

BOOK REVIEW

Motsamai Molefe. *African Personhood and Applied Ethics*. Makhanda: NISC (Pty) Ltd, 2020. African Books Collective. x + 138 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 987-1920033699.

Central to African moral-political thought is the notion of personhood. Personhood, in Motsamai Molefe's view, is a moral quality which human beings earn based on the quality of their behavior in society or on their being objects of dignity. The discourse on personhood has often taken the form of a quest for its compatibility with such modern political concepts as individual rights. It is, thus, refreshing that in demonstrating the viability of personhood as a moral theory, Molefe, in his book *African Personhood and Applied Ethics*, pays more attention to varied topics in Applied Ethics such as the environment, women, and development in African philosophy. This book defends personhood against three charges: that it endangers the realization of a just social order, that it promotes anthropomorphism/speciesism, and that it is, finally, not socially egalitarian. Molefe devotes the first two chapters to what he sees as the two dimensions of *Ubuntu* (personhood)—moral theory and theory of dignity—and utilizes the latter theory to address the three charges in the remaining chapters.

Molefe begins in Chapter One by examining the concept of personhood with a view to defending its robustness as a moral theory. By virtue of *Ubuntu*, three ontological features may be observed: human purity, relationality, and the capacity for human nature to grow or diminish (19–20). Molefe insists that the other-regarding demands of *Ubuntu*, in the attempt to attain moral excellence, do not negate “the self, uniqueness and self-regarding duties,” since *Ubuntu* also entails some aspects of individualism and egoism (29).

Chapter Two is a discussion of personhood and dignity in African moral political thought. Here, Molefe mostly uses the ontological conception of personhood which, he believes, grounds the equality of humans on the basis of their common capacity for sympathy. This is consistent with the ontological conceptions of Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, which are based on the capacity for moral sense. Unlike Gyekye's conception, however, Molefe's perspective is not religious. He argues that the ontological status of this human capacity is a plausible basis for human dignity, and that “the idea of

dignity is taken to be tantamount to the idea of possessing greater moral status ... of *full moral status*" (36). Thus, he rejects Ikuenobe's idea that dignity should be determined by the moral achievements of people, because that idea takes away "the egalitarianism associated with dignity" (among other reasons) (41).

Equality of women and the question of personhood is the focus of Chapter Three. Some scholars, including Anthony Oyowe, have maintained that the social conditions that exist in Africa, conditions within which personhood is determined, are "fraught" with "inequalities and injustices, gender being one of them" (61). Indeed, Oyowe suggests that women are limited to performing less significant roles in society. However, Molefe cautions against the commingling of the cultural dimensions of personal identity with moral personhood; he argues eloquently that *Ubuntu* guarantees human dignity and is, thus, able to promote a just social order for both men and women.

In Chapter Four, Molefe examines the moral status of animals. Citing Kwasi Wiredu's idea of *onipa na ohia* and Thaddeus Metz's modal-relational view of dignity, Molefe interprets these philosophers, together with Menkiti and Gyekye, as theorizing a hard form of anthropomorphism that deprives animals of rights. Challenging this position, Molefe again proposes *Ubuntu*: that human sympathy, as prescribed by *Ubuntu*, ought to cover animals—thereby granting animals a partial moral status (dignity). *Ubuntu*, dignity, requires the good treatment of animals.

Finally, Chapter Five tackles the question of personhood and development. Molefe underscores the viability of adopting an African, moral approach to development. Using the framework of development ethics, the means and ends of development are to be evaluated in moral, rather than, for example, in economic terms (95–96). The ethical character of, and thus the element of dignity in, development would be seen in virtues arising from *Ubuntu* which, Molefe notes, should also inform our thinking about concepts generally related to egalitarianism: good human life, just society, environment, and the ethics of means.

I would make two critical observations: First, Molefe attributes a descriptive ontology of a person to Gyekye (2, 18), yet he seems unable to explain adequately why this should be so, which serves to prolong the controversy. Second, the flow of information in this book is sometimes impeded by Molefe's frequent references to previous sections of the book, which this reader found distracting. However, these issues do not mar the quality and pertinence of the book. It engages many leading thinkers on personhood, brings new insights into the debate on personhood, and applies them to critical problems of modern times. I recommend it for institutions, ethicists, and those interested in critical expositions on African thought.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.95

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