Recent Work in African Philosophy: Its Relevance beyond the Continent

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In this article I critically discuss some recent English language books in African philosophy. Specifically, I expound and evaluate key claims from books published by sub-Saharan thinkers since 2017 that address epistemology, metaphysics, and value theory and that do so in ways of interest to an audience of at least Anglo-American-Australasian analytic philosophers. My aim is not to establish a definitive conclusion about these claims, but rather to facilitate cross-cultural engagement by highlighting their relevance, at least to many western philosophers, and by presenting challenges to these claims that such philosophers would be likely to mount.

1. Introducing African philosophy

There is a notable tradition of English-speaking philosophy that is not often represented in the pages of this journal[1] or indeed in those of other long-standing philosophy journals with an international contributorship and readership: the tradition of African philosophy. Although English is of course not indigenous to Africa, it has been the *lingua franca* of literate sub-Saharan philosophy since its substantial development in the 1960s (with French a somewhat distant runner up). Prior to that time, African cultures had transmitted information largely through oral means, and colonial powers had suppressed African ideas so as to promote Christian and more generally European perspectives. As we are now at the end of the third generation of academic African philosophers (roughly 1960–1970s, 1980–1990s, and 2000–2010s), and have in hand the healthy body of literature they have produced, it is surely time that western philosophers (and of course others beyond the continent) became more aware of it.

Some readers might be keen to know what makes something a work of African philosophy in the first place. It is tempting to suggest that it is simply a piece of philosophy composed by an African person (cf.

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[1] For all I can tell from a search on JSTOR (jstor.com), this is the first article on African philosophy to appear in *Mind* since its inception in 1876.

Hountondji 1996). However, there are some people from the West who appear to have done African philosophy (for instance, Graneß 2012; Hallen 2019), as well as some people from Africa who appear to have done western philosophy (for example, Wingo 2003; Oyowe 2010). A more promising account is therefore in terms, not of who does the philosophy, but rather of what the philosophy is like. Specifically, a philosophy plausibly counts as African if informed by methods, topics, and positions that have been *salient* in the philosophical work of those from the sub-Saharan part of the continent, that is, approaches that have been recurrent there in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere (see Metz 2015a). As the reader will see below, some of these views include appeals to the importance of elders (including ancestors), relationality, and community.

One project of use to a western audience of philosophers is to provide an overview of the field of African philosophy. However, that would be a large undertaking, and has in some respects already been done (in various handbooks, annotated bibliographies, and encyclopaedias, such as Wiredu 2004a; Metz 2011; and Afolayan and Falola 2017). In this article I instead critically discuss epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical views that have been advanced in authored books appearing in the last few years and that should be of interest to typical readers of this journal, namely, Anglo-American-Australasian philosophers using an analytic method. Such an orientation does not necessarily mean that the African philosophers whose work is critically discussed themselves use such a method, although some do (and, where they do not, I note the discrepancy). Instead, the point is to demonstrate the relevance of some recent work in the African tradition to many analytic philosophers in the West, acknowledging that, say, continental or comparative philosophers would likely find other things of interest about it.

This focus means not taking up any of the large corpus of work published before 2017. Of work published since then, it also means setting aside edited collections, whether addressing the field of African philosophy in general (Ukpokolo 2017; Chimakonam and du Toit 2018; Etieyibo 2018a) or some particular topics within it (Chimakonam 2018; Etieyibo 2018b; Ogude 2018, 2019; Okeja 2018; Chemhuru 2019; Hull 2019; Imafidon 2020). It also means bracketing books featuring styles and methods not readily amenable to analytic consideration, for example, works that are substantially meditations (Murungi 2017), autobiographies (More 2018), and intellectual biographies (Dübgen and Skupien 2019). This focus further means

excluding discussion of books that are primarily about African philosophy as a field (Murungi 2017, 2018) or that are surveys of it (Kasanda 2018). Finally, I have had to make some tough calls, electing not to engage with books devoted to narrower topics such as pedagogy (Waghid, Waghid, and Waghid 2018), consciousness (Chimakonam, Egbai, Segun, and Attoe 2019), and albinism (Imafidon 2019), in favour of those on broader topics.

In the following, I begin by taking up views about epistemic categories such as logic, truth, and knowledge that have grown in African soil and are of cross-cultural significance for western analytic philosophers, say, for rejecting an Aristotelian approach to reasoning (§2). Next, I consider ontology, where some African philosophers argue that there is good reason to believe in the existence of imperceptible (roughly 'spiritual') agents apart from God (§3). Finally, I address some claims in moral-political philosophy, including that an African version of communitarianism is a plausible alternative to a human rights framework and that the form of democracy predominant in the West (and reproduced in post-independence Africa) is unjust (§4). I conclude briefly by mentioning some additional perspectives that, for whatever reason, have not featured in recent books by African philosophers but that have been prominent in the field (§5). My goal is not to refute or support the claims I address, but instead to familiarize principally the Anglo-American-Australasian reader with central points from recent books in African philosophy, to provide a critical perspective on them, and thereby to encourage cross-cultural dialogue between African philosophers and those in the West.

2. African epistemology

Most readers will be asking themselves: 'What is different about African philosophy?' It is natural to think that one should not bother engaging with a different body of literature if it is unlikely to broaden one's horizons. I therefore begin by addressing a text that, of all those discussed here, constitutes the most radical departure from standard Anglo-American-Australasian philosophical assumptions but is nevertheless of relevance to analytic philosophers.

In his book, *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*, Jonathan Chimakonam (2019) strives to present a logic that is characteristically African, where by 'logic' Chimakonam means

correct reasoning (pp. 95, 170-171). Chimakonam has drawn particularly on the terms and concepts prevalent amongst his Igbo people in Nigeria, where it is a common practice for African philosophers to appeal to their respective cultures when advancing views. Sometimes these views are indicative of what is more generally believed amongst sub-Saharan thinkers, while at other times they reveal particularity. In Chimakonam's case, although he appeals to Igbo words, he intends his views to be broadly representative. Indeed, Chimakonam appears to suggest that a philosophy counts as African if and only if it is grounded on his logic or something like it (see pp. xxii, 21-36, 105, though perhaps he should be read as offering a merely sufficient condition for Africanness). Moreover, he contends that, although his logic has an African pedigree, it is likely to be attractive to those working in other, particularly non-western, traditions (pp. xvii, 36, 47-50).

The Igbo word '*ezumezu*' literally means the sum of what is strongest, where Chimakonam employs it metaphorically to characterize the third value in a trivalent logical system (pp. 94, 98-100, 106-109). According to Chimakonam, correct reasoning involves not merely distinguishing between true claims and false claims, but also recognizing that some claims can be true and false at the same time.

Trivalence is part of a large, comprehensive package of views that Chimakonam advances about how to reason correctly. Propositions are to be evaluated, not in terms of facts, but rather in terms of contexts of meaning (pp. 119-120, 122, 142). Propositions are true not when they correspond to facts, but rather when they are defensible in the light of a given meaningful context (pp. 121-122, 142-143).[2] Since propositions can be both defensible and indefensible in certain respects, or since contexts can shift, there can be trivalent 'included-middles', with some propositions best described as 'both true and false' (p. 106). The proper aim of asserting propositions is not to arrive at a definitive conclusion about a subject matter, but instead to generate new ideas and continue a constructive conversation between interlocutors (pp. 119, 125, 143). It would be a revealing exercise to consider whether this view of good reasoning is what best accounts for the major positions advanced in the other works of African

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[2] Probably the most influential African philosopher over the past forty years, Kwasi Wiredu, has argued that the correspondence theory of truth is 'tongue-dependent', meaning that it has purchase only for those working within certain languages, where for his Ghanaian Akan people, the theory is a mere tautology. See Wiredu (2004b).

philosophy addressed in this critical notice (as well as other major works in that field), or instead whether these positions make at least as much sense in the light of an Aristotelian logic.

Chimakonam is not out to convince those far removed from these approaches to change their mind—after all, that is not correct reasoning, for him. He also knows that characteristic western philosophers will 'struggle to make logical sense' of them (p. 94). Interestingly, he doubles down on the difficulty westerners might have grasping his logical schema—according to him, that is all the more evidence that he has developed a genuinely African approach to reasoning (p. 94)! Although Chimakonam's primary aim is simply to articulate a system of African logic, and not to convince sceptics of it, there are times when he does argue for it. The most useful occasions are when he presents examples that are meant not merely to illustrate, but also to motivate (see pp. 121, 122, 142-143, 144-145). Fascinatingly, he presents one argument that is patently deductively invalid (and not even inductively strong) from an Aristotelian standpoint, but maintains that it constitutes sound reasoning from an African perspective, which considers not mere formal relations between variables but also the explicit and often implicit contexts in which the propositions are asserted (p. 144).

A western logician in a broad and standard sense would consider which logical system, western or African (à la Chimakonam), is true in the sense of corresponding to the facts and without countenancing the possibility of a premise being both true and false. She would also aim to find out what is true or most justified by positing claims accepted by both sides, western and African, and then determining which logical system best explains them. It appears that these 'normal' strategies would, interestingly, beg the question against Chimakonam's African system of logic. For him, it would be improper reasoning to try to determine which logical system is the true one; rather we should be exchanging ideas with the aim of continuing to enrich reflection between disputants. In addition, for him, truth is relative to meaningful contexts, and the contexts between indigenous Africa and the 'modern' West might be so divergent as to occlude appeals to common ground. In the face of such radical disagreement between cultures, how can reasoning *about how to reason correctly* proceed?

Another book on African epistemology that has recently appeared is *Meaning and Truth in African Philosophy: Doing African Philosophy with Language*, by Grivas Kayange. Like Chimakonam, Kayange (2019) undertakes a sympathetic analysis of philosophical beliefs salient

amongst his people, who are the Chewa from Malawi, but, unlike Chimakonam, Kayange is more cautious about making claims about the nature of African philosophy or reasoning more generally (although see p. 141). The substantive views about truth and knowledge that Kayange advances also differ dramatically from Chimakonam's, and Kayange furthermore explicitly adopts an analytic method to address them, focusing particularly on defining linguistic terms.

According to Kayange, the correspondence theory of truth is the natural one to hold for philosophers influenced by Chewa culture and specifically by proverbs salient in it (pp. 91-105). However, Kayange appears at points to maintain that correspondence between statements and facts is merely a necessary condition of truth. Whereas most Anglo-American-Australasian philosophers, or at least those inclined towards the correspondence theory, would maintain that a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts, Kayange suggests at times that such correspondence is not sufficient for truth. In addition, truth requires someone to apprehend the correspondence. Furthermore, the relevant form of apprehension is through perception (and presumably introspection), hence the conclusion: 'Truth, therefore, requires a perceived correspondence between what is said and what is a fact' (p. 99).

Sometimes Kayange says that the correspondence must be 'perceived' (p. 99) or there must be 'observation' (pp. vi, 105) or 'confirmation' (pp. 103, 105). In contrast, and he says that it must be 'perceivable' (pp. 98, 169), 'can be perceived' (p. 102), or has to be 'observable' (p. 102). On the face of it, the latter approach is more plausible than the former. If I state that my son is in his bedroom, he is indeed there, although I have not seen him there because I am in a different part of the house, the intuition of this author is that the statement is true. *Perhaps* I do not *know* that it is true, but that is of course different from its not *being* true. And *perhaps* I am not *entitled to say* that it is true that my son is in his bedroom, but, again, that does not mean it is not truth. If we opt for the weaker construal, in terms of correspondence that is in principle observable, we can account for the intuition that the statement about my son's location is true. It would be important to know whether Kayange or many other African philosophers share the intuition.

Note, though, that even the weaker construal is still mighty strong, constituting a kind of verificationism that is somewhat surprising to encounter beyond the positivism that had been influential in twentieth-century America and Europe. If a statement is true only if what it

expresses can be observed, then, as is well known, statements about God, necessities, counterfactuals, and the distant future are cognitively meaningless, that is, are not even capable of being true or false. Notoriously, so is the thesis of verificationism itself.

There is a third way to interpret Kayange's remarks that avoids these implications, ones that Kayange himself would likely appreciate given his own interest in counterfactuals elsewhere in the book (pp. 33-46). The alternative approach is to maintain that in order for someone to *know* that a statement is true, or in order for a 'declarative statement' (p. 99) to be *justified*, its correspondence with reality must be perceived. When Kayange motivates the centrality of observation, he invokes considerations of knowledge, and not so much truth itself, for example appealing to the proverb that knowing the liver of a lizard is dissecting it (p. 100). This approach to knowledge dovetails what two scholars who engaged in analytic philosophical exchanges with Yoruba shamans in Nigeria found: many believe that one knows something only if one has seen it or more broadly perceived it (Hallen and Sodipo 1997). By this approach, to have evidence enough to know a proposition, it is not sufficient to have been told it by an authority; instead, first-person verification of a proposition through perception is necessary. I have to see that my son is in his room in order to truly know he is there; my daughter telling me that he is there is merely provisional.

On the face of it, such an empiricism is surprising to encounter, given recurrent features of African cultures. As Kayange himself discusses in the book, indigenous African peoples tend to believe in agents and forces that are in principle imperceptible (what westerners would call 'spiritual'), and to believe much about the nature of the world and human nature on the basis of the testimony of elders (see also Mungwini 2019, pp. 78-111, 119-129).

Although Kayange does not address these tensions, it would be revealing to do so. One might be tempted to suggest on his behalf that testimony generally has insufficient epistemic weight to ground knowledge, which involves a high degree of confidence or security. This move would invite debate about whether there are times when testimony is indeed epistemically robust enough for knowledge, and, if not, whether African philosophers could ever be in a position to know about imperceptible conditions. Another strategy, perhaps more suitable for characteristically African 'spiritual' beliefs, is to consider whether perception is required for knowledge only in respect of what is in principle perceptible. Perhaps the testimony of elders warrants

belief when it is about what is imperceptible, but is merely putative and insufficient for real knowledge when it is about what is perceptible.

In any event, African philosophers sympathetic to some kind of empiricist approach to justification/knowledge will have work to do when it comes to counterfactuals and necessities. Although the approach allows statements about them to be capable of truth, it entails that we cannot know that any of them are true, insofar as they are about either what would have happened but did not or what in fact happens in all possible worlds. Kayange is aware of some of these concerns that many Anglo-American-Australasian philosophers would express, but suggests that they are 'not interesting among the Chewa people given that counterfactuals are used for different ends in the society' (p. 104). He does not elaborate here. However, it would be worthwhile to consider thoroughly how purposes, and more generally values, influence our understanding of truth and reality, an issue that also arises when thinking about African metaphysics, as I now discuss.

3. African metaphysics

Two recent books that address the question of how to understand the basic nature of reality from an African perspective are Oladele Balogun's *African Philosophy: Reflections on Yoruba Metaphysics and Jurisprudence* and Pascah Mungwini's *Indigenous Shona Philosophy: Reconstructive Insights*. Like Chimakonam and Kayange, these authors advance philosophical views informed substantially by the beliefs of their respective peoples, with the Yoruba living largely in Nigeria and the Shona in Zimbabwe. However, whereas Chimakonam's book deploys *ezumezu* logic and Kayange's is analytic, Balogun's and Mungwini's works are principally hermeneutic, providing critical-philosophical interpretations of their people's belief systems.

Both Balogun (2018) and Mungwini (2019) defend the belief salient amongst indigenous (or 'traditional') Africans that there is an imperceptible realm in which there exist not merely God, but also an array of other agents. In particular, commonly believed to exist are ancestors, wise founders of a clan who have survived the deaths of their bodies and who continue to reside on earth where they guide the clan, sometimes doing so with punishments, at other times through messages passed on to diviners. In addition, African peoples tend to believe in what are often called the 'living-dead', who includes those

whose bodies have recently died but whose selves continue to live in a specific place on earth for a time (but eventually also die—there is little connotation of immortality in traditional African religion, not even for ancestors). It is common in Africa to think of a family as consisting of the living-dead, human beings who are alive, and the not-yet-born, where all exist at the same time in different, albeit constantly interacting, realms.

So far as I am aware, African philosophers have not yet mounted a defence of the animist idea that many imperceptible agents are here, on earth, with us. Many western folks believe in the existence of a soul that survives the death of our body by entering a transcendent Heaven or Hell. There is as yet no cross-cultural debate about how best to conceive of an afterlife, but it would be fascinating to see African philosophers make the case that the ontological demands of Judaism and Christianity (and Islam, even if not as prominent in the West) are harder to meet.

Instead, up to now African philosophers have been particularly concerned to justify belief in the existence of imperceptible agents (at least beyond God) in the face of philosophical-scientistic scepticism from the contemporary West. The latter would typically maintain that we have no ground for thinking that it is true that ancestors (or souls) exist since we do not need to posit them to predict and control events, or that we are unjustified in believing in ancestors (souls) since they do not figure in the best explanation of any less contested (normally observational) data. African philosophers have recently sought to meet these challenges, and in ways that are strong on the face of it.

On the one hand, some question whether truth—understood as correspondence in this case—should invariably determine belief. After all, to think it should is to express a certain value judgement about which choices one should make in life, a judgement that probably prizes knowledge for its own sake (cf. Aristotle on the value of theoretical wisdom). However, African philosophers tend not to think that truth is valuable in itself, finding other things to be good for their own sake or at least to a greater degree than truth.

For example, Balogun contends that people are likely to be more virtuous if they believe in ancestors. On the one hand, the prospect of becoming an ancestor and so living serenely for a long time encourages people to live uprightly, while, on the other, fear of punishment from those who have already become ancestors prompts the same (pp. 207-223). Balogun suggests that the practical concern of people living

morally is more important than a purely theoretical concern with getting our statements to correspond to the facts. The claim is reasonable and cannot fairly be dismissed—why think he is incorrect?

For another example of how commitment to the standard western conception of truth is questionable, consider the appeal to the value of culture. When Balogun chides the influence of 'alien' beliefs on his Yoruba people (p. 223), and presumably on African peoples more generally, he is suggesting that there is some good reason (which need not be conclusive or indefeasible) for people who have shared a way of life to continue doing so. In the way that (nuclear) families can have rituals and traditions that ought to be continued, so can larger groups such as a people or nation, where, in principle, doing so could come at some cost to truth *qua* correspondence.

Relatedly, consider Mungwini's point that it is appropriate for African philosophers, and by extension intellectuals more broadly, to respond to colonial disparagement of sub-Saharan interpretations of the world so as to 'redeem Africa and to define who we are' (p. 18; see also pp. 19-23, 112-116). Such a 'liberative agenda' (p. 19) or reparative response to 'epistemic injustice' (p. 19) is a *prima facie* important practical concern that, again, might come into conflict with apprehending the truth.

It is not obvious that truth should invariably win out in the face of the potentially competing values of morality, culture, and redress for colonialism. Hence, even if ancestors do not exist, there remains real debate about whether to believe they do.

Turn, now, from pragmatic to epistemic justification. Granted that inference to the best explanation is a perfectly sensible non-deductive mode of reasoning, what counts as the 'best' might vary, depending on the epistemic context. Balogun notes that it is 'easy' for western trained philosophers, 'but difficult for the traditional Yoruba, to discredit stories and testimonies justifying the belief in the lived-dead as make-up stories' (pp. 218-219; see also Menkiti 2004). Implicit, here, are some plausible philosophical moves. Insofar as testimony can provide some reason for belief, those who have been told that ancestors are real could have epistemic, and not merely practical, reason to believe that. The point applies more broadly to background beliefs in the light of which one would appraise competing explanations of events. If we are not inclined to reduce epistemic justification to objective likelihood of truth, as even few western epistemologists are, then there is probably space for justification to vary according to the

intellectual resources available in different contexts (cf. Ikuenobe 2006, especially pp. 175-213).

Admittedly, none of the above rationales for thinking that ancestors exist has leverage in respect of those in cultures that do not already accept them. For instance, these arguments do not give characteristic western interlocutors good reason—either evidential or pragmatic— to believe in a realm of non-theist imperceptible agents. As intercultural philosophy progresses, it would be interesting to see African philosophers come up with rationales that sceptics can appreciate— something they have clearly already done when it comes to moral-political considerations.

4.African value theory

Personhood is central (if not essential) to sub-Saharan normative thought, at least as interpreted in recent books by African philosophers (amongst them Mungwini 2019, pp. 143-154). Sometimes the word 'personhood' is used to connote a metaphysical account of human nature or personal identity, while at other times its sense is evaluative or normative, signifying human excellence or the final aim of a human being. Although African philosophers have sought to ground the normative sense of personhood on a prior, metaphysical notion, in what follows I set aside any metaphysical discussion. Instead, I first consider how one African philosopher has invoked personhood as a normative ideal to develop a moral-political theory, one that treats rights as 'secondary' or 'remedial' for society. Then I address the question of how to distribute political power, with many African philosophers maintaining that human excellence requires seeking consensus in the face of disagreement and not resting content with majority rule, which entails that the dominant form of political democracy in our day is unjustified.

In *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics* the South African Motsamai Molefe aims to 'have the idea of personhood inform a fully fledged moral-political theory' (2019, p. 1). The foundational principle is that one's ultimate aim as a moral agent should be to develop one's own virtue or to perfect one's human nature, albeit only in ways that do not violate human dignity (pp. 46, 50, 53, 83). In articulating a basic ethic and often supporting it by appeal to intuition, Molefe employs an analytic method that will be familiar to readers.

Before addressing the matter of what constitutes personhood/virtue, I note how this principle of right action differs from others salient in the West. Molefe's ethic is not utilitarian/consequentialist, not even in the form according to which one should promote virtue wherever one can in the world, as it is purely self-regarding; one's basic aim should be to promote one's own virtue, not that of others. His ethic is also not Aristotelian, partly since it is indeed an account of how to act rightly and not of how to be (even if the former relies on the latter), and partly because of its egalitarian account of dignity. Finally, his ethic is not Hobbesian, again in part due to the egalitarian considerations constraining an agent's choice, but also because of the content of personhood, which, as I now point out, is not a matter of desire satisfaction, pleasure, or some other account of happiness in the modern, subjective sense.

What, for Molefe, reliably promotes personhood, virtue, and human nature (which, for the purposes of his book, are equivalent)? Although a person's 'own perfection...is the goal of morality' (p. 83), which is self-regarding or individualist in a way, the content of what this involves (or at least the means by which it is promoted) is interestingly purely other-regarding or relational (pp. 50-51, 64, 108-109). That is, despite one's ultimate aim being the promotion of one's own virtue, an aim that is self-directed, one's own virtue so happens to be fostered exclusively by treating others in certain, positive ways. Specifically, one is more of a person the more one advances 'the welfare of society at large' (p. 62), exhibits 'generosity, kindness, sympathy' (p. 62), displays 'empathy, love, care' (p. 162), and further prioritizes 'special relationships' with family, friends, and other associates (p. 86).

Here, too, there is an important contrast between Molefe's characteristically African conception of personhood and accounts of virtue salient in western philosophy. The latter typically include some individualist or internal excellences, ones that do not make any essential reference to others, such as temperance, knowledge, and autonomy. For much of the African tradition, at least if we are speaking of *moral* virtue and our *foremost* goal as agents, the focus must be strictly on others, and hence the following maxim, frequently encountered: 'A person is a person through other persons'. (See Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009 for a survey of the similar views of several sub-Saharan peoples in respect of this maxim.)

If our basic aim should be to promote our own virtue, where that is done by relating to others in positive ways, what does that entail for

social and political philosophy? In the book Molefe applies his foundational ethic to the issues of whether we have moral rights, which rights we have, how strong they are relative to competing considerations, and similar topics. According to Molefe, an ethic instructing agents to advance their own virtue without degrading others entails a concern for what he and others in the African tradition often call the 'common good' (cf. Gyekye 2010, sec. 7), roughly a duty 'to secure the well-being of all human beings' (p. 147). Insofar as 'the good of *all* human beings is the moral responsibility of all' (p. 147, emphasis in original; see also p. 164), Molefe maintains that rights 'take a secondary status because they will tend to clash' with this goal (p. 147).

Why think that rights and a duty to promote the common good are incompatible? The idea is that virtues such as empathy, care, and love mean acting for the sake of all people's needs, not their rights (p. 162). More carefully, the view is that a rights-claim is essentially made 'against others', where one cannot reasonably demand that others, for instance, care for one; care, as a virtue, must arise 'spontaneously', that is, out of the agent's psychology (pp. 164-166). Where people fail to exhibit care, or where their care fails to meet people's needs, rights will have a 'remedial' role to play, according to Molefe (pp. 166, 168). Under such conditions, it would be appropriate for those whose needs have not been met to demand that, say, the state meet them.

Yet again we find an interesting difference between Molefe's African approach to distributive justice and typical western ones. Neither utilitarians nor Kantians (Rawlsians) characteristically believe that an agent's motivation matters when it comes to the allocation of resources. Roughly, a state of affairs in which people are satisfied is all that counts for utilitarians and the provision of means to those who are entitled to them is all that counts for Kantians (Rawlsians). For Molefe, though, a proper way to distribute goods is for those with the needed goods to be moved in certain ways, for instance by concern for others' vulnerability (pp. 162, 165).

A broadly similar approach to distributive justice is found in Oche Onazi's (2020) recent book, *An African Path to Disability Justice*, in which he argues that founding justice to the disabled on a sub-Saharan ideal of communal relationships is different from, and preferable to, a human rights approach. Practically, Onazi believes that an appeal to the language of rights is responsible for the failure of African institutions to uphold the interests of the disabled, since it does not jibe with widely held values (pp. 41, 54, 168). Theoretically, Onazi contends that we get a plausible account of how the state and society

ought to respond to the disabled by appealing to the virtue of altruism and more generally to 'close, warm, compassionate, harmonious and interdependent social relationships' (p. 172; see also pp. 117-134). Injustice, on this account, consists of 'the breakdown of or the exclusions from relationships in each community' (p. 133).

There are naturally a number of ways that one might question the above views. Here are two that western moral-political philosophers would likely raise and that are on the face of it challenging. Consider, first, invisible hand scenarios, in which (potentially a lot) more benefit of whatever relevant kind would be promoted if the agent were not motivated by other-regard and instead perhaps even evinced a selfish disposition. Concretely, it is plausible to think that self-interested profit seekers in certain kinds of markets sometimes (if not often) do more to meet people's needs than could beneficent legislators, and perhaps even more than beneficent shop-owners.

In such scenarios, does justice really forbid an agent from doing what would in fact do the most to meet people's needs? Must she indeed act from certain motives, regardless of the cost to the disabled or the common good?

A second challenge from some western philosophers would be to contend that rights have a foundational (even if not exhaustive) place in normative thought. Consider the organs case often discussed by Anglo-American-Australasian analytic ethicists, in which three innocent, biologically unlucky people will die unless they receive my (let us suppose, uniquely matching) heart, lungs, and kidneys (where I, too, am innocent). Supposing that a doctor was in a position to painlessly kill me, harvest my organs, and thereby save the lives of the three, should she? A large majority of both western and African moral philosophers would judge that she should not, the best explanation for this intuition arguably being that I have a right to life.

Consider what such a case might mean for Molefe's system. It suggests that sometimes we cannot act for the sake of the common good—there are some situations in which it is impossible to do what would be good for everyone (p. 164). The case further seems to show that virtues such as compassion, altruism, and love are indeterminate—presumably the doctor is required to exhibit them in respect of not only the three who need the organs to survive, but also me. How is she to choose which lives to protect merely on the basis of these considerations? Still more, the case is evidence that rights are not merely remedial in cases 'when human sympathies/love/care are scarce' (p. 168). Molefe might reply that they would be scarce in regard

to me were the doctor to intend to kill me, but, then, they would be scarce in regard to others were she not to intend to kill me. On the face of it, a right to life (understood as a right which is roughly violated by killing innocents without their consent for the greater good) naturally makes sense of why the doctor would be wrong to kill me if necessary and sufficient to save three other innocent lives. It would be interesting to see whether the African tradition can make sense of this case without the concept of a moral right, with one possibility being a notion of respect for life (cf. remarks in the conclusion).

Turn, now, to the last major topic featuring in recent African philosophical books that I address in this article, which is how to allocate political power. Just as African political philosophers often maintain that, when it comes to allocating goods, fulfilling duties is in some way prior to upholding rights, so they tend to hold that, when making decisions to govern a group or territory, seeking consensus is preferable to resting content with majority rule. In *Consensus as Democracy in Africa*, the Zimbabwean Bernard Matolino (2018) critically addresses what is the most salient position in the field, namely, that unanimous agreement should (nearly) always be sought before moving ahead in the face of disagreement. Although Matolino was initially tempted by a consensual approach, he in the end rejects it.

Before addressing reasons for and against consensus, consider how it might operate in a large-scale environment. According to one scheme, from Kwasi Wiredu (2000), whom Matolino plausibly labels the 'greatest advocate of consensus' in the African tradition (p. 50), legislators would be elected using majority rule, this being practically necessary in a country with millions of people. However, they would not be chosen according to party affiliation and would not represent a party or any other constituency upon having been elected. Instead, representatives would be elected based on the substance of their individual views. Then, upon joining a parliament or similar legislative body, representatives would deliberate with each other about what is best for the public as a whole, with a statute counting as valid law only if all representatives subsequently agree to it.

Wiredu calls this possible scheme a 'non-party polity', meant to contrast with a one-party dictatorship and a multi-party democracy. In the West many would be tempted to define the word 'democracy' as something like majority rule amongst competing parties, but Wiredu's proposal reveals that to be much too narrow. His non-

party polity would be a democratic system that forbids majority rule in favour of unanimity.

Why think unanimity is preferable? There are a number of arguments in the literature (canvassed in Metz 2015b), but the most important one for Wiredu, as Matolino reads him, is the right to 'substantive representation' (pp. 61-62). A right to formal representation amounts to the right to pick the people who will pick the rules, while a further right to substantive representation is the right to have one's interests figure in the picking of the rules. The former hardly guarantees the latter, as when in a multi-party democracy a majority of representatives decides on the rules, not addressing the interests of the minority. Wiredu believes that if representatives are not tied to parties with constituencies and if they must all agree about what would be best for everyone in the society, then everyone's interests are more likely to have some influence over decisions.

One may push further by asking why it would be preferable for everyone's interests to have some influence over decisions, not merely over the people who make the decisions. A practice of ensuring that all people's good is adequately advanced by a law or policy—while likely having some intuitive pull for some western readers—follows from deep values in the African tradition. For one, for many African philosophers human beings have a dignity that must be treated with respect (Molefe 2019, pp. 117-140), perhaps in virtue of their ability to be party to communal relationships, where failing to address the interests of any one person would be disrespectful, a failure to treat him as an equal or an end (Metz 2021). For another, for much African normative thought, themes of community, harmony, cohesion, solidarity, togetherness, and the like are salient (Mungwini 2019, pp. 150-154; Onazi 2020, pp. 117-134), where these would be enhanced if a given decision did not leave anyone's interests completely unfulfilled. Returning to personhood (virtue) as a potentially foundational value, a legislator would arguably display more personhood the more she acted together with other legislators 'to aim at securing common ground' (p. 72), as opposed to aiding one part of the public to the real detriment of other parts, let alone seeking to maintain power for herself as the rules allow; she would thereby arguably respect people's social nature and do so by bringing them closer together.

Many, if not most, African political philosophers would find the above reasoning compelling, but Matolino does not, arguing in a broadly analytic manner against it. He first explores the possibility that substantive representation could be realized in a majoritarian

system: 'This may range from extended town-hall gatherings to de-volution of power to allow the smallest unit to exercise total control over its affairs' (p. 68). However, upon reflection, Matolino accepts that a consensual model would likely do better than a non-consensual one if we are to 'include the wishes of the governed in the decisions that affect them' (p. 75; see also pp. 70-88, 107-113).

So, Matolino's ultimate criticism of requiring unanimous agreement amongst legislators is that doing so would have disadvantages that outweigh the likely advantage of promoting substantive representation (pp. 32-33, 67, 115-127, 180). In particular, Matolino suspects that, for a unanimitarian system to work, people would unjustly have to forsake some individualism, as the system would be 'intolerant of any project or political activity that is at variance with the common good' (p. 166). First, interests that were on the periphery and could not be met as part of the common ground would invariably go unsatisfied: '(F)reedoms to pursue certain ideas and actions may be deemed inconsistent with the ultimate ethos of the communitarian bedrock of consensus' (p. 127). Second, over time a consensual system would 'induce homogeneity' (p. 127), with people being brought up to think of their interests only in ways that are the same as, or at least consistent with, the interests of others.[3]

Matolino's critical points merit engagement. One way to respond would be to express doubt that these problems routinely arise in the context of university committees, where consensus is often the norm. When sitting on, say, a committee that decides what should be involved in obtaining a degree, it is common in English-speaking academe for members to seek consensus in the first instance and to deem majority rule upon voting to be a last resort. Do we thereby routinely fail to satisfy idiosyncratic interests? If so, is there injustice in that? After twenty or thirty years of consensus seeking on committees, do we no longer find substantial differences between our conceptions of what is good and bad? If we answer 'no' to such questions, then a further question is whether a committee is relevantly similar to a parliament.

It would also be natural for western critics to wonder whether consensus could be routinely obtained. Majority rule is at least efficient, whereas one might suspect it would often take quite a lot of

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[3] In addition, Matolino maintains that adherents to a consensual model need to show that it would be instrumentally effective in fostering distributive justice (pp. 180-192), which is fair, but I do not see that he himself provides reason to think that it would not.

time to bring recalcitrant minorities on board. Indeed, one might suspect that consensus would often be unachievable.

This point also deserves a response. For now, on behalf of the consensual model, I urge readers to consider how the Paris climate change talks were conducted back in 2015. Fascinatingly, by appealing to conflict resolution techniques used by the Zulu people of South Africa, some two hundred countries, naturally with quite divergent perspectives, were brought to unanimous agreement in about two days (Rathi 2015).

5. Conclusion: additional topics in African philosophy

I close by briefly noting three additional topics that are salient in contemporary African philosophy, that have not featured in books published in the past few years, and that would likely be of interest to at least many Anglo-American-Australasian analytic philosophers, if not philosophers in other traditions as well. Starting with epistemology and metaphysics, consider what is involved in understanding the nature of a thing. For probably a large majority of contemporary analytic philosophers, to grasp the essence of a natural object (roughly, a spatio-temporal thing that is not an artefact), such as water or the self, is to apprehend its intrinsic properties. Water is thought to be essentially H_2o, while a self is considered to be identical to a chain of mental states, a brain, or a soul. In contrast, for typical African philosophers, one cannot understand something's nature without appealing to its relational properties (for example, Okolo 2003; Asouzu 2007; Metz 2018). On this approach, water is (at least in part) essentially what plays a certain role in an ecosystem, while a self is constituted by its relationships with other selves and perhaps an environment. I submit that it is not obvious which approach is the more accurate one, with the disagreement meriting thoughtful consideration.

Turning to normative issues, while community is the concept around which most African moral-political philosophy turns, vitality is the next. A competing candidate for basic value in the sub-Saharan tradition is vital force, traditionally conceived as a divine energy that permeates everything that exists in varying degrees, and retaining much explanatory power when shorn of 'spiritual' elements. For a number of African philosophers, an agent such as a person or a government is morally better the more it produces new lives, health, creativity, confidence, and initiative, while reducing deaths, illness,

destructiveness, insecurity, and lethargy (Dzobo 1992; Bujo 1997; Magesa 1997). Such a view is hardly on the radar in contemporary western philosophy, but is of *prima facie* appeal.

Finally, for now, when it comes to political philosophy, probably the second most important innovation from the African tradition, after consensual democracy, is group rights. Although some African philosophers deny there are any individual rights, more common is the view that group rights exist alongside individual rights, a perspective enshrined in the African ('Banjul') Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Organization of African Unity 1981). Consider the Charter's articles that peoples, not merely individual persons, have rights to exist, to culture, to socio-economic development, and to resist domination. Such an approach is a plausible supplement to the strictly individualist human rights orientation dominant in the West.

My hope is that western philosophers will have found the issues raised and questions posed here of interest, and will agree that it is hardly obvious what one ought to conclude about them. I submit that they indicate that cross-cultural debates would be worth undertaking, with Anglo-American-Australasian philosophers likely to have their horizons broadened by engaging with those working in the tradition of literate African philosophy.[4]

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[4] I am grateful for written comments from two anonymous referees and by the editors of *Mind*, which have helped me clarify some points in this essay.

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