paternalistic nature of African traditional society. In their paper entitled "who is *umuntu* in *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*? Interrogating moral issues facing Ndau women in polygyny," Beatrice Dedaa Okyere-Manu and Elias Konyana (2018) claim that those who argue that the African concept of Ubuntu is gender neutral are mistaken (Okyere-Manu and Konyana 2018). Molefe is answering such views.

Molefe argues that personhood, as a moral theory, is an agent-centred theory of value and virtue. True humanity has to be actualized through the pursuit of virtue. Firstly, an entity has metaphysical status that is foundational to the attainment of virtue through its activities. What he means is that there is a metaphysical entity (human being) that develops into a person. The statement "a person is a person because of others" has two parts; the first is metaphysical and the second normative (moral/ethical). It is the individual that perfects, develops, self-actualizes, loves, communes etc in order to become a person; "the idea of personhood makes some facet of the individual the entire focus of morality. The moral process focuses on the character of the agent and the goal is the perfection of that character" (Molefe 24-25).

He thinks that social relationships "play an instrumental role" (Molefe 26) rather than a causal or constitutive one. This is not entirely accurate in my view because in Setswana "*motho ke motho ka batho*" means 'a person is a person because of (causal), through (instrumental) and with (conjugal) other people.' When I make a person my wife then the woman makes me her husband (causal); and we persist in this act as long as we both – as husband and wife - become and make each other (conjugal) husband and wife.

On the morality of actions, he gives an example:

> The act of rape is wrong precisely because it dehumanises insofar as it undermines the capacity for personal perfection of the victim of rape, as much as it also harms the perpetrator.
> […]The act of rape is a moral disabler insofar as it harms [dehumanises] the woman's capacity for personal development (Molefe 28).

The above is valid as a western-type ethical explanation, but it does not sufficiently explain Ubuntu ethics—mutual causality that I suggested above. Secondly, it is not clearly the case that rape is "a moral disabler and it harms [dehumanises] the woman's capacity to pursue her moral perfection." It is rather the perpetrator who is harmed since he becomes something less than a person—*sethubetsi* (raping beast) rather than a *motho* (person). He is the one failing in the pursuit of virtue. Secondly, the concept of virtue includes forgiveness. Somebody attacked is presented with the opportunity to be forgiving. They cannot do so unless they are attacked. The attacker becomes the "cause" of their ability to forgive. It is therefore difficult to see how this could be dehumanizing.

Molefe also seems to think that an individual's interest is contrasted with that of the community whereby there has to be a choice between them so that either one pursues their own interest over that of the community or vice versa. The correct position is that my individual interest is intertwined with that of the community—I cannot harm the community by pursuing my interest; likewise, the community cannot harm me by pursuing its interest (Eze 2008, 108). Rape is wrong because the rapist is causing a cancer-like existence in society—something wrong for both the rapist and the society. If he is a cancer, the society is cancerous. If the society is cancerous, he is affected as part of the society; he cannot claim to be aside from the society. In other words, a rapist misrepresents society in relation to the person he is raping. It as if society is raping the person. Ubuntu "is knowing that one belongs to a greater whole which diminishes one when others are humiliated or diminished, tortured or oppressed" (Jimoh 2018, 44).

The concept of dignity needs definition and justification. He avoids "invoking local words for dignity because they tend to imply a religious metaphysics; and I have stipulated a secular meta-ethical approach" (Molefe 37). I think this is problematic because if indeed African traditional thought systems are religious, or, put differently, if the profane/sacred distinction is not African, or traditional Africans do not differentiate between the sacred and the profane (Gumo, Gisege and Raballah 525), then how can one talk about African traditional philosophy and reject religious connotations? I am still to find proof that religious worldviews are false. Secularism is a western concept, and Molefe risks being accused of parading western ideas disguised as Ubuntu philosophy.

In seeking a central virtue constitutive of personhood he stumbles upon "*zwa*" and "*tlwa*," which he suggests provides the foundation for sympathy because it means one "feels" with the others. In Setswana, the word is "*utlwa*" translates to "hear," "feel" and "taste," or in other contexts "test" and "listen to." So, to translate dignity as "our capacity for sympathy" (Molefe 52) is controversial. He has not sufficiently justified why he wants to use the term in this instance. It is not self-evident that sympathy, even if it is translatable into the local languages, is the kernel of personhood.

He is correct in saying that "the idea of personhood, correctly construed, has resources that can offer a robust socially egalitarian interpretation, where women and men are treated as social equals on the basis of a gender-neutral ontological feature" (Molefe 54). This is consistent with other African philosophers (Letseka 2013, 340). The main problem is his definition of dignity.

He then attempts to use dignity in defence of animal rights. Since morality is sympathy, the "hearing with" (sympathy) should be extended to animals. The agent ought to sympathize with anything that has the capacity to suffer. Hearing does not discriminate but people try to. He then accords partial moral status to animals. He acknowledges that they do have limited sympathy-for their offspring and others. His view implies that if animals were to be killed painlessly it would always be fine since there is nothing to feel with them. Inescapably, it is not self-evident that sympathy ought to be the measure of personhood. "The virtue of such a view is that it does assign animals some intrinsic value, and this allows us to speak about animal rights" (Molefe). This is not accurate. Animals do not have value in themselves except as objects of sympathy. He would do better if he adopted the sentience argument.

Of course, the argument still leaves out reasons for preserving plants and non-sentient beings. I am supposing there is something morally wrong with destroying these. The view still does not show why a severely mentally disabled human being should have priority over a perfectly healthy dolphin or smart dog. Molefe's view is not consistent with the traditional Africans (even other peoples) who have respect for human remains—people will go out of their way to bury a human skull at great expense supposing a moral obligation to do so. I do not see how his view of dignity can explain this.

Of course, Molefe's attempt to make a case for treating animals morally is important and praiseworthy. Now that he has made an attempt, others will bring out the correct position. According to Setswana, *mmua lebe o bua la gagwe gore mona lentle a le tswe* [literally: 'the one who speaks a bad one (word) speaks his own so that one who has the beautiful one (word) should bring it out']. This means people should be allowed to express their bad (wrong, inaccurate, nonsensical) views so that those who are sensible can talk sense in response.

The treatment of development is premised on morality. Development is a moral requirement. The improvement of human beings is central: "development is value-and-human-centred, and it should not be reduced to technological and infrastructural advancements" (Molefe 94). His development ethics is anchored on the good life—how the individual seeks to pursue self-fulfilment/realisation (virtue). The second pillar is the just society in which the individual can pursue virtue. The third is the means through which this is done. From this, he

wants to proceed to the concept of dignity, which I considered to be controversial. Moral uprightness means the ability to pursue virtue. Injustice is when society does not allow its members the opportunity to pursue virtue.

With regards to the environment, he realises that sympathy and dignity cannot be used to protect the environment. He, therefore, shifts to the concept of enlightened anthropocentrism. The treatment of this subject is too swift for my appreciation. The reason is because he has denied himself the opportunity to glean the explanations for being environmentally friendly and ethical from traditional language as well as the religious belief systems. In my view, development ethics is an imperative for no other reason but the divine nature of human beings. It is uncontroversial to hold that the religious perspectives of people gives them the world view—its nature, the place of human beings in it, and how they relate to nature.

Molefe has started with a strong view regarding human dignity in which he can account for egalitarianism and inclusion of women. He proceeded to the weakened version in order to accommodate animals. Finding that his instrument cannot be weakened any further, he abandons the principle (dignity) and smuggles in anthropocentricism in a subtle form whereby the environment does not have value on its own but only because it is useful for human flourishing.

Many creation stories may give a hint as to how the environment has to be viewed from a traditional African perspective. Virtue in this context is not just harmonious living with human beings but also with animals and the environment. Molefe might not agree with African ancients, but they are saying something profound when they teach the intricate relationship between human beings and the environment—murder, the killing of a human being by another, is connected to the health of the environment since, for example, rain fails to come and the earth "refuses" to produce food. Totemism, not in the ancient anthropologists' perspective but understood from some traditional African view, is an acknowledgement that humanity is a part of the environment. Somebody called Ndlovu (elephant) has some mystical relationship with the animal. It does not have to be a religious connection, but one needs to research the kind of relationship that is entailed by the totem and naming.

Plant material has a relationship with people in a way that determines their attitude and conduct towards them. For example, not only do plants serve as useful tools for human use, they also are part of the environment within which human beings thrive and communicate with each other. One may not believe in traditional medicine and divination, but some research shows that divining bones can yield epistemologically sound data (J. Gaie). On personhood and the ethics of means, Molefe is on point. He ably articulates the theory in a way that many African scholars and traditionalists will readily identify themselves with it. On the whole, Molefe's publication is a welcome addition to the African academy's library. He published a text that should be viewed as a good basis upon which other scholars can build.

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