



The Arc of Personhood: Menkiti and Kant on Becoming and Being a Person

ABSTRACT: *This article seeks to come to a better understanding of the account of normative personhood given by the Nigerian philosopher Ifeyani Menkiti by engaging it with that of Kant. The idea is not to adjudicate between the two accounts, but to explore the philosophical possibilities and constraints in both. I focus on the moral significance of the afterlife in each account. I engage Kant's doctrine of the postulates in support of Menkiti's defense of belief in this-worldly ancestral existence and evaluate Kant's moral commitment to belief in the immortality of the soul in the light of Menkiti's more social conception of the afterlife. I close with some comments on the general need for greater cross-cultural philosophical engagement.*

KEYWORDS: African philosophers, Kant, Menkiti, ancestors, the soul, the moral afterlife

Introduction

My aim in this article is to develop a better understanding of one normative conception of personhood by engaging it with another: to develop a better understanding of that of Nigerian philosopher Ifeyani Menkiti by engaging it with that of Kant. The idea is not to adjudicate between them; I assume that different conceptions of personhood are equally possible. It does not follow that one can simply choose one's preferred conception. I take different philosophical conceptions of personhood to be extrapolations from contingently diverse social contexts, rooted in the wider moral and metaphysical beliefs of those whose self-conceptions and conduct they guide. In practice, most of us live by those conceptions, which our particular contexts make available to us (Lear 1998; Velleman 2013). I also believe, however, that any philosophical conception of personhood claims general

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

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

I shall employ Kant and Menkiti’s moderate anti-Cartesianisms in order to engage them on an issue on which they *are* further apart. This concerns the moral significance of a person’s afterlife. When I first came across Menkiti’s articles on personhood, I was drawn to his account of ancestors as ‘the living dead’—as persons who, though biologically dead, continue to exist nonphysically as moral members of their communities. Menkiti’s social account of a person’s afterlife put me in mind of Kant’s now neglected but to Western ears still familiar conception of the immortality of the soul and its role in the moral afterlife. While I am attracted to Menkiti’s social conception of the afterlife, I also believe that Kant offers the more sophisticated defense of moral belief in the afterlife. Thus, in what follows I shall engage Menkiti and Kant on the idea of a person’s afterlife. I begin with summary overviews of their respective conceptions of personhood and of the role of the afterlife in them (sections 1 and 2). I then problematize Menkiti’s underargued defense of warranted belief in ancestral existence and go on to ask whether Kant’s distinction between knowledge and belief (*Glaube*) can provide the basis for a better defense (section 3). Similarly, I problematize Kant’s singular focus on the soul’s afterlife, asking whether Menkiti’s social perspective does not offer a more integral account of the moral connection between the life and death of persons (section 4).

I appreciate that the strategy of engagement here proposed may well please no one. African philosophers may complain that I am elevating Menkiti's controversial conception of personhood to the status of general validity for the African context. Kant scholars may complain that my narrow focus on the *Critique of Practical Reason* fails to do justice to Kant's ever-developing views on the afterlife. I can only reiterate that my aim here is neither to evaluate the social pedigree of Menkiti's conception of personhood nor to conduct a comprehensive exegesis of Kant. My aim is to engage individual representatives of the African and Western philosophical traditions productively with one another. I hope to show that, despite the unavoidable compromises that need to be made, such cross-cultural philosophical engagement can be productive. I shall conclude with some brief remarks on the need for greater cross-cultural engagement in general (section 5).

I. Menkiti on Becoming a Person

In 'On the Normative Conception of a Person', Menkiti describes personhood as a temporally bounded 'ontological progression from an it to an it' (Menkiti 2006: 324; see also Menkiti 1984). Individual human life begins from infancy and ends with the passage from ancestor status into the domain of the nameless dead. The 'mystery of personhood' happens in between these two stages of nonpersonhood. Personhood is achieved through moral membership in communal life. As individuals pass from infancy to early childhood and adolescence, they gradually acquire social responsibilities and corresponding entitlements. In adulthood, persons mature morally as middle age gives way to the wisdom of old age. After their biological deaths, persons (may) acquire ancestor status.¹ Ancestors are 'the living dead': they continue to be nonphysically present and continue to play an active part in the moral community. Only with the passage into 'nameless death' do ancestors cease to be persons. Menkiti's initial account thus invokes the image of personhood as an arc marked by an ontological ascent and descent either side of a midpoint peak.

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

¹ Ancestor status is not necessarily guaranteed; its achievement may depend both on a person's general conduct in life and on the community's performing the relevant burial rites. I abstract from these qualifications here. Again, it is worth noting that not all African thinkers classify ancestors as persons even though most do not classify them as deities. Similarly, in many African ontologies the class of nonphysical but this-worldly beings includes more than ancestors. All of this underlines the importance of not conflating Menkiti's position with 'the African view' in general. My thanks to Martin Odei Ajei and Uchenna Okeja for discussion.

conscious of herself as a participating member of a community. Since infants as yet lack reflexive self-awareness, they are not yet persons.

It should be acknowledged that Kwame Gyekye's deeper worry concerns the power a community wields over its members when it has the authority either to assign or to withhold their status as persons. But that worry begs the question. Why not emphasize communal responsibility instead? A community tasked with reliably making persons out of infants will fail itself where it fails to succeed in that task more than occasionally. The relevant conception of community matters here. Given the conception of personhood Menkiti describes, it is reasonable to suppose the corresponding conception of community to be one that has a moral interest in making persons out of infants.

But Gyekye is in any case mistaken when he infers Menkiti's radical communitarianism from his nonessentialism about personhood. Menkiti emphasizes reflexive self-awareness: 'I am because we are'. He borrows this formulation from John Mbiti, who originally affirmed it in opposition to Cartesian introspective self-knowledge (Mbiti 1969: 141; Menkiti cites only the first half of Mbiti's full formula: 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am'). Intentionally or not, Mbiti's formula nonetheless retains Cartesian reflexivity: it is I who recognize myself as a member of my community, and so it is I who confer socially mediated personhood status upon myself. This makes Mbiti a moderate anti-Cartesian at best, and Menkiti follows him in this regard.

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

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

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

This is hardly the language of a radical communitarian: my own recognition, *with internal assurance*, of my community as the source of my humanity confers

personhood status upon me. But what holds for living persons must hold for ancestors also: the community cannot assign personhood status to ancestors in their behalf; ancestral existence must be self-affirming.

Perhaps ancestral existence is a matter of projective self-ascription. Consider another of Menkiti's remarks. On his conception of personhood it makes sense to say, 'I am looking forward to my own past' (Menkiti 2006: 325). This suggests that personhood is in fact cumulative: the older I get the more of a person I become—in fact, Menkiti does at one point speak of a 'maximal' conception of personhood. This disturbs the initial image of personhood as an arc: the cumulative conception suggests that personhood peaks at the point of gaining ancestor status before fading away into nameless death. Still, the cumulative conception shows why a person may be looking forward to her own past: she may anticipate her life beyond biological death and may look forward to becoming an ancestor. A biologically live person who looks forward to her future status as an ancestor might be able to say: 'I will be because we are'. She may speak now in behalf of her future self. Yet, while this satisfies the demand for reflexive self-ascription, it fails to account for Menkiti's repeated claims in behalf of ancestors' mind-independent, spatiotemporal but nonphysical existence. As we shall see below, Menkiti owes us a better justification for ancestors' nonphysical existence than he offers. I shall ask to what extent Kant's doctrine of the postulates may be able to help him out in this respect. Before returning to the question of ancestors' ontological status in section 3, I turn now to Kant.

2. Moral Agency and the Afterlife in Kant

I shall focus on Kant's treatment of the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the *Critique of Practical Reason*; there he introduces it in connection with the problem of the Highest Good.² Kant's argument in the second *Critique* for the Highest Good is widely regarded as unsatisfactory—the fact that Kant repeatedly returns to it in his subsequent writings may be indicative of his own dissatisfaction with it (Ameriks 2000a; Beck 1960; Silber 1959; Mariña 2000). Nonetheless, I here restrict myself to the account in the second *Critique* because it represents Kant's first sustained attempt to incorporate the idea of the moral afterlife into his practical philosophy; besides, I do not believe that Kant ever wholly repudiated that early attempt. Even within this narrow focus on the second *Critique*, I shall discuss the Highest Good only to the extent necessary to explicate the function of the immortality of the soul in relation to it. As noted, I am struck by the contrast between Menkiti's social account of the afterlife and Kant's singular focus on the soul. Since the singularity of that focus additionally strikes me as standing in some tension with the social orientation of Kant's moral theory in general (Darwall 2006), I begin with some brief remarks on Kant's moderate anti-Cartesianism. Aside from the noted affinity between Kant and Menkiti on this score, Kant's treatment of the moral afterlife seems to me to carry a certain Cartesian remainder.

² Page references to the second *Critique* are to volume and pagination of the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's collected works; the translation used is Beck's (1993).

Kant's anti-Cartesianism is primarily associated with the paralogism chapters and the refutation of idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—Kant both rejects our possible knowledge of the soul as a simple substance and insists that awareness of oneself as subject presupposes awareness of objects as distinct from oneself. Both arguments are generally thought to repudiate the idea of objective self-knowledge. In her analysis of the relation between Kant and Descartes, Beatrice Longuenesse argues that the problem of objective selfhood, which Kant incurs in the course of his engagement with Descartes, nonetheless remains a live issue for him. Longuenesse notes that while Kant rejects Descartes's inference from the proposition, 'I think' to the self as knowable object, he concedes that affirmation of the former commits one to there being *something or someone* that thinks (Longuenesse 2008). The problem is how to conceive of that something or someone in other than objectifying terms. Longuenesse proposes to treat the proposition 'I think' as an assertion, where the content of the proposition is made true by the individual act of asserting it, and known to be true by the agent of the act referred to by 'I' (Longuenesse 2008: 24). The basic idea is of a kind of performative self-positing. I am not sure how persuaded I am by this, in part because I am not sure that I understand how the content of any proposition can be 'made true' by the act of asserting it. However, I am here interested more in Longuenesse's general point that Kant remains in some sense stuck with the problem of objective selfhood as a result of his very engagement with Descartes's 'I think'. Although the problem originates in Kant's theoretical philosophy, there is clearly systematic continuity between the paralogism chapters of the first *Critique* and the doctrine of the postulates in the second *Critique*. While Kant's account of everyday moral agency avoids commitment to objective or objectifying selfhood, his appeal to the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the context of the Highest Good reintroduces remnants of the Cartesian idea of an objective self. (More specifically, I believe that Kant's account of our awareness of ourselves as agents is analogous to his account of our awareness of ourselves as knowers of objects: our consciousness of ourselves as moral agents is a function of our consciousness of the unconditional demands of duty upon us.)

Admittedly, my contention that Kant's account of everyday morality avoids reference to an objective (i.e., knowable) moral self conflicts with a widespread current reading of his moral theory as affirming a robust self-understanding of our supreme moral worth as rational agents. Particularly influential in this regard has been Christine Korsgaard's interpretation of *Groundwork's* humanity formula in light of what she regards as our intuitive moral self-conception. According to Korsgaard, I bestow (subjective) value upon particular objects or activities through my choices and pursuits of them. Although my particular choices and pursuits are contingent, the fact that I choose at all is not. Korsgaard identifies my capacity for choice in general as the unconditioned condition of my contingent choices; she further argues that I cannot but value that in virtue of which I am able to bestow subjective value, and she concludes that *Groundwork's* humanity formula is best read as giving philosophical expression to our intuitive self-worth as rational end-setters (Korsgaard 1996a). Relatedly, Korsgaard argues that I should take an interest in others' capacity for choice, that I should pursue my own choices consistently with others' pursuing theirs, and that I should assist others in their

pursuit of their rational choices: this is how we realize the kingdom of ends (Korsgaard 1996b).

Korsgaard's reading has been criticized on both systematic and substantive grounds: on systematic grounds for eroding the distinction between conditional and unconditional willing (Ameriks 2000b; Langton 2007; Timmermann 2006) and on substantive grounds for conflating the first-person agential perspective with the self as object of moral concern (Darwall 2006; Flikschuh 2009; O'Neill 1989). Nor can Korsgaard's account of Kantian everyday morality accommodate the idea of a moral afterlife (Hare 1996; O'Neill 1997). According to her account, we do possess a kind of objective moral self-knowledge: we know the source of our moral worth and are able, moreover, to perfect ourselves immanently. This is not what Kant believes.

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

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

The ambiguity concerning the transcendent or immanent realization of the Highest Good is forecast in Kant's uneven discussion of the relevant conception of happiness at issue. That justified hope for happiness must conform to the moral law as its supreme condition goes without saying (5:109). Even so, for the ensuing antinomy to be real, it must be sensibly conditioned happiness that is at stake. But although Kant begins from the finite agent's hope for material happiness, he moves progressively closer to a Stoic conception of moral self-contentment as 'an analogue' to the happiness of 'sensuous gratification' (5:117). He insists that 'consciousness of [the] capacity of pure practical reason through a deed (virtue) can produce a consciousness of mastery over inclinations and thus of independence

from them, [bringing] forth a negative satisfaction with one's condition, whose source is contentment with one's own person' (5:118). Later, he shifts back toward a more Epicurean conception, such as when, in the context of the postulate of God, he notes that happiness is a state in which 'everything goes according to [the subject's] wish and will' (5:124).

Kant's uneven treatment of the relevant conception of happiness impinges on that of the soul, whose existence, and that of God, we must postulate in connection with the Highest Good. A postulate of practical reason is 'a theoretical proposition which is not as such demonstrable, but which is an inseparable corollary of an a priori unconditionally valid practical law' (5:123). A postulate is thus a theoretically indemonstrable proposition, which is defensible on practical grounds. That defense depends on Kant's distinction between knowledge and faith as a distinctive species of belief (*Glaube*); I shall discuss it in the context of the next section. Here I want to consider the function of the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the light of the foregoing remarks on happiness.

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

The picture that emerges is of the soul as a kind of noumenal agent that strives beyond the finite agent's biological death in behalf of the Highest Good conceived in terms of happiness in proportion to virtue. This picture is unsatisfactory in numerous respects, most obviously so in respect of the soul's noted unsuitability in contributing to the finite agent's hope for sensibly conditioned happiness. But even if the requisite conception of happiness is that state analogous to bliss, there is an odd shift of attention from the finite agent's moral focus on her duties toward others to the soul's concern to being deemed morally meritorious in the eyes of God. There is something unattractively self-regarding about this latter concern. Granted, the idea of the Highest Good cannot *motivate* this-worldly moral agency but must rather arise from moral agency itself; granted further that moral merit in the eyes of God depends on conscientious discharge of worldly duties toward others. Even so, it is God's judgment of moral merit that secures the soul's (not the finite agent's!) happiness (as bliss). It is difficult to avoid the impression of a fairly decisive shift from an earthly moral life shared with finite others to a morally primary relationship with God. Given these worries, one may be tempted by Korsgaard's immanent reconciliation of happiness and morality. And yet, for

Kant, the idea of the Highest Good arises out of an acknowledgement of the stringently non-self-regarding demands of this-worldly morality. It is the very focus on our duties toward others that gives rise to the hope for happiness in the afterlife. So although they are in tension, there is also a deep connection between the other-personal orientation of this-worldly morality and the soul's focus on moral merit in the afterlife.

This leaves us with two puzzles: the puzzle of ancestors' nonphysical but this-worldly moral existence on the one hand, and that of the immortal soul's moral turn upon itself on the other. In the next two sections, I shall engage Menkiti and Kant on both these puzzles. I return first to Menkiti's inadequate defense of ancestral existence, asking whether Kant's doctrine of the postulates could provide the basis for a more plausible, practical defense. In [section 4](#) I return to the moral solitude of the soul, asking whether Menkiti's account of ancestral existence does not offer a morally richer account of a person's afterlife.

3. Practical Belief in Ancestral Existence

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

Return to Menkiti's characterization of personhood as 'an ontological progression from an it to an it'. The claim is that the life of a subject takes off from an initial state of thinghood (infancy) and eventually passes into a second state of thinghood (nameless death). The initial image of personhood as an arc encourages the idea of a person's *return* to the initial state of thinghood. On reflection, it is evident that the two 'its' at either end of this ontological journey are nonidentical (Matolino 2011). Yet, while the thinghood of infancy is relatively unambiguous, that of the nameless dead is less clear. The thinghood of the infant consists in its physical presence as a biological organism. By contrast, the thinghood of the nameless dead cannot consist in their physicality: ancestral status precedes nameless death, and ancestors are already nonphysical. If thinghood denotes physical or material existence (I here follow Menkiti in using the two terms interchangeably), can the nameless dead be any 'thing' at all? Is the ontological progression of personhood not better conceived as a progression from an 'it' to 'nothingness'? (Granted, this result may be no less problematic in certain other respects, but it strikes me as a more accurate specification of Menkiti's notion of an ontological progression.)

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

In 'Physical and Metaphysical Understanding' (Menkiti 2004), Menkiti contrasts the 'African metaphysical temperament' with Western metaphysical thinking. The latter is said to feel a strong pull toward (world-external) dualism. This yields the problem of interactionism, which recent Western thinking seeks to resolve by resorting to various forms of reductivism. Menkiti further notes the Western tradition's fascination with skepticism and its related tendency to mistrust ordinary experience. By contrast, African metaphysics 'is guided by the epistemic temper of the village'; it looks for commonsense explanations of observed phenomena and 'steadfastly refuses to open a can of worms where nothing can be gained by doing so' (Menkiti 2004: 121). In relation to ancestors, the temper of the village counsels acquiescence of belief in their nonphysical existence irrespective of a satisfactory explanation of its possibility.

While Menkiti's demand that metaphysical explanation be guided by ordinary experience is reasonable, such guidance cannot equate to acquiescence in unreasoned common sense. Menkiti's endeavor to shed light on ancestors' ontological status is hampered by his acquiescence in unreasoned common sense. In answer to the question he himself raises as to how one might 'reconcile belief in material agency with belief in [ancestors'] non-material agency', Menkiti attributes to traditional African society 'a belief system that is fully committed to material agency but that trades on an extended notion of what is embraced by the material universe' (Menkiti 2004: 121). I find this unhelpful; it is not clear to me how one can be both 'fully committed to a material universe' and embrace an 'extended notion' of the same. However one specifies materiality, it cannot contain its negation. If ancestral existence is nonmaterial, it will remain so on an extended notion of materiality. Perhaps for this reason Menkiti goes on to say that members of traditional African societies would give a 'material or quasi-material account of non-material agency'. Unlike 'non-materiality', the idea of 'quasi-material' entities suggests that ancestors are like material entities in some respects. We are then owed a specification of the extent of that likeness. More to the point, while giving a material explanation of nonmaterial agency looks like a contradiction in terms, a quasi-material explanation of nonmaterial agency resembles a reductivist move—precisely what Menkiti rejects in Western metaphysics.

A little later on in the same article, Menkiti concedes that while there are facts about the material universe that we do understand, there are also facts about it that we do not yet understand (Menkiti 2004: 123–24). Here he may be pushing against reductivism: that we cannot explain nonmaterial agency in material terms does

not entitle us to discount the possibility of its existence. Alternatively, he may be moving toward reductivism: eventually, what we currently take to be nonmaterial agency will be explicable in material terms. Either way, Menkiti fails to shed light on the matter.

Menkiti may have dug himself in. He borrows the notion of ‘quasi-materiality’ from Kwasi Wiredu. However, Wiredu employs it in the service of a conclusion that runs counter to Menkiti’s intentions. Like Menkiti, Wiredu rejects so-called Western dualism; he takes members of his own cultural group, the Akan of modern Ghana, to be disposed toward what he calls ‘a level-headed empiricism’ according to which ‘the universe is ontologically homogeneous’. In this universe, ‘everything that exists exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking’ (Wiredu 1996: 49). Wiredu concedes that the Akan believe in ancestral existence; he coins the term ‘quasi-material’ to refer to ‘any being or entity conceived as spatial but lacking some of the properties of material objects’ (Wiredu 1996: 53). Again, like Menkiti, Wiredu emphasizes ancestors’ *this-worldly* existence: ‘the extrahuman existents of Akan ontology do not belong to the category of the spiritual in the Cartesian sense of non-spatial, unextended’ (Wiredu 1996: 53). But Wiredu goes on to challenge the consistency of Akan belief when he says, ‘it is a legitimate question whether there is adequate evidence that [quasi-material] entities exist’. Given the broadly empiricist thrust of the Akan worldview according to Wiredu, this must be a question of empirical evidence. Although Wiredu counsels against the dogmatic assertion of such entities’ empirical nonexistence, he notes that ‘the plausibility of quasi-material existence claims tends to dwindle in the face of advancing scientific knowledge’ (Wiredu 1996: 54). In contrast to Menkiti, Wiredu thus employs the notion of the quasi-material in order to debunk the plausibility of belief in ancestral existence.³

Wiredu’s debunking is not necessarily the end of the matter. One could argue that knowledge of ancestral existence rests on this-worldly but extrasensory perception, where the extrasensory perception of ancestors requires a special kind of training reserved for experts, such as soothsayers and priests (Ajei 2014). Though suggestive, I want here to explore an alternative, Kant-inspired, practical vindication of ancestral existence. Return to Menkiti’s insistence that metaphysical inquiry be guided by ordinary human experience. The question is: at what level of experience do ordinary Africans affirm ancestral existence? From what Menkiti says, ancestral existence matters morally. Attempting a theoretical vindication of ancestral existence may then be misguided; what matters is practical vindication. These considerations resonate with Kant’s own practical defense of traditionally speculative ideas.

In the third antinomy of the first *Critique’s* transcendental dialectic Kant evaluates the respective positions of thesis and antithesis regarding the idea of

³ One of the journal’s referees has pointed out to me that Wiredu’s understanding of empiricism is unlikely to be acceptable to contemporary Western empiricists, that Wiredu appears to conflate empiricism and materialism. I read Wiredu as rejecting what he designates as ‘quasi-material’ beliefs within the general empiricist thrust of the Akan framework of belief—he wants to excise such belief from an otherwise broadly empiricist framework. For discussions in defense of quasi-materialism see Sogolo (2003) and Kwame (2006).

an uncaused first cause. He concedes the thesis' illicit inference from reason's demand for completeness of explanation in the order of given phenomena to rational knowability of an uncaused first cause. However, Kant equally rejects the 'dogmatic attitude' of the antithesis when it 'confidently denies whatever lies beyond the sphere of its intuitive knowledge'. Such dogmatism is 'all the more reprehensible owing to the irreparable injury which is thereby caused to the practical interests of reason' (CPR A471/B499). The thesis harbors a legitimate *moral* interest in relation to the idea of an uncaused first cause. An analogous response to Wiredu may be open to Menkiti: in making the case for ancestral existence depend on empirical evidence, Wiredu overlooks the interests of morality in these existence claims.

Kant's later doctrine of the postulates takes on board the critical conclusions of the transcendental dialectic, thus making room for reasoned faith in our ideas of freedom, God, and the soul, even while rejecting all possible knowledge claims in regard of these ideas. Recall Kant's specification of a postulate of practical reason as a 'theoretical proposition which is not as such demonstrable, but which is an inseparable corollary of an a priori unconditionally valid law' (5: 122). Notable here is the insistence upon a vindication of a *theoretical* proposition by *practical* reason. Practically, it matters that we be entitled to affirm that the soul *is* immortal, that we *are* free, that God *does* exist. Yet, while effective moral agency requires an assertoric propositional attitude (Willaschek 2010), practical warrant for adopting that attitude also requires acknowledgement of its objective insufficiency: in affirming God's existence on grounds of practical reason we must simultaneously acknowledge our lack of knowledge in this regard.

Kant's difficulty lies in defending the assertoric mode on practical grounds even while restricting the proposition's epistemic status. Interpreters disagree whether or not he succeeds in this regard (Beck 1960; Chignell 2007; Gardner 2006; Willaschek 2010). In his analyses of Kant's distinction between knowledge and belief Andrew Chignell distinguishes between them as two distinct modes of *Fürwahrhalten* (holding to be true). While knowledge is a holding to be true based on nonvoluntary epistemic assent, belief (*Glaube*) is based on voluntary nonepistemic assent (Chignell 2007a, 2007b). Ordinarily, we do not decide to believe; relevant available evidence usually determines our judgment as to whether or not X is the case. In the case of practical belief, by contrast, we do in a sense 'decide to believe'. We do so nonarbitrarily, that is, on the basis of nonevidentiary practical considerations. For the same reason, the critical demands of practical belief are especially stringent: while assent on practical grounds can be rational, and while "commonsense" people will have a lot of [practical beliefs], critical such assent 'should include reflective acknowledgement of its epistemic insufficiency' (Chignell 2007a: 56). Chignell's contrast between nonvoluntary epistemic assent and voluntary nonepistemic assent echoes Kant's own qualification in the second *Critique* that 'the righteous man may say: "I *will* there to be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding, and finally that my duration be endless"' (5:143, emphasis added). At the same time one may remain unconvinced that to will oneself to believe really is to believe, not least if its critical component lies in withholding judgment as to the truth—or falsity—of that belief (Gardner 2006).

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

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

4. Souls, Ancestors, and Moral Community

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

Recall that ancestors are biologically dead but morally alive. They exist nonphysically in the same world as biologically live persons; they are persons, not deities—that is, they are revered for their wisdom but not worshipped as omniscient or omnipotent. How might belief in ancestral existence impact a person's moral self-conception? One who believes in ancestral existence will hope one day to become an ancestor herself. This hope will guide her throughout her biological life: I call this 'living toward ancestral status'. One who believes in ancestral existence will also believe herself to be surrounded by ancestors whose moral claims upon her she must give due consideration: I call this 'living with ancestors' (the following draws on my more extended discussion in chapter 6 of Flikschuh [forthcoming]).

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

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

More is at stake here than pious thoughts about the virtues of a less than *wholly* self-regarding life—of the virtue of *also* considering the claims of community. To see this, consider *living with ancestors*, that is, living in the belief of being in the moral company of nonphysically present ancestors. African philosophers often fail to elaborate on the moral significance of living with ancestors. They emphasize the moral reverence those alive feel for ancestors, the invocation of ancestors at important social functions, and ancestors' general role in providing moral guidance. These functions may well be consistent with ancestors' mind-dependent existence: we *invoke* them when the need arises. Yet, if ancestors are persons, not mental phenomena, their nonphysical everyday reality must impinge on our everyday moral deliberations. Granted, nonphysical ancestors lack many of the morally relevant interests of embodied persons: presumably ancestors have no need of shelter, food, medical care, and so on. (Though traditionally, food is often left out for the ancestors; at burial the dead are also given many utensils of which it is believed that the dead may need them.) Ancestors do, however, have an interest in being accorded respect. They have an interest in not being insulted and in their counsel not being ignored. They have an interest in counting as communal members in uneventful everyday moral life. It is the daily nonphysical presence of ancestors, not their special invocation at important public functions that interests me. Their daily background presence adds a moral dimension that moderates interaction among the living. In taking into account the moral interests of ancestors, the interests of the living need not win out invariably. On the contrary, the moral interests of the ancestors may at times be given precedence over those

of the living. Community members may at times reach moral decisions of a kind they would not reach if they did not have to take into account, in their moral deliberations, the ancestral dimension of communal morality.

Again, we may be inclined to interpret the inclusion of ancestral moral claims as indicative of social backwardness—of attachment to superstitious belief and as a bar to social development. Again, however, this is largely prejudicial. What is philosophically interesting about the added ancestral dimension is its impact on the moral self-understanding of the living. To put the point somewhat aphoristically, the ancestral dimension within everyday moral deliberation makes death integral to moral life: if the dead remain persons, our acknowledgement and treatment of them as such establishes an ongoing moral connection between the living and the dead that deepens our sense of our moral interdependence in general. That interdependence is seen as essentially positive; it is not conceived as a lack or a limitation: the dead look after the living, and the living look after the dead—together, they secure communal continuity across time.

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

I noted the ambivalence in Kant's conception of happiness in relation to the Highest Good and the more general problem of bridging the gulf between freedom and nature—I set these issues aside here. What interests me here is the implied relation within a person's moral self-understanding between living others, the soul, and God. It strikes me that Kant resolves the issue of human finitude in a significantly different way from Menkiti. Ultimately, it is God, not others, who sustains the dependent soul. How, then, does the soul's sensibly embodied bearer relate to others through its dependence on God? Put differently, which relation has moral primacy: that between embodied temporal moral agents or that between soul and God? The idea of some sort of Cartesian remainder, mooted earlier, is relevant here: I suggested that while Kant's insistence on the moral agent's opacity to herself is continuous with the first *Critique* rejection of introspective self-knowledge, the postulate of the soul reinvents the idea of the self as a kind of noumenal agent who can pursue and even partake of a kind of happiness. We commit to this idea as no more than a practical belief. Nonetheless, even if in merely *willing* our souls to be immortal we will no more than the possibility of our sustained moral agency in the face of earthly adversity, the idea of the soul is the idea of a something or a someone *that* abides—ultimately, in God. If the real moral self—or even only the thought of such—ultimately seeks or abides in God, what is the moral significance of others, fellow humans, to the this-worldly, self-effacing moral agent? Does the presence

of God as ultimate sustainer of the moral self not threaten to render this-worldly interhuman moral relations insufficient unto themselves?

That, at any rate, is the worry that emerges in the light of Menkiti's conception of a this-worldly, altogether human moral afterlife. In reflecting on this worry one should remember the deep connection I noted between what Kant diagnoses as our sense of the world's moral recalcitrance and practical faith in the Highest Good: the idea of the Highest Good is a response to that recalcitrance, not an alternative to it. Thus, in turning to the Highest Good and with it to soul and God, we do not turn away from the world and others. We rather sustain our moral faith in them even despite plenty of empirical evidence to the contrary. And yet, we need God to be able to do so. While it would be mistaken to read Kant's doctrine of the postulate as indicative of a moral turn away from others and toward God, it also appears that the soul's turn to God is needed to prevent a collapse of moral faith in oneself and others. In contrast to Menkiti's account, Kant's view offers an extra-human dimension in human moral affairs the absence of which would undermine human moral relations. I find that thought morally unsettling in a way in which I do not find Menkiti's contrasting account unsettling, and I wonder whether belief in nonphysical, this-worldly ancestral existence is not a price worth paying.

5. Thinking Cross-Culturally

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

I suggested that Menkiti's underargued defense of mind-independent ancestral existence might be better developed along the lines of Kantian practical belief. This is not to say that Menkiti can take on board Kant's doctrine of the postulates in its entirety. Similarly, it would be foolish to expect Kant to replace regulative yet nonetheless transcendent ideas about soul or God with more immanent conceptions of the moral afterlife: there is a plethora of reasons, both practical and theoretical, why Kant requires the noumenal dimension and why its retention is indeed fruitful. Still, consideration of alternative conceptions of the afterlife to Kantian noumenalism is both interesting in itself and may alert us to the constraints of our own contextually conceived ideas about personhood. Belief in ancestral existence may not be available to us in practice, but we may be able to admire its moral depth nonetheless.

This last remark returns me to the more general point with which I began this article and on which I want to say a little more in the limited space left.

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

As noted at the outset, Western philosophers, Kant included, have for long stretches of time barely accorded those of African descent the status of persons at all. While we now acknowledge philosophy's historical failings in this regard, mere acknowledgement of past failings is no guarantee against the possibility of our own failures. It may not be enough to say that philosophical conceptions of personhood that previously excluded some people now include them. Acknowledgement of past philosophical failures must include acknowledgement of the possible inadequacies of some basic categories of philosophical thinking in the Western tradition. In the case at hand, Western conceptions of personhood that centrally appeal to the idea of the soul—and many do so more or less implicitly—cannot bear out their own claims to general validity.

This need not be disastrous. To the contrary, openness to different philosophical traditions opens up fresh avenues of philosophical inquiry, and can thus be reinvigorating for one's own tradition even if one cannot expect the straightforward incorporation of one set of philosophical beliefs into another. One may wonder whether affirmation of the possibility of cross-cultural philosophical engagement and simultaneous denial of the ready translatability of one set of beliefs into another is not to commit the incoherence of philosophical relativism. I do not think so: others' often quite markedly different beliefs need not be unintelligible to us just because we cannot share them. Nor need we array them along some axis of historical development in order to render them intelligible to ourselves as the sort of superstitious beliefs we ourselves once held: these are outmoded responses to the fact that not everyone thinks alike. We are meant to live, today, in a world of different cultures' moral and political equality—we regard our own political principles as chief purveyors of that commitment. If so, our philosophical thinking will have to accommodate itself to that commitment (Flikschuh 2014). Is this merely a plea for political correctness, as some have suggested to me in responses to earlier presentations of this paper? I prefer to think of it as a plea for greater intellectual curiosity. Will serious intellectual engagement with the thoughts of others spell the end of the Western philosophical tradition, even of Western civilization? Of course not—persistent failure so to engage with the thoughts of others in a rapidly changing moral and political world is much more likely to achieve that particular result. What will we gain? Exposure to interesting ideas unfamiliar to us, such as

the idea of ancestral existence, and the philosophical fascination they are able to exert on us even if we cannot share them in practice.

KATRIN FLIKSCHUH
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
K.A.Flikschuh@lse.ac.uk

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