INTRODUCING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF DISABILITY

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Abstract

African philosophers have shown a growing interest in the subject of disability, which is unsurprising for four interrelated reasons. First, disability is a major social and public health issue across the African continent, where a significant proportion of the population lives with disabilities, making the subject particularly relevant to African philosophers. Second, philosophy of disability has developed into a distinct and coherent field, prompting African philosophers to contribute to its discourse. Third, African philosophy has long engaged with issues of injustice, including the historical denial of African indigenous people's personhood, knowledge, and rights. Since disability entered academia through the lens of injustice, it aligns naturally with African philosophical concerns. Fourth, disability discourse remains predominantly shaped by voices from the Global North, creating a demand for more diverse perspectives, a demand to which African philosophers are increasingly responding. Despite this growing engagement, these contributions are not yet recognised as forming a distinct field within philosophy. Instead, they are often absorbed into the broader domains of the philosophy of disability, Disability Studies, or African philosophy. This article addresses this gap by demonstrating that African philosophical reflections on disability, ranging from conceptual analyses to discussions of its relationship to justice and moral status, collectively justify the identification of an emergent subfield of *African philosophy of disability*. It further proposes directions for developing this subfield into a more clearly defined and robust area of study.

Keywords: African philosophy of disability, Justice, Moral status, Global North, Global South

Introduction

Philosophers have long engaged with the concept of disability, but it was not until the mid-1980s that the subject began to receive sustained philosophical attention (CURETON & WASSERMAN 2020). By the late 1990s, this engagement had intensified to such an extent that Shelley Tremain argued that it had coalesced into a coherent and identifiable subfield, which she termed the "philosophy of disability" (TREMAIN 2017, VIII). This label has since become the standard way of characterising philosophical inquiry into disability.

Much of this philosophical interest was driven by the emergence of Disability Studies, a field grounded in three main objectives: (1) securing legislative protection for disabled individuals, (2) psychologically empowering people with disabilities, and (3) promoting self-advocacy (VEHMAS n.d.n. 2009). Disability Studies itself arose from the social model of disability, which defines disability as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an inherent biological condition (UPIAS 1976). Together, the social model and the aims of Disability Studies compelled philosophers to engage with the subject of disability in a more serious and systematic manner. Additional factors also contributed to this growing

philosophical interest. First, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, philosophers increasingly turned their attention to questions of difference, alterity, and otherness; lines of inquiry that naturally expanded to include disability (IMAFIDON 2019a). Second, the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 prompted philosophers to test the applicability of Rawlsian principles across a range of contexts, including disability (TREMAIN 2018).

While these developments unfolded, concerns arose regarding the exclusion of perspectives from the Global South. As Shaun Grech (2013, 49) notes, the academic discourse on disability, "remains the arena of the global North (read British and US) academics, with solid white, Western, middle-class foundations retaining an almost exclusive focus on the global North". This critique applies to the philosophy of disability as much as to Disability Studies. In the early stages of African philosophical discourse, much of the discipline's attention was directed toward debates about the legitimacy, methodology, and scope of African philosophy (OMOGE 2022). These foundational disputes, sustained by internal and external scepticism, diverted attention from a range of important topics, including disability. For instance, debates over ethnophilosophy, the nature of personhood, and the relevance of communalism consumed scholarly attention for decades, leaving issues such as disability, mental health, and gender identity comparatively underexplored. Consequently, African philosophers were diverted from their central intellectual mandate: to uncover, articulate, and critically analyse African experiences. This preoccupation has left several important topics, including disability, comparatively underexplored (MANZINI 2020). However, since the late 2010s, African philosophers have begun to engage more seriously and rigorously with disability. Yet despite this growing body of work, these contributions have not been presented as constituting a distinct subfield within African philosophy. This article seeks to fill that gap by demonstrating that these emerging engagements collectively form the foundations of an *African philosophy of disability*. While Elvis Imafidon initiates an important conversation by examining disability through the lens of African philosophies of difference, this article's approach differs in that it synthesises the full range of emerging African contributions — conceptual, moral, communitarian, and justice-focused — to argue explicitly for the recognition of *African philosophy of disability* as a distinct and coherent subfield. Rather than cataloguing every individual contribution, it examines the key trends that have shaped the discourse to date.

The article is divided into two sections. The first explores major themes within the existing literature, namely, conceptions of disability in African contexts, and disability's relation to justice and moral status as central trends in African philosophical thought on disability thus far. The second section identifies critical gaps that must be addressed for African philosophical approaches to disability to mature into a coherent, well-defined subfield.

Key Trends in African Philosophy of Disability

One of the most frequently discussed issues in African philosophy of disability concerns how disability ought to be understood within African contexts. Edwin Etieyibo (2022a; 2022b) is one key contributor to this discussion. He proposes a three-layered account of disability, beginning with the metaphysical, moving to the physio-mental, and culminating in what he terms the holistic view. According to Etieyibo's (2022a) metaphysical account, traditional African cosmologies regard injuries and ailments not merely as biological facts but primarily as spiritual events. Disability, on this view, may arise from supernatural conflicts, divine decrees, misalignment with guardian spirits, witchcraft, malevolent forces, or the absence or withdrawal of protective spiritual entities. In this framework, a person is fundamentally a spiritual being, and misfortune within the spiritual realm creates the conditions for disease or

disability. As Etieyibo (2022a, 163) explains, "by metaphysical disability, I mean disability that has a spiritual or metaphysical place in the metaphysical or spiritual world or sphere".

He then turns to the physio-mental account, which emphasises that a person is not only a spirit but also a physical being. Misfortunes that occur in the spiritual realm manifest in the physical world through the body or mind; it is at this level that disability or disease becomes visible. Etieyibo (2022a, 163) clarifies this by noting that, "whenever this spirit encounters misfortune, the other self, the physical self, becomes ill, diseased, or disabled". Taken together, the metaphysical and physio-mental accounts form what Etieyibo calls the holistic view of disability. As he states, "I will call both the 'physio-mental' disability and 'metaphysical' disability … the holistic notion of disability" (Etieyibo 2022b, 8).

Earlier than Etieyibo, Julie Maybee's (2017; 2019) work offers a different point of view on disability in African contexts, based on the widely accepted view (in African thought) that identity is constituted through community and shared social practices (see HORD & LEE 1995; MENKITI 1984; GYEKYE 1992). Drawing on the African social conception of the self, Maybee argues that disability is not merely an individual or biological matter but is fundamentally social. In this view, disability arises through societal interpretations of bodily difference and the norms that determine what counts as ability.

Another area of attention in African philosophy of disability is the moral status of people with disabilities. One key contribution comes from Patric Ojok and Junior Musenze (2019), who draw upon archaeological evidence from Egypt and Sudan to demonstrate that ancient African societies revered disability. They argued that artifacts from temples and tombs depict people with disabilities alongside kings and high-ranking officials, suggesting a revered status. Lavish burial sites near royal cemeteries indicate not only their high-ranking status but also that they were viewed as gatekeepers to the divine (OJOK AND MUSENZE 2019).

Further illustrating this reverence, Ojok and Musenze highlight Yoruba folklore, where disability is linked to the deity Obatala, the god of creation. According to Yoruba mythology, Obatala, in a state of exhaustion and intoxication, inadvertently shaped individuals with disabilities. However, upon realising this, he vowed to protect them, affirming their special status. This myth reinforces the idea that disabled individuals are not only divine creations but are uniquely cherished. Additionally, Ojok and Musenze reference Eshu (also Esu), the trickster deity, who is often depicted with a limp, to demonstrate that in ancient African spiritualism, disability was perceived as a source of power. Rather than a limitation, Eshu's disability is portrayed as an attribute that grants him superior insight into both the human and supernatural worlds (OJOK and MUSENZE 2019, 4).

While the examples offered by Ojok and Musenze highlight the spiritual significance of disability in ancient African cultures, their analysis also extends into the terrain of moral status. The archaeological and cultural evidence they present, such as the depiction of people with disabilities in royal temples, sacred spaces, and elite burial contexts, does not merely ascribe metaphysical importance to disability. Instead, it reveals that individuals with disabilities were regarded as morally considerable persons, occupying positions of reverence, symbolic authority, and social value. Their inclusion in ritual activities and proximity to rulers signals that disability was associated with ethical esteem and recognition within communal life, not just spiritual potency.

Omotade Adegbindin (2018) aligns with Ojok and Musenze's assertion that disabled individuals held a high moral status in ancient Africa but also contends that this status persists within Yoruba culture, and that this status has not diminished due to colonial influences. He situates his analysis within Yoruba cosmology, which divides reality into the metaphysical (Ìsàlú-ọ̀run) and the material (sàlú-ayé) realms. Within this framework, disability is not merely a physical condition but has spiritual origins and significance. Yoruba thought

distinguishes between the physical body (ara) and the spiritual elements that animate it. The interconnectedness of the two realms means that occurrences in the physical world, including disability, are often interpreted as reflections of spiritual phenomena.

Adegbindin argues that within Yoruba belief systems, disability is not seen as a defect but as an intentional aspect of divine artistry. He challenges the notion that Obatala creates disabled individuals as a form of punishment, instead portraying the deity as an artist shaping diverse human forms according to his creative will (ADEGBINDIN 2018). In Yoruba cosmology, the concept of normalcy is irrelevant; each human form is an expression of divine intent. To view disability as an error would not only misinterpret Obatala's role but would also be considered blasphemous, as it undermines the sacred nature of his creations. This perspective reframes disability as an aspect of divine expression rather than a deviation from an ideal.

Adegbindin further explores the mutual interaction between the spiritual and material realms in Yoruba cosmology, where spiritual entities influence the conditions of the physical world. In this belief system, addressing disability often involves both spiritual and traditional practices. This holistic worldview shapes how disability is understood, emphasising that it is neither a flaw nor an affliction but a manifestation of divine will.

This view has clear moral implications: to perceive disability as a mistake is to misunderstand the metaphysical foundations of humanity and to commit a moral error by denying the sacredness inherent in every person. For Adegbindin, disability therefore demands respect, dignity, and moral acknowledgement, not pity or exclusion. His account frames disability as a legitimate and valued dimension of human diversity, and in doing so, anchors the moral status of people with disabilities in the ethical and cosmological commitments of Yoruba thought. Through this lens, disability becomes a site of moral affirmation, challenging any interpretation that equates bodily difference with diminished worth.

Furthermore, African philosophy of disability focuses on the intersection of Afro-communitarianism and disability., Nompumelelo Manzini (2018; 2020) offers a sharp critique of Afro-communitarian conceptions of personhood, arguing that they are marked by sexism, anti-queerness, and, importantly, ableism. She contends that they marginalise people with disabilities by normalising able-bodiedness as the standard for full moral recognition. On this point, she states that "[t]he critique that the conceptions of persons are ableist stems from the idea that these theories have normalized able-bodiedness at the core of what counts as persons" (MANZINI 2020, 384). Her critique focuses on Ifeanyi Menkiti's normative conception of personhood and Kagame's shadow thesis. Menkiti's view ties personhood to participation in communal life and to rites of passage such as naming, puberty, marriage, and parenthood. This, Manzini argues, excludes those who cannot meet these expectations, including infertile individuals, since "the rite highlights the ways in which the normative conception of persons is ableist, in so far as infertile individuals cannot participate in such a rite" (MANZINI 2018, 23). Kagame similarly links personhood to intellectual capacity, thereby centring able-bodiedness and able-mindedness in determining who counts as a person.

Manzini extends her critique by showing how these frameworks systematically devalue various marginalised groups. She argues that Menkiti's normative conception of personhood upholds heteronormative and biologically determinist assumptions that exclude intersex individuals, including individuals like Caster Semenya, whose embodiment challenges rigid reproductive norms. She also critiques Kagame's insistence that a sound mind is necessary for personhood, which, she argues, relegates individuals with Down Syndrome, autism, or traumatic brain injuries to a lower moral category. As she notes, Kagame's framework risks classifying such individuals as ibintu (things) rather than persons

in certain communal settings (MANZINI 2020). Through these examples, Manzini demonstrates that both Menkiti and Kagame embed ableist assumptions at the heart of their theories, thereby denying full personhood to those who do not conform to communal expectations.

Evaristus Eyo (2023) supports Manzini's critique, further arguing that Menkiti's normative personhood is inherently exclusionary due to its emphasis on practice-based personhood. On this point, he states 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" (EYO 2023, 62). This perspective underscores the exclusionary nature of Menkiti's model, which fails to accommodate those whose participation in communal life is non-traditional or limited by cognitive challenges. Eyo extends this critique to include gender and queer perspectives, arguing that African communitarian conceptions of personhood privilege normative identities while marginalising those who do not conform to established communal roles.

Elvis Imafidon (2017; 2018; 2019b; 2020; 2021) also critiques Afro-communitarian conception(s) of personhood, specifically highlighting its ableist treatment of individuals with albinism. He observes that in predominantly Black African communities, people with albinism are often perceived as *other*, effectively undermining their full inclusion in society. Imafidon (2017, 167) notes that "[i]n the densely black populated African communities, a person with albinism is generally considered as another, a different and an unusual entity, not as a human being". Imafidon grounds his critique in lived experiences, exposing the real-world exclusion of individuals with albinism within African communities. He argues that Afro-communitarianism perceives albinism as a threat to collective identity, leading to the systemic marginalisation of affected individuals.

According to Imafidon, self-worth for individuals with disabilities must be actively asserted in defiance of societal rejection. He describes this process as *earned self-worth*, stating that individuals must challenge social norms to claim their humanity and value (IMAFIDON 2020). This insight reveals a critical tension within Afro-communitarianism: while it purports to champion communal solidarity, it simultaneously excludes those who do not fit conventional norms. Imafidon's analysis calls for a revaluation of Afro-communitarian ideals to ensure they genuinely uphold inclusivity and human dignity.

Motsamai Molefe (2022) and Molefe and Elphus Maude (2023) offer an alternative perspective on disability within the Afro-communitarian context. While examining the African vitality theories such as Thaddeus Metz's communitarian theory, Ikuenobe's performative theory, and his own capacity theory, Molefe (2022) argues that these theories, by de-emphasising rationality and autonomy as prerequisites for moral worth, provide novel insights into the status of individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. Vitality theory asserts that the mere possession of a specific kind of life force (at the levels normally found in human beings) confers moral consideration, thereby conferring full moral status on cognitively disabled individuals. Similarly, Molefe interprets Metz's communitarian theory as grounding moral status in sentience and the capacity to experience harm rather than in rational engagement, leading to the same conclusion. Regarding Ikuenobe's performative theory, Molefe identifies two interpretations: an inclusive one, which recognises inherent human capacities even when they cannot be exercised, and an exclusionary one, which ties moral status to active communal contributions. This duality highlights the tension between moderate and radical communitarianism, where the former seeks to include all individuals as valuable members of society, while the latter remains exclusionary, reinforcing ableist and normative biases. Consequently, under the radical communitarian interpretation, cognitively disabled individuals lack moral status, whereas under the moderate interpretation, they

possess partial moral status. In his capacity theory of dignity, Molefe (2022; 2023) argues that individuals with severe cognitive disabilities should be regarded as objects of virtue, even if they cannot fully realise or perfect such virtue themselves. By positioning them as such, his framework affirms their inherent belonging to the moral community, entitling them to full moral status.

Another area of attention in African philosophical disability discourse is that of justice. Oche Onazi (2020; 2022) highlights the potential of Godfrey Tangwa's theory of personhood in advancing justice and inclusion for people with disabilities in Africa. Tangwa's conception of personhood rejects moral distinctions between being human and being a person. Onazi (2020, 3) states that "[a] major advantage of Tangwa's work is that it makes no moral distinction between persons and human beings or rank human beings according to individuating features of age, characteristics, and status. It also does not distinguish between infants, people with disabilities, and people without disabilities". Adopting Tangwa's theory, Onazi argues, could foster a more equitable and accommodating perspective on disability, aligning African communitarian values with inclusivity and recognition, ensuring all members, regardless of ability, are embraced as integral parts of the community.

Earlier, Mariah Berghs (2017) advocates for Ubuntu as a framework for justice and inclusion. She argues that, within an Ubuntu perspective, disability is not a deficit but a form of human diversity, reflecting differences that do not necessarily diminish one's quality of life. Berghs (2017, 2) asserts that "[i]n an Ubuntu model of disability, impairment becomes cognitive, sensory, mental, physical (inclusive of biological), and spiritual diversity that can have a multitude of shared meanings that society, as a human collective, constantly (re)make together". This approach situates disability as an integral aspect of communal life, where one's identity is deeply interwoven with collective existence. While this interconnectedness might appear restrictive from an individualistic perspective, potentially overshadowing personal autonomy, it affirms one's humanity within an African context. True humanity, according to Ubuntu, manifests through relationships defined by harmony, belonging, sharing, love, and care. While non-disability may obscure this deep integration, disability makes it more visible. The Ubuntu model, therefore, reimagines impairment as a form of diversity that enriches communal solidarity and affirms human dignity.

A key aspect of Berghs's Ubuntu model is the distinction between disability and disablement. Disability refers to physical or mental conditions that may deviate from societal norms of function or appearance. Disablement, however, arises when this diversity is perceived as inhuman, when individuals are seen as threats to the social order, disruptors of kinship relations, or morally excluded from the category of the human. Berghs (2017, 2) explains that "[w]hen that otherness or diversity, disability, becomes a difference predicated as inhuman, for example, in that a person is viewed as threatening the social order, kinship relations are viewed as morally outside the realm of what it socially means to be human". This perspective underscores that disablement results from societal responses, specifically discrimination and exclusion. For instance, Etieyibo and Odirin Omiegbe (2016, 3) note that "people with oculocutaneous albinism are broadly discriminated against in Nigeria. Sometimes they are isolated, and at other times they are trafficked and killed". Such acts exemplify disablement, where individuals with disabilities face marginalisation or harm due to societal prejudice. Importantly, Berghs contends that disablement is not a fixed state; it fluctuates based on communal attitudes. An inclusive, compassionate society diminishes disablement, allowing only the condition of disability to remain. Thus, disablement is contingent on social perceptions and can be mitigated through shifts in collective behaviour and values.

In Berghs's Ubuntu model, disablement has no rightful place. Disablement signifies societal intolerance toward human diversity, which Berghs argues fundamentally violates Ubuntu's core principles. She emphasises that "[a]t the heart of Ubuntu is a respect for a diversity of what it means to be human" (BERGHS 2017, 2). This suggests that failing to acknowledge and respect diversity undermines Ubuntu's foundational values. By embracing inclusivity and rejecting disablement, Ubuntu fosters a society where disability is recognized as part of the human experience rather than a marker of deficiency.

From the above discussions, the discourse on disability in African philosophy can be broadly categorized into three areas: conceptualising disability, moral status, Afro-communitarianism, and disability and justice. However, this discussion is not exhaustive; it does not cover epistemological, feminist, developmental, or other emerging strands in African philosophy of disability. Regarding the three areas highlighted in this article, African philosophers do not necessarily treat these issues as separate or isolated. This interconnectedness may lead to concerns about this categorisation, as it risks overlooking the overarching nature of these discussions. Nonetheless, a closer examination often reveals the primary focus of each philosopher's work.

Gaps and Future Directions

Although African philosophers have made significant contributions to questions of moral status, justice, communitarianism, and the conceptualisation of disability, one important area remains underexamined: the relationship between disability and well-being. That is, while meaningful insights exist, the current literature stops short of providing a sustained and analytically precise account of disability's relation to well-being. For instance, Adegbindin maintains that:

> A careful reflection on the mythography of Òrìṣàńlá is therefore not a feeble admission of our claim that differing bodily configurations are better conceived as works of art that demonstrate 'a pluralistic world of abilities'... The formation of this positive identity would reconstruct disability as a diversity to be affirmed and, by instantiation, reconfigure negative notions of institutional exclusion, enfeebling sense of shame, socio-economic limitations associated with disability. (ADEGBINDIN 2018, 92)

Likewise, Etieyibo suggests:

> [H]olistic view of disability suggests an African cultural worldview on disability emphasizing differences. That is, beings or entities are different in degrees and not in kinds since they are but beings of the same nature or kind. This is so given that beings are in possession of different degrees or amount(sic) of forces and that it is this that demarcates or marks difference or differences. (ETIEYIBO 2022b, 12)

Yet, despite these promising insights, both philosophers move too quickly to normative claims about the value of disability without first establishing a clear and analytically defensible account of what disability and well-being refer to in African contexts. Without this conceptual groundwork, their conclusions, while meaningful, lack the depth and argumentative foundation necessary to substantively develop the discourse. Had they undertaken this prior conceptual clarification, one could reasonably regard them as leading the philosophical conversation on disability toward what is arguably its most urgent and under-theorised dimension: its relationship to well-being.

A careful examination of this relationship is essential because prevailing assumptions about it contribute to the perception and treatment of people with disabilities. Moreover, a

deeper understanding of this dynamic is necessary to develop meaningful interventions aimed at addressing various challenges faced by people with disabilities in Africa. The factors contributing to these challenges are numerous, yet they predominantly stem from the way society perceives and treats them. As Mark Mostert (2016) notes, there are approximately 300 million African children with disabilities, the vast majority of whom are excluded from educational institutions. Furthermore, adults with disabilities are routinely marginalised when it comes to employment opportunities, as well as social, political, and economic life (CHARLES n.d.n., 2023). This systemic exclusion effectively denies them full citizenship and participation in their communities. Additionally, Africans with disabilities are significantly more vulnerable to abuse, particularly when intersecting factors such as gender, race, age, and socio-economic status further disadvantage them (EMMETT & ALANT 2006).

Given these socially constructed barriers, it is difficult to envision a reality in which people with disabilities in Africa lead flourishing lives. However, some argue that the disadvantages they face are not solely attributable to societal attitudes and treatment but also to the inherent limitations imposed by their disabilities. These may include difficulties with mobility, chronic pain, sensory processing limitations, or communication impairments, factors that may affect daily functioning even in supportive social environments. This argument emanates from the perspective that "disability (in persons) is an impairment present from birth or occurring during one's lifetime that makes someone *unable* to do, or limited in doing, things or performing activities *normally* expected from her or him and includes the person's experience of that impairment in a social context" (IMAFIDON 2019b, 14 emphasis original). This perspective suggests that if all societal barriers were eliminated, individuals with disabilities would still experience disadvantages due to the constraints of their impairments. This claim challenges the idea that disability-related disadvantages are entirely socially constructed. If true, it would mean that in a non-ableist world, disability would impose no disadvantages, an assertion many find implausible as it downplays the role of impairment itself in shaping lived experiences.

Thus, one could argue that children with disabilities are excluded from education not only due to societal discrimination but also because they may struggle with comprehension or practical application of what is taught in the classroom. From this standpoint, disability itself, rather than being merely recognised as a societal attitude, should be recognised as a significant factor compromising wellbeing. This debate mirrors an ongoing discourse in Western philosophy, particularly the longstanding tension between Disability Studies scholars and bioethicists regarding the definition of disability and the theoretical frameworks appropriate for understanding it.

By the mid-2000s, the dominant perspective in this discourse was that disability is a crucial subject of inquiry because of its relationship to well-being. Without an assumed connection between disability and a diminished quality of life, it is unlikely that the subject of disability would have garnered substantial academic attention. For instance, if having a physical impairment had no impact, real or perceived, on an individual's ability to live well, disability would not be as prominent a topic in philosophical inquiry. Whether the challenges of living with a disability arise from the impairment itself or from societal exclusion, the link between disability and wellbeing remains central. This connection, in turn, raises pressing ethical and legislative questions: *Is life as a disabled person worth living? Is it morally permissible to abort a foetus that shows signs of a disability? Should disability be cured or preserved? What legal and policy measures are necessary for ensuring the rights and well-being of disabled individuals?* These questions arise precisely because they presuppose a connection between disability and diminished well-being, a connection that requires philosophical scrutiny.

Reflecting this shift in focus, from the mid-2000s onward, the relationship between disability and wellbeing became the cornerstone of philosophical inquiry on disability. Andrew Schroeder encapsulates this transformation by noting the following:

> It would not be an exaggeration, I think, to say that the central question in the philosophy of disability in recent years has been the neutrality of disability — roughly, whether disabilities tend to reduce individual well-being (even in the absence of ableism and discrimination), or whether they are instead merely different ways of being that are not in themselves worse for their bearers. (SCHROEDER 2018, 1)

Two opposing positions characterise this debate. On one side, the *bad-difference view* argues that disability is inherently detrimental to well-being. On the other hand, the *mere-difference view* contends that disability is neutral in terms of its impact on an individual's well-being. These contrasting theories stem from differing conceptions of both disability and wellbeing, making the discussion complex rather than straightforward.

Within an African context, this discussion is particularly relevant for the reasons already stated. If African philosophy of disability is to develop into a well-defined and effective field of study, it must begin by establishing the nature of the relationship between disability and wellbeing. Social behaviour, government policy, and medical practices all hinge on the understanding of this relationship. However, this inquiry cannot proceed without first clarifying the concepts of disability and well-being, not merely for the sake of definition, but to illuminate their interconnection.

A critical misstep in African philosophical discourse on disability has been an excessive focus on defining disability rather than addressing the more fundamental question: What features make a condition count as a disability within African philosophical and cultural contexts? Tom Shakespeare (1999, 25) argues that "[w]e all know what a disabled person is: it is a common-sense category, much as 'woman' or 'black person' or 'homosexual'". The real challenge lies in explaining what unifies all conditions typically classified as disabilities in African contexts. That is, what common feature makes conditions such as dwarfism, albinism, mutism, aphasia, autism, PTSD, schizophrenia, and dyslexia belong to the category of 'disability' despite their striking heterogeneity. As Elizabeth Barnes (2016, 12) puts it; "A successful account of disability needs to tell us what unifies these disparate cases — it needs to explain what (if anything) it is that individual disabilities have in common with each other".

A similar issue arises with the concept of well-being. African philosophy has traditionally framed well-being in communal terms, without necessarily making it relevant to individualised cases such as disability. Polycarp Ikuenobe (2018, 594) explains that, "...African view indicates that practically, 'we' is connected intimately to the 'self' or 'I' in the social-moral context of a community." He emphasises that "self-regarding concerns and one's well-being cannot be achieved without communities (other-regarding concerns) that provide relevant goods and harmonious conditions" (Ikuenobe 2018, 594). However, to properly investigate the relationship between disability and well-being, this communal framing must be supplemented by an examination of well-being from an individualistic standpoint.

This individual dimension of well-being raises questions such as, *what does well-being mean for a particular person?* Stephen Campbell (2016, 403) clarifies that "to say that x is good for Sam implies that Sam stands in a special relationship to x: it is something that benefits him and improves his well-being". This highlights that well-being is inherently tied to personal benefit, something that directly improves an individual's quality of life.

Conversely, the impersonal perspective regards well-being as an abstract good, detached from the experiences or interests of any particular individual.

Once these fundamental concepts are properly articulated and the nature of their relationship is established, it will become easier to address critical issues such as moral status, justice, healthcare, and policy. A nuanced and well-grounded African philosophy of disability must, therefore, begin by rigorously exploring what disability is and how it relates to individual well-being.

Conclusion

The discussions presented in this article demonstrate that African philosophical engagement with disability is far more developed and diverse than has been widely recognised. Across conceptual analyses, moral status debates, critiques of Afro-communitarianism, and reflections on justice, African philosophers have generated a substantial and growing body of work that warrants being understood as a distinct subfield: *African philosophy of disability*. What unites these contributions is a shared effort to illuminate how disability is conceptualised, lived, and normatively evaluated within African worldviews, spiritual traditions, moral systems, and social structures.

However, much of the existing scholarship focuses either on descriptive accounts of cultural beliefs or on normative claims regarding inclusion, dignity, and justice. Yet these arguments often presuppose, without thoroughly examining, one of the most foundational questions in the wider global philosophy of disability: how disability relates to well-being. As demonstrated by scholars such as Adegbindin and Etieyibo, there are promising gestures toward understanding disability as a form of human diversity within African philosophical frameworks. Still, these insights stop short of offering a sustained analytical account of well-being, either at the communal or individual level.

Developing this line of inquiry is essential. A clearer account of what unifies the conditions classified as disabilities in African societies, and of how well-being should be understood both communally and individually, would strengthen subsequent debates on moral status, justice, health care, education, and public policy. More importantly, it would illuminate how African societies might respond more effectively and ethically to the lived realities of people with disabilities.

Recognising African philosophy of disability as a subfield provides an opportunity to consolidate existing scholarship, identify conceptual continuities, and chart new directions for research. By grounding future work in a more rigorous analysis of disability and well-being, African philosophers can deepen the theoretical foundations of the field and make a distinctive contribution to global philosophical conversations about disability.

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