

Is Menkiti's Normative Personhood Inclusive? The Case of Mentally Disabled Persons

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Menkiti's normative personhood is exclusionary, and logically inadequate, especially regarding mentally disabled persons. My argument is that Menkiti's account of personhood as a moral-political theory does not possess the resources to accommodate and account for mentally disabled persons because of its rigid process of transformation, which requires moral excellence. An inclusive moral theory, I argue, should be able to accommodate all members of the moral community irrespective of their ability, but rather, their capacity for relationships. Tapping into the intellectual resources of conversational thinking, I propose another conception of personhood predicated on moral status as the basis for personhood. With this method, I query the inclusiveness of Menkiti's conception and demonstrate that a relational alternative option that bases moral status on the human capacity for relationships might be more inclusive. Here, personhood is anchored on the capacity for relationships, not the ability to exude moral excellence. I then contend that this moral status conception of personhood possesses the needed resources to account for all because it is inclusive and egalitarian, riding on the crest of *Ezumezu* logic, which is also both egalitarian and inclusive.

Keywords: Normative personhood, Ezumezu, Moral status, Relationships, Moral excellence, Conversational thinking.

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the tenability of Ifeanyi Menkiti's normative personhood using the case of mentally disabled persons. Menkiti's normative personhood is an aspect of Afro-communitarian theory, which seeks to give an account of the community-individual relationship in African thought. Afro-communitarianism is a discourse on personhood, social identity, and the communal relationship that sustains such social identity. It is here employed to represent the traditional African understanding of a good society. To discuss normative personhood as a moral theory that envisages an inclusive and egalitarian society, this paper will invoke salient questions relating to the status of mentally disabled persons. A plausible vision of a good society, if Menkiti's normative conception of personhood counts as one, ought to be characterized by inclusivity, recognition, and respect. That is, it must be able to accommodate all persons,

including the mentally disabled, as part of the moral community deserving respect from moral agents and state institutions. Stated differently, I will argue normative personhood, if tenable, must be able to account for mentally disabled people as persons deserving of all human rights. Otherwise, it is untenable. The idea of Afro-communitarianism draws its name and orientation from the fact that it places a premium on community and interpersonal relationships as defining features of a good society (MENKITI 1984, 2004; GYEKYE 1992; MBIGI 2005). It is an imagination of a community-centered humane society (MASOLO, 2004). The preceding entails that Afro-communitarianism envisages a communal society predicated on duty to oneself, the community, and others sustained through healthy relationships. For Menkiti (1984, 172), personhood is achieved through the “process of incorporation into the community”. This process involves a full complement of moral excellencies, without which one would fail at it (1984). This ritual of incorporation does not consider mentally disabled persons who may not have this ability for moral excellence, but the human capacity for relationships. Stated differently, those who lack the ability for moral excellence, according to Menkiti, are non-persons.

The work focuses on the tenability of Menkiti’s normative personhood as a moral and political view because of the recent objections raised against it in the literature on African philosophy. Menkiti’s normative personhood is an Afro-communitarian theory. African moral and political scholars have argued that Afro-communitarianism is untenable on some ethical and logical grounds. It has been accused of *ageism*, *patriarchy*, *sexism*, *homophobia*, *ableism*, *speciesism*, and *being theoretically inadequate* (OYOWE 2013; HORSTHEMKE 2015; AKIODE 2018; MANZINI 2018; CHIMAKONAM 2018, 2022; IMAFIDON 2019). The essence of these criticisms is that Afro-communitarianism fails to embody an inclusive vision of a good society since it excludes sections of humanity, such as mentally disabled persons, women, and other groups of persons, from the moral community. Since Menkiti’s normative personhood is an Afro-communitarian theory, it implies that the above criticisms may apply to it. Specifically, this work argues that the criticisms apply because normative personhood has a lopsided thesis that places premium on one aspect of reality while disregarding the others. If the foregoing is correct, Menkiti’s normative personhood would be an exclusionary and inadequate account of personhood.

This paper aims to examine one of the serious objections to Menkiti’s normative personhood. For lack of space, this research will limit its scope to the accusation of ableism (exclusion of disabled persons) as a characteristic weakness of normative personhood. My focus on ableism is informed by the fact that it is generally under-explored in the literature. I contend that should Menkiti’s normative personhood prove untenable in the face of the accusation that it marginalizes a section of humanity, then another conception of personhood, perhaps one that is based on moral status (moral obligations) could become a viable option. The idea of moral status here does not imply virtue, rather, it is a function of possessing certain ontological features. The claim of this paper is that mere possession of these ontological features constitutes sufficient ground for recognition, respect, and protection. As a result, any entity that has the relevant ontological features, even if the entity is a mentally disabled person, is owed moral respect and recognition, and should thus be included among persons. Amara

Chimakonam (2021, 2022) underscores the above in her ‘Personhood-Based Theory of Right Action’ when she argues that one needs to be sympathetic to others in the community as well as project oneself into another person’s position irrespective of their station in society because of our shared humanity. This theory is grounded on a principle that states that “an action is right if and only if it positively contributes to the common good while adding moral excellencies to the individuals” (AE Chimakonam 2022, 112). Within this purview, the interest of mentally disabled persons forms part of the common good since they are part of the moral community.

The work shall be divided into four parts. The first part will expose Afro-communitarianism as a moral and political theory, specifically, Menkiti’s normative personhood as one of its types. In the second part, the work will discuss Menkiti’s normative personhood. In the third part, I will discuss its basic tenets and raise an extensive survey of objections against it. In the fourth part, I will attempt to show that normative personhood might possess the resources to accommodate mentally disabled persons if it is grounded on moral status guided by a trivalent rather than bivalent logic.

What is Afro-communitarianism?

It is not an easy task to define what exactly counts as Afro-communitarianism due to different understandings offered by various scholars. For lack of space, I will attempt to conceptualize it, focusing on some salient features available in the literature. To begin with, it is important to note that Afro-communitarianism draws its name and orientation from the fact that it places a premium on community and interpersonal relationships as defining features of a culture and a good society. For example, Kwame Gyekye (1992, 102) emphasizes the importance of the community as not only an “outstanding but are the defining characteristics of African cultures”. In the same vein, Lovemore Mbigi (2005, 75) observes, “Community is the cornerstone in African thought and life”. This implies that Afro-communitarianism envisages a communal society where empathy, care, and interpersonal relationship flourish. To understand the kind of society imagined by Afro-communitarianism, we need to specify the values that characterize it. For Dismas Masolo (2004), Afro-communitarianism is an imagination of a community-centered humane society. In this understanding, there exists communal belongingness, which expresses social relationships. This communalistic disposition serves as the foundation of group-oriented interest: the common good. From the above, Afro-communitarianism can be construed as a discourse on personhood, social identity, and communal relationships that sustains such social identity. It is a moral or political theory that seeks to explain the role of social relationships between an individual and other members of the moral community. Some scholars of African thought tend to understand Afro-communitarianism as a vision of a humane society. They usually invoke a variety of values like sharing, interdependence, practical altruism, empathy, generosity, and friendliness to account for a humane society (WIREDU 1996; TUTU 1999; MASOLO 2004; METZ 2007). They imagine a community-oriented society as one that is regulated by the above social virtues. In this sense, Afro-communitarianism imagines a good society as one that is flourishing insofar as it exudes relational and ‘other-regarding’ virtues of altruism, respect, etc.

Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984), a Nigerian and African philosopher attempts a robust account of the Afro-communitarian conception of personhood called normative personhood. He argues that his aim is to “articulate a certain conception of personhood in African thought” (1984, 171). This entails that Afro-communitarianism is an attempt to explain how Africans conceive of personhood and a humane society. Menkiti argues that personhood in the West revolves around abstract and static features of “a lone individual, while in the African understanding, it is in reference to the environing community” (1984, 172-173). This implies that for Africans, the community is the foundation of personhood, that is, whenever the question of personal identity arises, “Menkiti will refer to the reality of the community as opposed to the reality of an individual” (MATOLINO 2014, 55).

Menkiti (1984, 2004) offers a normative conception of personhood. He began by distinguishing between “being a human and being a moral person” (MENKITI 2004, 325-326). Being human simply implies being born with a biological seed and body identity. But personhood, on the other hand, is achieved through ontological progression or what he termed the “process of ritual and social transformation until one attains full complement of excellencies” (MENKITI 1984, 172). Personhood here is not a given; it is a process during which one is incorporated into the community. This demonstrates that community is very important here because one does not ascribe personhood to oneself, rather, it is the community that ascribes personhood to an individual. Menkiti (2004) argues that in the journey to personhood, the community acts as the catalyst and the prescriber of norms, this is the only means through which a biological given is transformed into personhood. This conception of personhood is normative because it prioritizes the community’s social norms as the necessary condition for achieving personhood. For instance, one is expected to be conversant with the norms of the community, exhibit moral excellencies, and be transformed into a “moral being or the bearer of norms” (MENKITI 2004, 326). However, one is said to have failed personhood if one falls short of these features. It must be noted that one cannot achieve these moral excellencies in isolation, but only through and in the community. Thus, the community plays an essential role in the process of personhood.

From the above explanation, the relationship between personhood and community is inseparable, making Menkiti’s normative personhood an Afro-communitarian theory. It, therefore, suffices to argue that Menkiti’s normative personhood is an aspect of Afro-communitarian theory because it emphasizes the inseparable relationship between an individual and the community.

Menkiti’s Version of Afro-communitarianism: The Normative Personhood

Menkiti published three main works where he articulated, refined, and defended his theory of normative personhood (see 1984, 2004, 2018). In the opening lines of the 1984 essay, Menkiti makes his intention known when he declares that his aim in this paper is to “articulate a certain conception of the person found in African traditional thought” (1984, 171). This presupposes that there exists a certain conception of personhood in African thought that others might be ignorant of, hence, his project of articulating this unique conception of personhood.

Menkiti's normative conception of personhood stipulates that the community embodies and ontologically influences personhood. In his "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," Menkiti attempts a conception of personhood that is shaped by the community. This conception of personhood portrays interdependence between an individual and the community in which the community is the foundation of personhood. This means that personhood is rooted in the community (MENKITI 1984, 2004, 2018). The journey toward personhood or "ontological progression begins at birth" (MENKITI 2004, 326). At this stage, the child is regarded as an "it" because the child lacks personhood at that stage. However, as the process of incorporation into the community progresses, the individual is expected to be acquainted with the norms and values of the community. The ontological progression, which takes place in time (MENKITI 2004), witnesses the emergence of new qualities that are part of moral personhood. This journey of transformation is a journey from "it" to "it" (MENKITI 2004, 327). At birth, a child is nameless and considered "it" until personhood is achieved. When the person dies, there is another journey to the spiritual realm where one continues to live as a nameless ancestor.

Here, both moral and epistemic development form part of personhood because one is expected to internalize and practice societal norms and reject those that are inimical to the community. It must be noted here that the process of this moral maturation is gradual, and there is no shortcut. In this process, "the heart does grow increasingly wiser, morally speaking" (MENKITI 2004, 325). This process continues till one achieves moral excellence that is definitive of a person. The above entails that Menkiti's normative personhood prioritizes the idea of moral perfection, a process of fully imbibing and exuding the community's moral values. It is imperative to note that the normativity of this theory is expressed in its emphasis on moral maturity or arrival (MENKITI 2004, 325-326). Menkiti considers this important because it helps in the improvement of the human community (2004).

Menkiti (1984, 171), claims that there exists "a difference between the African and Western views" of personhood. In the African view, "it is the community that defines a person as a person" or ascribes personhood to an individual after undergoing the ritual of social transformation, while in the Western view, it is some static "isolated qualities of rationality, will, or memory" (MENKITI 1984, 172; 2004, 324) that defines a person. For example, in his [Meditations] (1986, 18), Rene Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum*, which translates to "I think therefore I exist" is an individual affirmation of personhood grounded on rationality. This idea of personhood is devoid of communal colouration because it is "an instance of an individualistic model" (OYOWE 2022, 4). However, personhood in African thought is rooted in the community, this demonstrates the importance of the project of personhood and the place of the community in achieving personhood as it is beyond individual raw capacities (like will, memory, or rationality). Put differently, personhood in African thought is predicated on the "maximal definition of a person" (MENKITI 1984, 173), that is, different processes and stages that lead to personhood. The aim is to make an individual a moral being capable of sustaining healthy relationships in the community. This implies that personhood is a process, and this process is a process of

transformation and ritual of incorporation during which an individual acquires the social rules and norms of society. For Menkiti, this process is necessary because it is through it that one acquires the moral excellencies expected of a person. But one could fail to acquire personhood because one is “ineffective” (MENKITI, 1984, 173). This points to the fact that personhood is predicated on the acquisition of moral excellence or perfection, thus anyone who fails to acquire this virtue is a non-person (TSHIVHASE, 2021). The idea of moral excellence or perfection entails that an individual has the responsibility of leading a morally excellent life in relation to others in the community, it is expected that as an individual continues to partake in the life of the community through discharging one’s obligations, promote the common good and perform person-based right actions, such individual increases his or her moral excellencies. Menkiti (1984, 2004) argues that it is through carrying out his/her obligation that one is transformed from the “it” of the infant characterized by a lack of moral function into “person-status” with full moral maturity. The preceding entails that mentally disabled persons may be non-persons since they do not possess the ability for moral perfection or excellence. At this point, this work problematizes Menkiti’s normative personhood as exclusionary and ableist.

Objections against Normative Personhood

There is ample literature on the criticisms of normative personhood, and this research will engage with some of them. Some include Gyekye (1992), Matolino (2009), Famakinwa (2010) Molefe (2017). Some works intersect disability and normative personhood. These works argue that normative personhood is selective when it comes to mentally disabled persons because this group of persons has been at the margins of society for a long time. To argue differently, society has been denying persons with cognitive and intellectual disabilities personhood and treating them as entities without moral worth (PARMENTER, 2001). This is the case because the Menkitian society ascribes personhood to an individual based on its ability for moral perfection and not the human capacity for relationships. Even when they are granted minimal consideration, they are treated with pity instead of considering their moral worth, which comes with dignity. In this case, an entity that ought to be an object of moral consideration should be treated with less respect because they are disabled, thereby violating their dignity as a person. For example, due to their vulnerability, the mentally disabled are prone to physical, and sexual abuse, some of them are kept in an isolated environment with limited communication, only depending on their caregiver, who might even abuse them.

Nompumelelo Manzini (2019, 379) observes that “Kagame’s minimalist requirement for personhood, which is predicated on intelligence as a defining feature of personhood, is ableist”. Since it locates personhood on intelligence, it excludes “people living with severe cognitive disabilities from the status of personhood”. This implies that personhood is a product of cognitive ability, not any other feature, like the human capacity for relationships.

Manzini (2018) further argues that Afro-communitarianism, specifically, the normative conception of personhood, embodies exclusion against women and the queer. This makes it ableist, sexist, and anti-queer. This entails that normative personhood does not possess the resources to accommodate mentally disabled persons. Olajumoke Akiode (2018) also shares the view that Afro-

communitarianism may be sexist since some of its practices that marginalize women demonstrate clear disconnection from its theory.

Elvis Imafidon (2019) argues that prevailing conceptions of personhood are exclusionary, flawed, and limited. He argues that they are exclusionary towards infants, and people with physical and mental disabilities because of its rigid criteria for personhood, which denies some groups of people personhood due to a lack of some ontological features. The same criticism of ableism can apply to Menkiti's (2004), Wiredu's (2009), and Ikuenobe's (2016) understanding of personhood since they all require the agent to be able to exude personhood-related abilities like the practise of moral excellence. Since those who are mentally disabled cannot manifest such abilities, they are therefore excluded from the moral community and denied personhood.

Oritsegbubemi Oyowe (2013) and Oyowe and Yurkivska (2014) accuse normative personhood of being a male-centered ideology that promotes the exclusion and secundarization of some groups of persons in society. They observe that the concept of personhood is inherently characterized by social relations that privilege some groups of persons to the detriment of others.

A recent work that problematizes Menkiti's conception, which is the focus of this research, is Jonathan Chimakonam (2022, 94). He argues that the normative personhood proposed by Menkiti is problematic and inadequate. As he puts it, first, normative personhood "assumes that the ancient belief of the community's domination of the individual" is still tenable in modern society. "Second, it assumes that all matters concerning personhood" revolve around "community norms, thereby trivializing individual capacities and endowments". Third, "it assumes in error that it is fair to compare traditional African communal thought with modern Western thought" despite the differences. Fourth, "it assumes that an accurate conception of personhood should be a closed predicament" that should not be questioned by any individual. "Fifth, it assumes that personhood can only be conceived as a social relationship that is an end in itself". Chimakonam's objection is based on what could be termed 'the charge of inadequacy'. Here, Menkiti fails to recognize the diversity and dynamic nature of the African community and thus fails to provide adequate criteria for personhood. He seems to take for granted the constant evolution of the human community. The preceding shows that Menkiti's normative personhood is not adequate for mapping the reality and morality of any human society.

Also, Mpho Tshivhase (2021) argues that the prevailing conception of personhood is not gender-sensitive because it does not pay attention to the needs of another gender, especially women. She argues that personhood predicated upon relationality means nothing without freedom and consciousness. Tshivhase's argument seems appealing, but she still makes the same mistake by excluding mentally disabled persons from her theory of reconfiguration of personhood.

Disability can take various forms; it can be physical, social, or psychological. For instance, Arie Rimmerman (2013) conceives disability from a social perspective, which stipulates that disability is the product of how society is structured. Ronald Berger (2013, 6) augments this position when he argues that "disability refers to an inability to perform a personal or socially necessary task because of that impairment or the societal reaction to it". This expresses the social model of disability, which is one of the areas of concern for moral philosophy because it

tends to examine the place of the mentally disabled within a given social setting. This form of disability results from or is the product of an unjust social structure (RALSTON and HO, 2010), which puts these individuals in a disadvantaged position. These are persons, for example, who cannot speak, see, hear, walk or function independently (KITTAI, 2005). But this does not constitute sufficient reasons for treating some of them without respect, as they possess the capacity for moral consideration (i.e. relationality) and ought to be treated with dignity, especially those with severe cognitive disabilities who sometimes are subjects of physical or emotional abuse. Establishing equality might require “making moral claims based on something that all human beings share in common” (TOLLEFSEN 2010, 184), which is moral status. This calls for an extension of moral worth to include mentally disabled persons since they are also members of the moral community. The question thus is, can normative personhood include mentally disabled persons in the moral community?

The above objections show that the normative conception of personhood, especially the strand championed by Menkiti (1984, 2004) does not possess the resources to account for some groups of persons, including the mentally disabled individuals in its moral orbit, due to its emphasis on moral perfection and excellence. Thus, there is a need to renegotiate, deconstruct, and reconstruct a novel understanding of personhood that will be able to accommodate all by virtue of ontological features (capacity for relationships). I further argue that Menkiti’s theory is practice-based, thereby excluding the mentally disabled who possess the human capacity for relationships (though in potentiality), and this capacity for relationships is predicated on the principle of relationality, sustained by moral consideration as I will show in the subsequent section. I will now turn to the next section to discuss another understanding of normative personhood, showing its egalitarian nature using moral status as a theoretical framework.

Personhood and Moral Status

In the preceding section, I discussed some serious objections to Menkiti’s normative personhood. These objections are because the prevailing conceptions of personhood are predicated on ontological progression and transformation gained through the process of incorporation (MENKITI, 1984, 2004), which implies moral excellencies, and perfection. This automatically excludes some groups of persons, like mentally disabled persons, from moral consideration. Here, I will attempt another conception of personhood in African philosophical thought using the concept of moral status. Manuel Toscano (2011, 16) conceives moral status as “that normative condition that determines how this entity ought to be treated, and it is the sole prerogative of the society to establish this normative framework”. This implies that it is society that sets out the modalities for the normative framework and moral status. It must be noted that the idea of moral status comes in degrees. Maryanne Warren (2000) holds that an entity can possess various degrees of moral status. This degree is not limitless, it culminates in what functions as full moral status. One can argue that it is only actual entities that can possess moral status. This, in a way, excludes fetuses and embryo from moral consideration since only those in actual existence deserves moral status. What this implies is that not all entities are accorded moral status to the same degree.

Thaddeus Metz (2012) underscores this point when he argues that mentally disabled persons and infants possess higher moral status than animals. According to him:

Compared with animals, normal human beings are more able to include “deformed” humans such as psychopaths, as well as the mentally incapacitated, in a “we”, cooperate with them, act in ways likely to improve their quality of life, exhibit sympathetic emotions with them, and act for their sake. We do much more for the psychopathic and the mentally incapacitated than we do animals, which is evidence of a greater ability to make them an object of a friendly relationship. (Metz 2012, 397)

The preceding entails that there are degrees of moral status depending on the ontological feature or relevant moral properties of an entity. However, what is important is that it places entities on the scale of moral worth, which accords them with moral consideration. The central idea here is that an entity possesses moral worth that commands moral obligations from a moral agent by virtue of its ontological features or capacities. Here, I identify the capacity for relationships as an ontological trait all humans possess, whether mentally sound or not. This implies that an individual ought to be treated as a subject of moral obligation based on their morally important capacity for relationship. That is, one is a person if one possesses the capacity to enter a mutual relationship with others in the community. This is a form of “modal-relationalism”, which entails that something has moral status by possessing a “certain causal or intentional connection with another being” (METZ 2012, 322, 392). This human capacity for relationship is sufficient to attract moral consideration and respect, not unchosen facts of disability. It is worth noting that the capacity for relationships here entails the human instinct or inclination to relate with others and enter into a healthy relationship with others without necessarily being discriminated against.

In the discussion thus far, it has been shown that Menkiti’s normative personhood is exclusionary because it does not possess the resources to accommodate mentally disabled persons as subjects of moral consideration; it is, therefore, untenable. To achieve inclusivity, I contend that personhood should be a matter of human capacity for relationships. It is important at this point to draw a distinction between ability and capacity. While ability implies the physical power to act, capacity implies the mental power to will and judge. Menkiti’s theory seems to align with the individual’s ability to act, as a criterion for personhood than capacity. From here, I argue that Menkiti’s normative personhood seems to prescribe the criterion of a ‘well-functioning mental capacity and the ‘ability to attain moral perfection and excellence’ and, which excludes all those who lack it, like the mentally disabled. Instead of a criterion of ‘capacity to exhibit morally important behaviours, such as relationships, which everyone has, whether mentally sound or not.

Furthermore, at the core of any moral community lies ‘relationship’ because it is during people’s relationships that moral and immoral actions are carried out. This shows the importance of the human capacity for relationships in the conception of personhood. That is, as much as an entity possesses the human capacity for relationships with others in the community, they are persons.

However, it must be noted here that a relationship does not imply ‘anything goes’. It is rule-governed, and the rule in this case is the principle of relationality, which states that “Variables necessarily interrelate irrespective of their unique contexts, all things considered, because no variable is an ego solus” governs the activity of the relationship itself (CHIMAKONAM and CHIMAKONAM 2023, 335). But my argument here is that one does not necessarily have to practice relationships in order to qualify as a person. Mere possession of such capacity is sufficient for personhood.

Now, admittedly, the idea of moral status as the basis for personhood is incontestable, what is necessary is to show how those at the margins of personhood deserve to be accorded moral status. As argued by Oyowe (2022), the common understanding of Menkiti’s conception of personhood is that all beings at the margins of personhood lack moral status. I argue that this is a categorical mistake by Menkiti because entities with certain capacities for relationships deserve moral status and are subjects of moral obligations. This capacity for relationships is sufficient for moral recognition because it is at the foundation of communal existence. Metz’s theory of moral status forms the central argument of this novel idea of personhood. Metz (2019, 38-39) argues that “an agent is obligated to treat a person as possessing the capacity for communal relationships, in so far as they are capable of being communed with and communing”. This entails that an individual is a person by virtue of possessing the capacity of relationship, that is, the capacity to relate to and be related to by others in the community.

Specifically, Metz (2021, 106) argues that “agents honour individuals because of their capacity to relate in a communal or friendly way, either as a subject or an object”. This shows that Metz’s conception of personhood revolves around communitarian ethics in which personhood is rooted in the community. Following this line of argument, I argue that personhood is not a matter of ontological transformation as posited by Menkiti (1984, 2004, 2018), but rather, it should be seen from the perspective of capacity to relate and be related to. This will open the window of personhood for the consideration of mentally disabled persons who may not possess the capacity for ontological transformation (resulting in moral perfection) but can relate with others in the community.

For a certain conception of personhood to be inclusive and egalitarian, it should be able to account for all human species by virtue of their ontological feature. This is where moral status becomes necessary. If all human entity possesses moral status to the degree that corresponds to their relational capacity, it implies that by virtue of that moral status, they should be treated as persons. Put differently, if the moral status is granted to all human entities, they become persons since they can commune and be communed with in the community. Although mentally disabled persons may not have the ability for moral perfection, they have the capacity to relate and commune with people in the community. Such capacity for relationships is an important feature that glues society together. This means that those who possess this important capacity should be treated as persons with some degree of moral status. The degree or scale of moral status does not in any way suggest the degree of personhood, but rather a degree of moral obligations owed to the bearer.

I argue that it would be erroneous to assume that mentally disabled people are not persons. They are persons by the mere fact that they possess the capacity for relationships. Evidence of this can be found in the everyday experience where such people actually relate, interact, and sustain healthy relationships with others in the community. It does not matter how effective such relationships are or even whether they could be moral, the capacity for human relationships is mental and accounts for dignity. Critics may argue that it is only a moral person that can make claims of justice, implying that mentally disabled persons cannot make claims of justice. I argue that once there is a place for relationality in the consideration of moral status, which also entails duties and obligations, mentally disabled persons can make claims of justice, even if indirectly through those they share relationships with. Similarly, persons with ability for moral perfection can make claims of justice on behalf of mentally disabled persons who may not have the moral sense to do so. This is a duty of care. In doing this, their human dignity must not be violated because such could truncate the principle of relationality and ethics of conversation, which demand equal and mutual respect. This affirms the central point of Menkiti's assertion that "persons are the sort of entities that are owed the duties of justice" (1984, 177). This implies that only persons can make claims of justice, not non-persons.

However, the idea of justice calls for equal treatment of others as persons. Motsamai Molefe (2020, 21) underscores this fact when he argues that a "human being characterized by personhood relates positively with others". This entails healthy relationships with others irrespective of their mental capacities. Tersely, it suffices to argue that a conception of personhood is not devoid of moral status as this places entities on the scale of moral worth. This is a patient-centered idea of personhood because it places a premium on the moral value or worth of an entity as the subject or the object of moral obligations, which expresses the idea of moral recognition and respect.

More profoundly, there are some facts about an entity that makes it deserve moral consideration. David DeGrazia (2013) refers to this as an independent *moral weight* that points to the inalienable moral worth of a being, making it an object of moral obligation. This moral obligation calls for the extension of moral consideration to accommodate mentally disabled persons due to their capacity for human relationships.

Besides marginality, another problem with Menkiti's conception of personhood is that it is grounded on two-valued logic (CHIMAKONAM 2018). This is so because it is logic that forms the foundation of any thought system. One cannot theorize adequately about African lived experiences or thought systems using the paradigm of Aristotelian two-valued logic. Such an attempt will only make the theory a distorted view of such a worldview. The two-valued logical system polarizes human relationships to create unequal binary opposition between superior and inferior, thereby placing others (in this case, the mentally disabled persons) at the margins of society. Menkiti and some other communitarians made the mistake of grounding personhood on this divisive logical system which is not in line with African communitarian thought. Thus, to address this problem, another logical variant like Ezumezu logic, which is both egalitarian and inclusive becomes necessary.

From the foregoing, I argue that personhood in African thought should be grounded on trivalent logic, (its trivalent nature enables it to address the issue of marginalization and exclusion) as this will give room for inclusivity and equality, and the version I propose here is *Ezumezu* logic. According to Chimakonam (2019, 96), Ezumezu “is a prototype African logic” with universal applicability. It is a “logical framework that can be used to explain and analyze experiences in the African worldview” (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 96). This logical system is suitable for the explanation of the experiences, thoughts, and concepts in African thought. Arguably, it possesses the resources to accommodate contraries and opposing variables. Ezumezu logic is governed by “three laws of thought, which are the laws of *njikoka*, *nnekoka* and *onona-etiti*” (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 138), with different principles. The “law of *njikoka*” places premium on a collective identity as against individual identity, the law of *nnekoka* on the other hand prioritizes complementation which acknowledges collective identity within the group, while the law of *onona-etiti* promotes mutual inclusivity (CHIMAKONAM 2019). Using these laws and “the principle of *Ohakarasi*, which states that the truth of the centre accounts for the truths of its peripheries, all things being equal” (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 102), I contend that normative personhood grounded on Ezumezu logic is both egalitarian and inclusive because it pays attention to all members of the moral community as moral subjects deserving respect and obligation. This reflects the true communitarian spirit which characterizes African thought systems. Here, a person with the capacity for relationship is *ipso facto* a member of a moral community and deserves moral consideration.

Critics may argue that moral consideration comes with moral responsibility; as such, extending moral consideration to mentally disabled persons entails that they should be morally responsible for their actions and inactions. Responding to this, I contend that though there is a collective moral responsibility that comes with moral consideration, there is also a communal moral responsibility, and this covers all members of the community by virtue of their incorporation into the community. Hence, mentally disabled persons are covered by communal moral responsibility since they are not competent moral agents. Also, if it is granted that moral status comes in degrees and mentally disabled persons are accorded some, it will amount to moral inconsistency to demand a higher degree of moral responsibility from them. On another note, in a deterministic worldview, the idea of moral responsibility does not arise because humans are predetermined to act in certain ways in various contexts.

Also, the idea of moral responsibility neglects futuristic events and developments. If mentally disabled persons cannot assume moral responsibility in the present, it does not mean that they may not do so in the future, given a proper context, since they have the initial capacity to do so. Thus, insisting on immediate moral blame or praiseworthy behaviour forecloses the possibility for future improvement.

Conclusion

The agent-centered notion of personhood (persons with moral responsibilities and duties) has been the dominant discourse in African philosophy, sometimes to the detriment of the patient-centered notion of personhood (subjects of moral consideration and concerns). This has given rise to the problem of marginalization

and exclusion of mentally disabled persons from the moral framework since they do not possess the ability for moral perfection that enhances personhood. Departing from the agent-centered notion of personhood, this work pays attention to the patient-centered notion of personhood as an attempt to respond to the problem of excluding mentally disabled persons from the moral community, which also denies them personhood.

The central argument in this essay is that Menkiti's normative conception of personhood is exclusionary because it does not accommodate some groups of people, the mentally disabled persons. To bridge this intellectual gap, there is a need for another conception of personhood, a conception that would be inclusive and egalitarian. Thus, this work argues that normative personhood can be inclusive if it is erected on moral status. As demonstrated earlier, moral status entails the seat of moral obligation. It is that ontological feature that accords one moral worth and obligation. In this new paradigm, an individual is a person by virtue of his or her ontological feature or human capacity for relationships, unlike Menkiti's (1984; 2004) conception, in which an individual acquires personhood by actions that incorporate him into the community through ritual and social transformation that enable such a person to attain moral perfection or excellencies. Menkiti's preceding criterion indicates a well-functioning mental capacity and physical ability before one can attain personhood. In this framework, only those who have attained moral perfection are regarded as persons, and others are non-persons. On the contrary, this work stipulates that the mere possession of relational capacity is sufficient for personhood.

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