

The (Mal) Function of “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s Normative Account of Person

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Abstract: The prominent African philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti is of the view that the African conception of personhood is decidedly communitarian. He argues, however, that although there are various ways of conceiving the communitarian concept of personhood, some of these ways are erroneous. He claims that his conception of personhood, which privileges epistemological growth, is the most accurate account of personhood in African thinking. In his view ontological progression is marked by a successful induction into society at various stages of the individual’s life. The main aim of this paper is to argue against Menkiti’s articulation of the concept of personhood through epistemological growth particularly through his use of the word “it” to denote different stages of epistemic stations. The paper seeks to show that his use of the word “it” is not helpful in his argument and that a conception of personhood that articulates itself in terms of epistemological advancement as espoused by Menkiti complicates the communitarian view of personhood.

Introduction

One of the most widely debated ideas in African thinking is that of the concept of person. Various thinkers have adopted irreconcilable differences in articulating this concept. This has led to the rise of different schools of thought that defend their particular view at the exclusion of others. Each school of thought claims to represent the authentic African view of person. However, within each school of thought there is no absolute agreement on what constitutes person. The Malawian philosopher Didier Kaphagawani (1998) has identified what he claims to be three distinct theses which seek to articulate the African view of persons. The three theses he has in mind are stated as follows: firstly there is the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels’ “force” thesis. Tempels extensively studied the people of present day Democratic Republic of Congo and came to the conclusion that their metaphysics and worldview was to be found in their notion of force. Kaphagawani takes this idea of force to also apply to the identity of persons; hence he identifies Tempels’ views on person as force thesis. Secondly, Kaphagawani identifies what he calls the “communalist” thesis. He admits that this thesis has its origins in Tempels’ work, but he chooses to identify it with the Kenyan thinker John Mbiti. The third thesis is one propounded by the Rwandese thinker Alexis Kagame. Kaphagawani identifies Kagame’s thesis as a “shadow” thesis. If, for argument’s sake, we were to accept that Kaphagawani’s characterisation is correct then it would be clear that African thinkers talk about the same concept in different ways. The difference that we have here is a conceptual difference. An advocate of the communalist thesis will not use the same categories of definition and will not use the same language as a proponent of the shadow thesis. This state of affairs will lead

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us either inquiring into whether one of these three theses is much closer to the truth than the other two, or whether they are all true, or whether none of them is true. Interesting as that inquiry promises to be, I will not undertake it here as it is not my present aim. My present aim is to inquire into a particular aspect that is raised by one of the proponents of the communitarian view. Ifeanyi Menkiti has become one of the most strident champions of the communalist version of personhood. His claim to fame is his bold statement that in African thinking, personhood is the sort of thing that one can be better at, worse at, or fail at. Further, he argues that personhood is not a static thing that is granted at birth but something that is attained as one gets along in society. In particular, one becomes more of a person through moral growth, which he sees as synonymous with ontological progression. Menkiti's account has attracted both support and criticism from some of the foremost thinkers on the continent. For example, Kwasi Wiredu (1996) agrees with Menkiti's characterisation while Kwame Gyekye (1997) rejects its radical statement.

My main aim in this paper is to argue against Menkiti's use of the word "it" as a moral concept to support his ontological claims about the nature of personhood. I argue that such usage of the word misrepresents the communitarian view of persons. I think it is important to address Menkiti's position because it has now come to represent what Gyekye calls "radical/extreme/unrestricted" communitarianism. Radical communitarianism, as defended by Menkiti, claims that it is the sole authentic view of African thinking on personhood; hence this project is conceived as a critique of one of the most important grounds for claiming that authenticity.

The Communitarian View

The essential position of the communitarian view is that personhood is the sort of thing that is realized in the quality of relationships that one has with fellow community members and the good communal standing that one commands. Further, personhood is not seen as an abstract or theoretical concept but as an activity that is socially sanctioned. Thus Dzobo argues: "The person who has achieved a creative personality and productive life and is able to maintain a productive relationship with others is said to 'have become a person.'"¹ Placide Tempels argues that the "living 'muntu' is in a relation of being to being with God, with his clan brethren, with his family and with his descendants. He is in a similar ontological relationship with his patrimony, his land, with all that it contains or produces, with all that grows or lives on it."² Effectively, these relationships are taken as an ontological constitution of personhood. In articulating the difference between an African and a Western conception of personhood, Menkiti notes that most Western views "abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather man is defined by the environing community."³ Menkiti thinks that this makes the African conception of personhood dynamic compared to the more static Western notion. Godwin Sogolo argues that while it might be intellectually satisfying to formulate a theory or theories about human nature, a more significant account is one that manifests a communal account of human characteristics: "The point of significance here does not lie in some abstract understanding of what man is capable of becoming but on the actualisation of his potentials and capabilities. In discussing the African conception of man and society, the main objective is to provide a picture of man

and society held by African communities and to establish how human conduct, institutions and thought patterns are governed by this conception.”⁴ In the same vein, Richard C. Onwuanibe also thinks that the traditional African view of a person is more practical than theoretical. Hence he claims that this view “is based on the conviction that the metaphysical sphere is not abstractly divorced from concrete experience; for the physical and metaphysical are aspects of reality, and the transition from one to the other is natural.”⁵

The crucial point being made here is that this school of thought sees personhood in African thinking as something that ought to be understood in real terms as opposed to abstractions. Personhood is a communal concept that is not automatically obtained at birth or by virtue of possessing certain features. This leads Menkiti to argue that in as “far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse.”⁶ Menkiti sees personhood as something that is earned in the dynamic relationship between the individual and the community. John Mbiti characterises such a relationship in terms of the community being constitutive of the individual and sharing in her fate. “Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.’ This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.”⁷ Thus the articulation of the concept of person is couched in communal terms and has reference to one’s experiences as a participant in communal affairs/relations. Kwame Anthony Appiah thinks that “a theory of the person is hard to isolate from the general views of a people about the world—social, natural and supernatural—in which they live.”⁸ Hence the African view of person seeks to give articulation to a worldview that takes communal experiences seriously.

Various communitarian thinkers have sought to articulate the concept of person from this view. However, there are different articulations and ways of arriving at the communitarian view of persons. Kwame Gyekye has proposed one such difference. He is of the view that there is a difference between what he terms radical communitarianism and moderate communitarianism. He argues that his version represents moderate communitarianism while Menkiti’s version represents radical communitarianism. To his mind, radical communitarianism’s chief failure is that it gives an erroneous account of the relationship between the individual and the community. It also fails to give adequate recognition to the individual’s creativeness and inventiveness, and it also fails to give individuals due regard for their human rights.⁹ My point here is to show that although there is widespread agreement to the fact that the concept of person in African thinking is communitarian; there is significant difference in the articulation of what that communitarian conception might be and the consequences attendant to such a concept.

Menkiti’s Communitarianism

Menkiti’s version of communitarianism is informed by Tempels and Mbiti’s views. For Menkiti, moral progression is the key element to understanding personhood. This comes as an individual progresses in society in terms of moral stature and discharge of duties.. Menkiti endorses Tempels’ view that there is a difference between a person of middling importance and a person with a great deal of force who has a role to play in society. For Menkiti the notion of muntu/person “includes an idea of excellence, of plenitude of force at maturation.”¹⁰ Relying on Tempels, he argues that individuals who lack these key

characteristics are described as “‘ke muntu po’ which translates as ‘this is not a man.’”¹¹ Menkiti argues that it is not enough to understand the individual as a biological organism with psychological traits. On the contrary in order to become a person an individual has to go “through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man.”¹² During these rituals of incorporation the community prescribes the norms by which the individual should live. The more one fulfils all these rituals and the more one abides by communal dictates, the more one becomes a person. Thus Menkiti argues:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.¹³

Menkiti claims that the notion of acquisition of personhood is supported by the English language, which allows a child to be referred to as “it” while that word is never used on adults. His argument is that “it” can be justifiably used in reference to children because they have no moral status whereas it cannot apply to adults because they have attained a certain moral standing. For him moral worth plays a crucial role in the attainment of the status of personhood. An individual who does not exhibit a certain socially sanctioned moral status is taken as having failed at personhood. This leads him to seek clarification between the usage of the terms “individual” and “individual person.”

Menkiti argues that the term “individual” merely refers to the different forms of agency in the world. Individual person on the other hand represents a movement from the raw appetite level to one that is marked by the dignity of the person. In order to get to the level that characterizes the dignity of the person, he says, something with more weight might be needed.¹⁴ That something with more weight is the ontological progression that transforms an individual from a mere biological organism to full personhood. Hence he states: “I think it would be best, regarding the African story, to conceive of the movement of the individual human child into personhood, and beyond, as essentially a journey from an *it* to an *it*.”¹⁵ This ontological progression takes place in time. Taking a cue from Mbiti, Menkiti argues that in traditional African societies time was essentially a movement from the present to the past.¹⁶ This meant that the more of a past one had, the more of a person one also was.

What is clear on this account is that excellencies are gathered as one grows old, and it takes time for these excellencies to be accumulated by any given individual. Furthermore, these excellencies are located in the life history of the individual; hence this reference to time in traditional African societies as backward looking. But most importantly, Menkiti claims that the gathering of qualities over time has ontological significance. He argues that there is an ontological difference between the young and the old. This difference is not merely a qualitative difference but one of identity: “The issue here is not gradation pure and simple, but gradation based on the emergence of special new qualities seen as constitutive of a level of being not only qualitatively superior to, but also ontologically different from the entity with which one first began.”¹⁷ For Menkiti, the fundamental issue is the emergence of moral or quasi-moral qualities that account for the shift in classification. These moral qualities

should be considered useful to the enrichment of the human community and must involve an internalisation of a rejection of those attitudes that are considered to be harmful to the entire community.

He cites an example whereby in society people find it difficult to talk about an eighteen year old moral giant but would have no trouble talking about an 18 year old mathematical giant. The reason behind this is that the 18 year old lacks the lived experience to be a moral giant. This means that in the journey of becoming a person the community plays a vital role as a prescriber of norms that actually steps in to transform a biological entity to personhood: “For married to the notion of person is the notion of moral arrival, a notion involving yardsticks and gradations, or, more simply involving an expectation that certain ways of being or behaving in the world may be so off the mark as to raise important questions regarding the person-status of their doers.”¹⁸ Thus this conception of personhood clearly involves a march from just being a biological human entity into a full person through internalising the approved moral injunctions. In order for an individual to count as a person one ought to demonstrate moral rectitude, and this is only attained with time as one lives and participates in the community through the discharge of her moral obligations.

The Role of “it” in the Transformation to Personhood

As mentioned above, Menkiti thinks that the transformation from mere biological and human status into personhood is clearly supported by the usage of “it” in the English language. While it is acceptable to refer to a child as an “it,” because of its lack of moral status, the same cannot be said of an adult who has attained a certain moral status. But Menkiti appears to think that this is more than a matter of language usage as it involves some significant ontological difference. Hence he suggests that the movement from childhood into full personhood and beyond is best regarded as a journey from an “it” to an “it.” “The so-called ‘ontological progression’ begins at birth with the child basically considered an “it” – essentially an individual without individuality, without personality, and without a name.”¹⁹ From there the child is made to go through rituals such as naming ceremonies which mark the beginning of incorporation into personhood via the community. These are later followed by ceremonies ushering the child into puberty and adulthood. In adulthood, the individual goes through ceremonies such as marriage and bearing of children. All these ceremonies are followed by the experience of advance in age, elderhood, and then, finally, ancestorhood.

Menkiti argues that personhood does not dissipate with death. On the contrary ancestors are taken as persons since they do not suffer going out of existence at the point of their physical death. “Only when the stage of the nameless dead is joined does the person once again become an “it,” going out of the world the same way the journey first began. Thus the movement is a movement from an *it* to an *it*.”²⁰

Menkiti further argues that this movement from an “it” to an “it” is a depersonalised reference that marks both the very beginning of existence and its very end. Again, he emphasises the depersonalised reference that is used to refer to the young child but can never be used to refer to an adult or teenager. For him, such language usage carries ontological significance. He seeks to clarify his claim by stating that: “Now regarding the *it* status of the nameless dead at the very end of the described journey, I believe that the *it* designation also carries the ease of natural use, and is the way it should be. The one contrast worth noting is that in the case of the nameless dead, there is not even the flexibility for the

use of a named or pronominal reference, as with the case of a young child. The nameless dead remain *its* and cannot be designated as something else."²¹ He claims that there is no ontological progression beyond the world of the spirits. In conclusion he notes that: "The observation can therefore be correctly made that a metaphysically significant symmetry exists between the opening phase of an individual's quest for personhood and the terminal phase of quest. Both are marked by an absence of incorporation – an absence underscored by the related absence of re-enacted names."²²

Problem of "it" as a Normative Reference

The first problem with Menkiti's argument is his attempt to ground the normative difference between babies and adults, in African thinking, through his alleged evidence of the usage of the English word "it" as an indicator of the ontological difference between babies and adults. The most curious thing about this supposed normative significance of "it" in African thinking is that the normative significance fails to find expression in any African language including Menkiti's own Igbo. Interestingly he is able to find an Igbo proverb that seeks to show that there is an ontological difference between the young and the old. The normative function of "it" would have carried more weight had Menkiti shown that there is such a word in his language which does the normative work for showing the ontological difference between the young and the old. His attempt at using the word "it" from the English language in the way he does as evidence for his conclusion betrays either a selective use of the word or a serious misunderstanding of how the word operates in the English language.

In the English language the word "it" does not carry any moral or qualitative indication whenever it is used as a referential word. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary identifies the word "it" as a pronoun. It defines a pronoun as "any of a small set of words that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases whose referents are named or understood in the context."²³ The dictionary also gives five possible ways of using the word "it." In cases where it is used to refer to people the word is used to make references that are not normative but comparable to words such as "he," "she," or "they." In the English language the word "it" does not denote depersonalised existence as Menkiti argues. Neither does it connote as a matter of necessity, when used in reference to any instance of human existence, a certain moral or ontological standing. It is a word that can be used to refer to babies but its use in reference to babies does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that babies are not persons, and neither is its use evidence of that. In the case that the word "it" is used as a reference to a baby it is used as a substitute for the baby's name (noun). A baby's name, at least in the English language, in itself does not lend itself to evaluations of whether it carries any moral weight or not. It is quite unusual to try and impute to the substitute "it" moral significance where the original name commanded no such judgement.

The proper meaning of the word can be obtained by a full understanding of the different contexts in which it can be used. All the possible contexts of its usage do not offer any support to Menkiti's argument. William P. Alston states the matter as follows: "Consider prepositions like 'into,' 'at,' and 'by.' There is no doubt that each has a meaning, in most cases a number of meanings. For example, one of the meanings of 'at' is *in the direction of*; however 'at' can hardly be said to refer, denote, or connote."²⁴ The same applies to the word "it" when particularly used in the sense suggested by Menkiti. That the connotation suggested by Menkiti does not make sense becomes manifest when one considers how the word operates in the language when used to refer to babies. Menkiti

claims that it makes sense for someone to talk like this; "We rushed the baby to hospital. It was sick." Menkiti thinks that this not only makes grammatical sense, but the grammar also shows that there is some ontological significance in that expression. However, there is one simple thing that seems to have completely escaped Menkiti. What has escaped his attention is that grammatical rules do not necessarily equate with ontological claims. They are just rules of how certain words may be used in certain instances in order to abide with rules of grammar and make sense to the listener. The reason why "it" in the above sentence makes sense is to be found in the fact that "it" is placed in a supporting statement that does not stand alone. It furnishes further information on the first sentence. "It was sick" as a statement that stands on its own does not make much sense and definitely does not show any ontological significance. "It," therefore, has to be used in certain contexts in certain ways for it to make sense. Menkiti does not seem to be aware of that or at the very least ignores that. "It" on its own refers to nothing unless it has been preceded by an object that has a specific noun and "it" is introduced after the explicit naming of that object as a substituting reference. The next point to note is that the word "it" can be used in reference to any noun. It makes sense to utter the phrase "It is Menkiti," but this ought to be understood as a particular usage of the word "it" probably in response to the question "Who is it?" As a matter of essence the word "it" is not restricted only to refer to babies. It can be used to refer to grown men and women who have attained the ontological status that Menkiti denies babies.

I think it is important to note that Menkiti uses the word "it" to refer to the sick baby and the events that unfolded around the sick baby. "It" in this sense cannot be taken as synonymous with the experiences or status of the baby. It merely replaces the name of the baby as one of the few instances of substitution. One can say any one of the following two sentences without either compromising the ontological status of the baby or making grammatical nonsense: "We rushed the baby to hospital. She/he was sick"; "We rushed the baby to hospital. The baby was sick." In the same way "it" merely informs us of the particular person or object that is under discussion. This means that there has to be a discussion going on or at least there has to be certain things that have been said about a certain individual or object and the circumstances around that object or individual for "it" to make sense. "It" is not a word that can stand alone and make sense on its own. It has to be combined with a clearly stated noun and has to be used in reference to that noun or its circumstances for it to make sense. This sense is simple grammatical sense and has no further meaning besides mere grammatical substitution.

Secondly, Menkiti claims that "it" is used as an instance of pointing out a depersonalised existence. This depersonalised existence is mainly characterised by an absence of personhood. The word "it" applies to human subjects in two instances of their life. The first instance of depersonalised existence is when an individual is a baby or so young that she does not have any moral sense. The second stage is when one has joined the world of spirits, which is called collective immortality. For Menkiti members of these two groups can be referred to as "its" without cause for controversy. However, this position does not help matters much. Even if we were to accept that Menkiti's use of "it" carries any moral or ontological significance, still he would run into serious difficulties. The greatest problem facing Menkiti's account is that he does not distinguish between these two kinds of "its" - that is one at the beginning of the individual's life and one at the end of that individual's life. He just lumps them together as periods of depersonalised existence. However, on closer examination there is a huge difference between these "its" which have very unfavourable

implications for his use of “it” as a normative indicator. The baby whom Menkiti refers to as an “it” that lacks any moral standing, hence ontological status, has yet to live through all the requirements of attaining personhood. In other words we may refer to her as a potential person. However, a member of the spiritual world of collective immortality has gone through all the stages of personhood and has now attained a different status. Although both categories may be referred to as “its” they are in a radically different relationship to that word in as far as it is meant to carry any ontological weight. One who has moved away from an “it” into a full person and back to another “it” does not quite make a return to the “it” of babies. Babies and ancestors who belong to the world of collective immortality do not stand in the same relationship to the ontological weight of “it.” There is a qualitative difference between these two senses of “it,” and Menkiti’s account ought to acknowledge and clarify that difference and its significance to both instances of the depersonalised existence. I argue that these two instances of depersonalised existence do not have the same ontological significance and that the burden is on Menkiti to fully articulate the difference and the significance of that difference. If my point is valid then it cannot be the case that babies and ancestors can both be referred to as “its.”

Perhaps more troublesome is Menkiti’s own admission that physical death does not actually spell the end of life for the deceased individual. This point is supported by the concept of *seritilisisthunzi* which survives the physical death of the individual to become an ancestor provided the right rituals have been performed.²⁵ It means that the individual moves into another form or shape of existence, the spiritual realm. Mbiti (1970) says this movement is first characterised by the notion of the recently departed individual going to join what he characterises as the living dead and later the collective immortality or the nameless dead. The living dead are essentially still in the memories of the living. The living talk about the recently departed making reference to their personal names and they still remember them hence they are called the living dead. With the passage of time, however, according to Mbiti, these living dead join the realm of collective immortality. This essentially means that these departed are no longer referred to by name. On the contrary, they are remembered as spirits that partake in the completeness of African life. In Mbiti’s account it appears as if there is no radical difference between members of the living dead and those of collective immortality. The only difference is that those in collective immortality are no longer remembered by the living and referred to by name but as a collective.

Two philosophically significant issues arise here. Firstly, it appears as if there is no justification for calling those who belong to collective immortality as “its” who have a depersonalised existence merely because their names are not mentioned. It would be proper if they were to lose some or all of their ontological gains for them to become “its.” “It” is a reference that has been used by Menkiti to refer to a moral station that deprives anyone who is referred to as an “it” any moral status and consequently personhood. At the very least, Menkiti needs to marshal some evidence that shows that members of collective immortality have essentially gone through such a fundamental shift from being members of the living dead and that such a shift warrants that they be deprived of the person status and be reduced to “its” status. However, Menkiti cannot marshal such evidence for he is aware of the fact that the mere passage of time that lead future generations to forget the names of persons gone by is not sufficient to warrant the loss of any form of existence.

If Menkiti were to respond by arguing that the actual passage of time which leads to future generations forgetting about persons who previously constituted the living dead does in actual fact lead to the elevation of the collective immortality, he would be faced with yet

another difficulty. The difficulty is that going into the group of collective immortality is not in any way an elevation into a higher spiritual realm. This is because Menkiti is wont to referring to any form of depersonalised existence as an “it” and imputing to that reference non-existence of personhood. This particular reference to the departed as having no personhood status is a gross violation of the African understanding of the status of the departed. Menkiti denies the members of collective immortality any moral status yet African thinking would see such members as having a moral status as they have an interest in human affairs. The best that Menkiti can do is to suggest two senses of “it” or jettison his idea of depersonalised existence applying as “its” to collective immortality. Those who belong to collective immortality have a status that is radically different from that of children. “Its” cannot work in the same way to mean the same thing for children and those who belong to the collective immortality. Tempels’ hierarchy of forces stands in stark contrast to Menkiti’s explanation of the nature of the spirits that belong to the collective immortality. Tempels states that in the hierarchy of forces, God is the supreme force who created everything and gives power, force, and existence to all other creatures:

After him come the first fathers of men, founders of the different clans. These archipatriarchs were the first to whom God communicated his vital force, with the power of exercising their influence on all posterity. They constitute the most important chain binding men to God. They occupy so exalted a rank in Bantu thought that they are not regarded merely as ordinary dead. They are no longer named among the manes; and by the Baluba they are called *bavidye*, spiritualised beings, beings belonging to a higher hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine force.²⁶

Tempels’ account not only contrasts Menkiti’s account but also makes much more sense than Menkiti’s. Tempels identifies the place of the long departed in the hierarchy of forces. Their places range from being the founders of clans who participate in God’s divine mission to the recently departed who live in the memories of the living. The long departed who participate in God’s plan play two crucial roles according to Tempels. Firstly, they have the power to influence all posterity, and secondly, they are the vital link between the living and God. Tempels calls them the *bavidye* as opposed to Menkiti’s rather obscure depersonalised “its.” In the hierarchy of forces the *bavidye* are by far much more important and influential than children. Actually on Tempels’ account it does not seem to be the case that the *bavidye* lead any kind of depersonalised existence in the sense that Menkiti suggests. If the term depersonalised could ever be applied to these spirits it could only mean that their names cannot be recalled. But crucially these spirits have not gone out of existence. They have not lost their status of personhood through an act of final annihilation. On the contrary they are seen to have an active and powerful influence on the living. They have not gone out with a final silence falling at the end as Menkiti suggests. What has happened is far much more complex, for the spirits have assumed a new spiritual existence that is also a continuation of the success of personhood. If one fails at personhood one is not likely to succeed at becoming an ancestor. As we saw above, the *isithunzi/serithi* of persons who conducted themselves unworthily is allowed to die or slowly disappear whereas those who behaved worthily and have entered the world of collective immortality will never go out of that existence.

It does not make much sense for Menkiti to talk of “its” at the end of a person’s life who has become an ancestor. For such talk to succeed it would need to be backed by a coherent

account of how spirits assume their existence in the spiritual realm and how they go out of existence in that realm. We know that the biological human being comes into existence through birth and goes out of physical existence at death. However, as Menkiti attests, for the human person, physical death does not spell the end of life:

Here, the person that the child became, at some stage in the described journey, does not abruptly go out of existence at the stage of physical death. The sense appears to be that the person, once arrived, can only depart slowly, yielding incrementally his or her achieved status. Only when the stage of the nameless dead is joined does the person once again become an "it," going out of the world the same way the journey first began. Thus the movement is a movement from an it to an it. The moral magic of personhood happens in between, and, after the magic it is silence at the end-point that we call the stage of the nameless dead. There is no heaven or hell, no final judgement warranting an ascension into the ranks, above, of the saved; nor descent into the ranks, below, of the damned.²⁷

There are a number of significant problems in Menkiti's argument. Firstly, his argument that personhood is lost incrementally has no basis in African thinking. Menkiti suggests that at the end when a spirit joins the nameless dead one has ceased to exist. He is careful not to emphasise a different existence. Thus, we can take it on his account that the person has completely gone out of existence. However, Mbiti's interpretation of what happens to the soul is more nuanced. Mbiti argues that the living dead who enters the world of collective immortality only loses its humanness as it assumes its spiritual existence. "It has "lost" its personal name, as far as human beings are concerned, and with it goes also the human personality. It is now an "it" and no longer a "he" or "she"; it is now one of myriads of spirits who have lost their humanness. This, for all practical purposes, is the final destiny of the human soul. Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full his spiritiness; and there is no general evolution or devolution beyond that point."²⁸ Mbiti's interpretation shows that there is no incremental loss of personhood into non-personhood as Menkiti suggests. What actually happens is that there is a shift in status; from humanness to a spiritual realm. There is no legitimate ground for reading this as marking an absolute end of the individual. In fact, Mbiti confesses that this matter is at the very least vague. "Collective immortality is man's cul-de-sac in the hereafter. Whether this immortality is relative or absolute I have no clear means of judging, and on this matter African concepts seem to be vague."²⁹ Mbiti claims that some of these spirits attach themselves to objects while others cause fear when they are encountered by the living while the rest are just swallowed up in the collective immortality where they are forgotten after a number of generations. Essentially this does not represent an end to the life of the spirit. Mbiti uses the word "it" to merely show that the individual has lost some key human characteristics such as gender or physical presence. But since the concept of person aims for a radical exposition that goes beyond physical traits it would seem plausible that such an entity still retains its personhood in a significant form. "It" does not symbolise the final end, as Menkiti would like us to believe, it simply points to a non-human existence which is different from a complete loss of personhood.

Secondly, Menkiti's characterisation of personhood as some moral magic is incoherent. Something that is magical is something that is preternatural, enchanting, and beyond explanation. A magic trick is meant to amuse and baffle. When a magician contorts reality

we are baffled and seek an explanation for that which we consider not possible. Magicians do not reveal their secrets in order to keep their audience both amused and interested. The process of attaining personhood on the communitarian account involves no magic at all. It is a processual experience which takes a long time culminating in an individual becoming morally responsible and showing moral excellence or a sense of moral propriety. This is attained through a long journey involving observance of ceremonies and rites of incorporation as well as serious moral instruction that comes with each stage of growth and development towards being a full person. Menkiti’s presentation of personhood as moral magic that happens between two stages of depersonalised existence does not help his case. This is because on his account, the attainment of personhood involves a lot of serious effort on the individual’s side. Individual have to observe all the rites of incorporation and make a deliberate effort at ensuring that that their lives reflect a moral worth that is socially sanctioned. There is nothing magical about all these processes, as they are known and are publically available to all members of society. Those who fail to live by them do not do so as a result of failure to muster any magical instruction but do so as a result of a lack of moral will to do the right thing or as a result of pure evil on their part. The phrase “moral magic of personhood” in itself and as an event that happens between two depersonalised forms of existence is devoid of meaning.

Thirdly, Menkiti claims that at the end there is no ascension into heaven or descent into hell. While that may be the case in African thinking, Menkiti’s account suffers the handicap that it fails to account for the happenings in the realm of collective immortality. His suggestion that this stage marks complete annihilation of the individual’s soul is open to doubt as Mbiti openly states that the “soul of a man is destined to become an ordinary spirit.”³⁰ Thus Menkiti’s account can be taken to task for failing to have any articulation on destiny, which is taken to be important in communitarianism since it joins everyone to the community and gives meaning to members of the community.³¹ Without such a theory individuals will not be able to make sense of their lives in the present, or decipher the purpose of such a life and what is to come after that life. In other words, Menkiti’s version of “it” at the end of personalised existence is a truncated account. He needs to outline clearly what the final destiny of the soul is. Without that clear articulation his account is inadequate and compares poorly with Mbiti’s or Tempels’ accounts.

Ontology or Epistemology

Menkiti seeks to provide a most accurate normative account of the nature of personhood in African thinking. In his view, personhood is attained when in the interval of that movement from an “it” to an “it,” an individual goes through ontological progression over time. This ontological progression is marked by the acquisition and exhibition of moral qualities by an individual. This makes the individual ontologically different from what she was prior to the acquisition of these characteristics as well as ontologically different from those who have not acquired or do not exhibit these qualities as of yet. Clearly, Menkiti goes for an acquisitive and gradual account of personhood.

His account involves two crucial aspects. The first has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, which I will call epistemological growth. But this epistemological growth is of a special kind, which involves the moral aspect of both the individual and social life. Combined together we may call this whole process epistemological moral growth. The reason why I choose to frame this growth in these terms is simply because morals are things

that are learnt from society and that apply differently to individuals. People learn of different moral expectations that they are burdened with at different stages of their lives. That process of learning the moral code of society and any successful internalisation of such a code is epistemological growth. Essentially that moral growth is epistemological growth of another form. A process of internalization, remembering and bringing to effect such a moral code in one's daily conduct is evidence of the success of epistemological development.

Effectively what this means is that adults who have successfully internalised the moral code of their society and are held as upright for forsaking the kind of conduct that is considered deleterious to the harmony of society or inter-personal relations are epistemologically different from babies. That epistemological difference shows itself in the way that the adults are able to animate what they have learnt and know in the moral arena. On the contrary, babies and small children are incapable of making any morally significant choices because they lack any epistemological acquisition to direct their conduct. They are still in the process of learning how they ought to conduct themselves in the social arena and in their interpersonal relations.

It is this difference that Menkiti uses to establish the criterion for personhood. He claims that personhood is the sort of thing one can be better at, ineffective at, or fail at. Being better, ineffective, or a failure at personhood is directly dependent and determined by how one exhibits the epistemological acquisition of morals through conduct whenever a call is made to exhibit moral qualities. Moral worth is indicative of epistemological success. Menkiti takes this to be constitutive of the ontological status of persons in African thinking. Those who do not yet possess the required epistemological moral traits, such as babies, are considered as non-persons. While those who fail in their adulthood to acquire the epistemological tools to inform and guide their moral actions are considered to be worse, ineffective, or to have completely failed at personhood.

There are two problems with this account of personhood. Firstly, it appears as if there is no justification for this gradation to be seen as ontological progression that bears on the status of personhood. Menkiti's claim that gradation, which connotes moral arrival, is symbiotic with the ontological status of personhood is overstated. The moral difference between the young and old is nothing more than a difference in epistemological status in certain matters, in this case moral matters. The epistemological arrival at the moral codes of conduct that are socially sanctioned is indicative of the success of the internalisation of such codes. The difference between the elderly members of society who have undertaken such a journey and the young who are yet to embark on such a journey is not as radical as Menkiti depicts. It is not an ontological difference but a difference in time which accounts for the different epistemological stations that the young and the old find themselves respectively in. Epistemological difference, no matter how vast, cannot be taken to represent ontological differences. As Didier Kaphagawani rightly notes "it is indeed the case that elders tended to have an epistemological monopoly over the young. But to concede this point is not to assert an ontological distinction between the elders and the young; rather, it is merely to point out an epistemological difference; the young are not ontologically less human than the elders."³² What the elders have is simply superior knowledge compared to the young. This knowledge may be vital to the survival of the community or essential in fostering cordial relations that promote the general well-being of the community. However, such knowledge in itself does not constitute an ontological difference between the very young and the old. It only shows that elders have become competent and knowledgeable about things that the young are still to be competent and knowledgeable about in future. Although the elders are given

epistemological superiority this does not mean that they are entitled to any ontological supremacy. Kaphagawani underscores the significance of the epistemological when he argues that: “Rather, like in every orderly distribution of roles in a system of production, this privilege is given to individuals who show and sustain the ability to perform the roles apportioned to them by the social system.”³³ Thus the difference between the old and the young is a difference of the performance of roles that have been assigned to different individuals depending on what stage they are at in their social lives. Elderly people who are ineffective, worse, or fail at showing any knowledge of the moral code or other similar knowledge or fail to live up to the moral requirements of their respective societies are not failing at personhood. They are simply being incompetent or failures at retaining a certain type of knowledge that is expected of their age by virtue of their lengthy social exposure and training. That failure has nothing to do with their ontological status

The reason for this, which is the second problem for Menkiti, lies in the fact that when we talk about ontological constituents of any given entity or entities we tend to talk in terms of key characteristics that are fixed and do not lend themselves to vicissitudes of change. This is particularly crucial when dealing with the concept of person. Using moral epistemological gains as Menkiti advocates lends itself to serious difficulties that would render the notion of personhood not only incomprehensible but extremely indeterminate. His notion of moral arrival, which is supposed to spell out a finality of what counts as a person, seems not to command such finality. Menkiti takes this moral arrival as something that is unchangeable and fixed. He thinks that once the individual has come to attain the right kind of moral competence or aptitude one will remain in that state for the remainder of one’s life. However, the idea of moral arrival does not represent anything fixed and unchangeable once that moral destination has been reached. Firstly, it is not clear at all what actual point of moral development represents that arrival. Menkiti simply fuses age and some moral attainment as key requisites for that arrival. However, the moral status of each individual of age differs from one person to the next. To say that two individuals are people of moral stature is not the same as claiming that they have the same stature. It does not even say what stature is desirable and what circumstances are most desirable to attain it. These two people could probably have a different view on issues of morality and different motivations for staying moral and have definitely different degrees of moral worth. One of these individuals might have arrived at that moral station by pure chance and luck while the other may have arrived at that station through trials and tribulations. If that is the case which one of these is a better person—or a person at all? Is the person who rides on luck a person? What does she become if such an ephemeral thing as luck runs out in an instant? It is undesirable that personhood is determined by such a flux criterion as moral arrival. While there may be cases where we think that determining personhood is difficult, Menkiti’s case does not even bring sophisticated questions about how that determination may be rendered difficult. The whole attainment of personhood is hidden behind unclear and very fluid concepts such as moral arrival.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show that Menkiti’s use of “it” in his normative account of personhood does not succeed. I argue that the word “it” does not carry any moral significance. I argue against Menkiti’s use of epistemological advancement as a measure of personhood. I hold that such a view does not bear on the crucial determinant of what can

ontologically count as a person. If my argument succeeds, Menkiti's version of communitarianism does no better than other versions he thought erroneous.

Notes

- 1 Dzobo 1992, p. 131.
- 2 Temples 1959, pp. 66-67.
- 3 Menkiti 1984, p. 171.
- 4 Sogolo 1993, p. 190.
- 5 Onwuanibe 1984, p. 184.
- 6 Menkiti 1984, p. 173.
- 7 Mbiti 1970, p. 141.
- 8 Appiah 2004, p. 26.
- 9 Gyekye 1997, pp. 59-62.
- 10 Menkiti 1984, p. 172.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid, p. 176.
- 14 Menkiti 2004, p. 325.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 For a comprehensive discussion of the concept of time see Mbiti 1970, pp. 19-36
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Menkiti 2004, p. 326.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Menkiti 2004, p. 327.
- 21 Ibid, p. 328.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pronoun>
- 24 Alston 1964, p. 17.
- 25 Boon 1996, p. 35. The concept of *seriti*(a seSotho word)/*isithunzi*(an isiZulu and isiXhosa word) literally implies shadow. Berglund 1989, p. 86, writes: "Doke and Vilakazi [in their Zulu-English Dictionary] say that *isithunzi* is, firstly, the shadow; secondly, moral weight, influence and prestige, while thirdly, it is the soul, personality." For a fuller discussion of the concept, see Berglund 1989, pp. 85-88.
- 26 Tempels 1959, pp. 41-42.
- 27 Menkiti 2004, p. 327.
- 28 Mbiti 1970, p. 213.
- 29 Ibid, p. 214.
- 30 Ibid, p. 216.
- 31 Gbadegesin 2004, pp. 60-61.
- 32 Kaphagawani 1998, p. 173.
- 33 Kaphagawani 2000, p. 74.

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