TRANSHUMANISM IN AFRICA: A CONVERSATION WITH ADEMOLA FAYEMI ON HIS AFROFUTURISTIC ACCOUNT OF PERSONHOOD

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Abstract

In "Personhood in a Transhumanist Context: An African Perspective", Ademola K. Fayemi advocates for a kind of Afro-communitarian theory of transhumanism that is compatible with the Afro-communitarian idea of personhood. In this paper, I examine Fayemi's account of transhumanism - in particular, his Afrofuturistic account of personhood. Against his Afrofuturistic account of personhood, I argue that enhancing personhood is more plausibly viewed in terms of what I call 'technologized personhood' and that even if such a technologized personhood contributes to the common good, this would not support the moral permissibility of transhumanism from an Afro-communitarian standpoint. I will deploy Ifeanyi Menkiti's account of personhood to contend with the view that such a technologized personhood would have a great implication for the Afro-normative conception of personhood in the transhumanist future.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Afrofuturism, Afrofuturistic account of personhood, normative conception of personhood, Ifeanyi Menkiti

Introduction

In his recent article, "Personhood in a Transhumanist Context: An African Perspective", Ademola Fayemi advocates for a kind of Afro-communitarian theory of transhumanism that he calls "Afrofuturism" (FAYEMI 2018, 71). Fayemi's Afrofuturism is based on his Afrofuturistic account of personhood teased out from Yoruba

worldview and philosophically grounded on the Afro-communitarian idea of personhood being socially defined in terms of harmonious relationships with members of the community. Fayemi advances three central claims on this ground: First, he argues that transhumanism in Africa is strongly motivated by the moral problems confronting the continent that need to be urgently addressed to ameliorate the human existential condition in the continent. Second, he argues that the ontological conception of personhood in the Yoruba worldview suits transhumanism since both believe that human nature is not rigid and fixed but a work in progress and alterable. Finally, he claims that the Afrofuturistic account of personhood grounds the permissibility of transhumanism in Africa since the relational capacity of enhanced persons would incorporate them better into the community and, in turn, contribute to both individual well-being and the common good of the community.

I agree with the idea that the technological enhancement of personhood would increase the relational capacity of individuals and better situate them to contribute to the common good. However, I will take issue, in this article, with the idea that transhumanism is compatible with the Afro-communitarian normative concept of personhood. On the contrary, I argue that enhancing personhood is more plausibly viewed as technologized personhood and that even if such a technologized personhood contributes to the common good, this would not support the moral permissibility of transhumanism from an Afro-communitarian standpoint.

In what follows, I will invoke an argument to cast doubt on Fayemi's Afrofuturistic transhumanist project in Africa. (I will deploy Ifeanyi Menkiti's Afro-communitarian account of personhood to contend that a technologized personhood would have a great implication for the Afro-normative conception of personhood in the transhumanist future. This is the idea that normative personhood would be radicalized to technologized personhood to such an extent that it would eliminate the moral weight placed on attaining personhood and render the very idea of personhood absurd. This argument will ground my claim that transhumanism is incompatible with Afro-communitarian personhood, which, in turn, casts doubt on the permissibility of transhumanism from an Afro-communitarian stance.

The article is structured thus: the first part discusses Fayemi's Afrofuturistic transhumanist project in Africa. The final part critically engages with his Afrofuturistic account of personhood in light of Ifeanyi Menkiti's Afro-communitarian account normative conception of personhood.

Fayemi's Afrofuturistic Transhumanist Project in Africa

In what follows, I discuss Fayemi's Afrofuturistic account of personhood, which aims to demonstrate that transhumanism is compatible with African thoughts. From an Afro-communitarian standpoint, Fayemi discusses two accounts of personhood, namely, ontological and normative. At the ontological level, he construes personhood from the Yoruba understanding of a person (*eniyan* in the Yoruba language). He posits that a person comprises of some fundamental elements, which are *inu* (psychological self) that is responsible for individuals' character dispositions, *ara* (body), *emi* (the vital spirits of the body or soul), and *ori* (destiny) (FAYEMI 2018, 58). From the normative angle, Fayemi posits that personhood in the Yoruba thought system is a process of adding moral virtues to one's *iwa* (character) through a harmonious relationship with other members of the community (FAYEMI 2018, 58-59). He philosophically extends this normative sense to the Afro-communitarian stand and claims that personhood should be best seen as "a constructive ensemble of virtues of relations of both potential and capable beings in the community" (FAYEMI 2018, 59). Since, "[M]orality, to a greater extent, is a function of relationship among people in the community with an emphasis on sharing a way of life and caring for another's qualitative existence" (FAYEMI 2018, 59). This Afro-communitarian conception of a person entails that personhood, normatively speaking, is socially defined. In this sense, a person attains full personhood, he says, by acquiring a higher capacity for modal relationality. He holds that there is a sort of relationship between the ontological and normative accounts of personhood within this worldview. According to him, this relationship is well captured with the Yoruba belief that a person's *iwa* and actions reflect one's *inu*. In Fayemi's words; "[T]he *inú* is responsible for a person's character." He further explains that "[H]aving a good *inú* is reflected in one's character," and "[I]f the

inú is however bad, immoral actions will result from a bad *inú"* (FAYEMI 2018, 58).

Making both the ontological and normative conception of personhood the basis for establishing the compatibility of transhumanism with personhood in the African philosophical context, Fayemi defends an Afrofuturistic account of personhood that aims at a philosophical reconstruction of personhood in order to harmonize it with some censored tenets of transhumanism. As he argues, "Afrofuturistic account of personhood recognizes the normative, ontological and the communal dimensions of personhood but it is neither consumed by the idiosyncrasies of African uniqueness nor the supernatural/ontological embeddedness of personhood" (FAYEMI 2018, 71). He further argues that "[A]n Afrofuturistic account of personhood imagines the existence of biotechnologies, pharmacological, neurobehavioural enhancing drugs capable of enriching moral personhood in the African weltanschauung" (FAYEMI 2018, 71).

Fayemi argues that such a reconstruction is necessary because the "religio-ontological" nature of personhood within the Yoruba worldview, and, by extension, the Africa worldview, gatekeeps against the "evolutionary spirit" of transhumanism. For him, the religio-ontological African personhood recognizes the use of "divination to modify human essence and enhance the source of our moral disposition" making it "radically" different from the transhumanists use of science and technology to "radical(ly) and progressive(ly) transform human nature in consonance with the evolutionary spirit" (FAYEMI 2018, 70). According to Fayemi, an Afrofuturistic account of personhood goes beyond this religio-ontological African personhood to articulate an African-inspired idea of personhood that accommodates science and technology.

Like the religio-ontological African idea of personhood, Fayemi's Afrofuturistic account of personhood well acknowledges that a person's *inu* is amendable and alterable through *Ifa* divination, and, therefore, "human essence" is not "particularly fixed but allows for modifications" (FAYEMI 2018, 70). He claims that this alterable human essence better situates personhood with the transhumanists' assumption that human nature is dynamic and a work in progress, and can be altered through science and technology. Unlike the religio-ontological African idea of personhood that limits the

alteration of human essence to life-promoting technologies and non-evolutionary ontological values, the Afrofuturistic account of personhood acknowledges the use of science and technology, in the evolutionary spirit, to alter human essence.

At this point, Fayemi has set the scene for his transhumanists project in Africa, what he calls "Afrofuturism". Afrofuturism involves the "critical African imaginations of a *posthuman future* taking cognizance of African history, culture, religion and philosophy in the light of shifting dynamics in scientific, technological and power relations in the evolving world order" (FAYEMI 2018, 71, emphasis mine). Here, one will observe that Fayemi's Afrofuturism describes a posthuman future in Africa. This suggests that Fayemi envisions creating posthumans[1] that would be technologized species of Africa's posthuman future. Transhumanists, such as Ray Kurzweil (2005), Nick Bostrom (1998, 2003, 2005, 2008), Max More (2013), claim that the changes involved in the transition to the posthuman future would be so radical that humans would be transformed to entirely new species. As pointed out by Christopher Hook, for instance, "a posthuman would no longer be a human being, having been so significantly altered as to no longer

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[1] There are different definitions of posthuman as there are different types of posthumanism; see Stefan Sorgner (2009), Robert Ranisch and Stefan Sorgner (2014) for an overview of posthumanism; Andy Miah (2008), and Cary Wolfe (2010) for the different histories of posthumanism. Others are Donna Haraway (1991), Katherine N. Hayles (1999), Rosi Braidotti (2013), Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2014). However, my focus here will be on the transhumanist posthumanism that sees posthumans as its final goal achieved by "escaping or repressing not just [humanity's] animal origins in nature, the biological and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether…" (WOLFE 2010, xv). This is the sense Fayemi might be said to be employing the term, since he holds that "[t]he vision of the pro-transhumanist is to arrive at a stage where the enhanced humans or posthumans, as they are referred to, are such that their basic capacities will "radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards." [And as such] these posthumans may be "resistant to disease and impervious to aging," have "unlimited youth and vigour," and "reach intellectual heights as far above any current human genius as humans are above other primates." They may have "increased capacity for pleasure, love, artistic appreciation, and serenity" and "experience novel states of consciousness" that current human brains cannot access" (FAYEMI 2018, 64).

represent the human species" (HOOK 2004, 2517). Humanity will then become posthumanity – a stage where superintelligent machines would outlive humans. This idea situates better with Fayemi's Afrofuturism that envisions a posthuman future where Africans would have been radically enhanced and their social conditions transformed to overcome their biological and natural limitations through intensified use of science and technology (see FAYEMI 2018, 64). At this posthuman future, Africans would be, as Simone Young (2006) describes with so much enthusiasm:

> Liberated from biological slavery, an immortalized species, Homo cyberneticus, will set out for the stars. Conscious life will gradually spread throughout the galaxy… until finally, in the unimaginably distant future, the whole universe has come alive, awakened to its own nature—a cosmic mind become conscious of itself as a living entity—omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent (YOUNG 2006, 44).

Fayemi claims that Africans in the posthuman future will no longer bear the burden of disease, aging, cognitive incapacity, moral disability, and probably death: "[A]gainst the various forms of suffering that humans' experience, transhumanism brings the hope of enhancing human nature in plausible ways that would whittle down experiences of pains, human biological sufferings, and lift the albatross imposed on humans by nature" (FAYEMI 2018, 63, see also 64). For him, they would possess greater physical, moral, and psychological capacities in this posthuman future. Also, they would make better moral choices and would be better at actualizing their goals at the individual and societal levels. In his words, "the possibility is high that the psychological-self (*inú*), the internal structure of a person, when enhanced, would promote the self, and by extension, the common good through improvement in moral personhood paradigms rather than making human personality ignoble" (FAYEMI 2018, 70).

Furthermore, Fayemi believes that the transition to this posthuman future involves the genetic and moral enhancement of both ontological and normative personhood. On the one hand,

Fayemi argues that through moral enhancement[2], normative personhood can be enhanced. A person, he says, can be morally enhanced to be more moral and to better incorporate into society by engaging in a harmonious relationship with other members of the community. Moral enhancement would expand "the capacity frontiers of humans as social and relational beings" (FAYEMI 2018, 71). For instance, through moral enhancement, a sadist who exhibits an anti-social attitude towards others would be morally augmented to exhibit friendliness towards others and become pro-social. For Fayemi, such a morally enhanced individual has increased their "capacity of modal relationality to become a full person, a subject rather than object of personhood" (FAYEMI 2018, 71).

On the other hand, Fayemi claims that there is an urgent need for genetic enhancement[3] in Africa, especially in the face of political corruption that has plagued the socio-political sphere of the continent. Ontologically, he argues that since a person's character is connected to their psychological self (*inu*), and technologically enhancing the psychological self would help Africans to act morally. For him, there is a connection between "moral disorder" and "genetic defect", and genetically altering the gene responsible for one's moral disposition would alter the genetic defect and enhance

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[2] Fayemi did not define this term, but moral enhancement is construed here as *biomedical and genetic interventions that would directly and radically augment individuals moral capacities beyond what is therapeutically necessary and considered normal for humans so that they always act morally and become more virtuous.*

[3] In the absence of a definition by Fayemi, it is important to note that human genetic enhancement is a *means through which the human genome can be manipulated using molecular engineering techniques known as gene editing to prevent genetic diseases (see SAVULESCU 2001, 2007, DEGRAZIA 2012, VEIT 2018). This manipulation can be done at the somatic and germline genetic levels. While the somatic genetic enhancement changes the gene of a person for medical purposes, germline genetic enhancement is deliberately changing the genes in oocyte, sperm, embryo and foetus.* "Methods of genetic modification currently available include the sex selection of offspring as well as the exclusion of offspring with certain genetic diseases—either by prenatal screening and selective abortion or by in vitro fertilization and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and embryo selection" (KOURANY 2014, 984).

one's moral behaviour.[4] As Fayemi argues; "[P]olitical corruption which may be rightly deemed an offshoot of our moral disposition is thus curable through the deployment of genetic engineering and other biotechnological advancements in tackling the genes responsible for our moral disposition and biases" (FAYEMI 2018, 70). He then concludes that "the enhancement of genes responsible for a good character can engender a better social structure in contemporary society in a therapeutic sense rather than engendering radical alteration of human nature" (FAYEMI 2018, 70, emphasis mine). In the next section, I will critically engage with Fayemi's Afrofuturism.

The Root Concerns
In this section, I philosophically converse with Fayemi's Afrofuturism in light of Menkiti's account of the normative conception of personhood. In Menkiti's influential normative conception of personhood, communal values and norms shape personhood (1984; 2004; 2018). Menkiti, from an Afro-communitarian standpoint, points out that what confers personhood on individuals within the African view, which he refers to as the "maximal definition of a person," is how well individuals "incorporate" into their community. This incorporation involves a process by which individuals adhere to communal rules and norms. For Menkiti:

> Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description person does not fully apply. *For personhood is something which has to be achieved, is not given simply because one is born of human seed. Personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse.* We must

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[4] For more arguments on the effect of genes on our moral disposition, see these two important literature: WALKER, Mark. "Enhancing Genetic Virtue," [Politics and the Life Sciences],pp. 27–47, 2009. Vol 28. No2.; AGAR, Nicholas. "Enhancing Genetic Virtue?," [Politics and the Life Sciences], pp. 73- 75, 2010. Vol 29. No1.

also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man. And during this long process of attainment, the community plays a vital role as a catalyst and a prescriber of norms. Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives so that what was initially biologically given come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term (MENKITI 1984, 172-173, emphasis mine).

The above quote implies that personhood is a thing to be acquired and not something that one is born with. It involves the process of character formation that depicts excellence. Hence, an individual acquires personhood in proportion to how much they adhere to communal norms and assume\discharge their communal obligations\responsibilities accordingly. By so doing, one migrates from the non-moral status of an "it" to the moral status of a person because adhering to communal norms and taking up communal responsibilities entails an "ethical maturity" that one acquires as one progresses in the community. For Menkiti, it "is the carrying out of these obligations that transform one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense-- an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived' as eluding one" (MENKITI 1984, 176; see 2004, 330). The failure to adhere to communal norms makes an individual not to attain the status of a person; or as Menkiti (2004, 326) points out, "personhood is the sort of thing which has to be achieved, the sort of thing at which individuals could fail." In the remaining part of this section, I will deploy this account of personhood to critically engage with Fayemi's Afrofuturism. However, Menkiti did not try out this account of personhood in the area of moral enhancement as I aim to do here, and, also, my approach is rarely found in the extant literature on his normative conception of personhood.

So far, we have seen that Fayemi's Afrofuturism is based on his Afrofuturistic account of personhood teased out from Yoruba

worldview and philosophically grounded on the Afro-communitarian idea of personhood being socially defined in terms of a harmonious relationship with members of the community. Fayemi advances three central claims on this ground: First, Fayemi argues that transhumanism in Africa should be strongly motivated by the moral problems confronting the continent that need to be urgently addressed in order to ameliorate the human existential conditions in the continent. Second, he argues that the ontological conception of personhood works well with transhumanism since both provide arguments that suggest that human nature is not rigid and fixed but a work in progress and alterable. Finally, he claims that the Afrofuturistic account of personhood grounds the permissibility of transhumanism in Africa since the relational capacity of enhanced persons would incorporate them better into the community and, in turn, contribute to both individual well-being and the common good of the community.

But, for argument's sake, let us agree with Fayemi that Africans could choose to enhance their personhood, which would increase their relational capacity and better situate them to contribute to the common good by inevitably conforming to social norms (FAYEMI 2018, 69). No doubt, as Fayemi rightly claims, enhancing personhood would produce moral behaviours, all things considered, that are always right or good. For lack of better characterization, let us call this technologized personhood, where personhood is engineered into individuals. With technologized personhood, individuals would be morally enhanced to inevitably conform to social norms, engage in friendly relationships, and promote the common good. Individuals would automatically know what is good and right because personhood has been technologically engineered into them. Individuals in Fayemi's Afrofuturism would be morally flawless beings that would transcend human moral inabilities (and other biological/natural limitations). In this Afro-futuristic vision, morally enhanced individuals would not fail at the gate of morality anymore.

An implication of this idea of technologized personhood is that normative personhood, where individuals strive to attain full personhood, would be radicalized since personhood would be technologically given. Such a radicalization would be in the form of a radical change from normative personhood to technologized

personhood. This would eliminate the value Africans place on personhood since the journey and strive associated with attaining personhood is ultimately eliminated by the genetic compulsion to always do good. In other words, personhood no longer becomes the "sort of thing which has to be achieved, [or] the sort of thing at which individuals could fail..." (MENKITI 2004, 326). At this point, one thing is clear about Fayemi's Afrofuturistic vision: the ultimate end of enhancing personhood is to achieve moral perfection. A state of perfection "is an absolute extreme, exceeding in merit any condition which could possibly be improved" (CONEE 1994, 815). Perfection deals with a state of extreme completion needing no more improvement. It is a state where growth and progress are no longer required. Moral perfection is then the idea that moral agents would *always* behave in morally upright ways. This ability to always do the right thing, as opposed to possibly failing, is what differentiates moral perfection from moral imperfection, and, in turn, technologized personhood from normative personhood.

Now, we must understand that the end of technologized personhood is moral perfection. And if this is so, truly reaching a state of perfection would mean that we must have attained a position of moral completion where further enhancement is no longer required. In a state of moral perfection, morality would at least seem trivial. If ordinary morality consists of two alternatives – right and wrong – and technologized personhood involves a *necessary* choice of right over wrong, then morality becomes insignificant. Moreover, without these moral alternatives, the moral weight of Menkiti's account of personhood would arguably be lost. This point has been well underscored by Norman Pearson (1880) when he argues thus:

> Morality of course can only find [a] place in an environment of more or less imperfection, for it implies the possible alternative of immorality. It postulates a recognition of the distinction between right and wrong, but it also involves the possibility of a preference 'for one or the other.' Virtue consists in eschewing evil and pursuing good; but where there is no evil to eschew, there can be no virtue or virtuous action. But in this state of perfection, I mean of course… a perfection relative to our physical

environment-there can be no morality, *for there can be no desire to do wrong* (PEARSON 1880, 574).

Fayemi might want to object that the difference between right and wrong well exists in posthumans' minds, which is unaffected by the degree of perfection they must have reached. For even in a state of perfection, posthumans are free to grasp wrong actions in contradiction to right actions but are merely engineered to do what is right. But having the idea of right and wrong in the mind alone without being able to freely choose between the two alternatives compromises the autonomy of a moral agent. If this is right, then the freedom or the autonomy to choose either to do right or wrong emphasized by the process of striving towards normative personhood would cease to exist in Fayemi's Afro-futuristic vision of Africa, and morality then becomes trivial. Moreover, the journey towards earning personhood would be lost if everyone is altered towards moral perfection. Thus, the moral weight placed on personhood, a la Menkiti's account, would completely cease to exist with such a technologized personhood.

Conclusion
From the above, Fayemi's Afrofuturistic transhumanist future provides ground to doubt the permissibility of transhumanism in Africa. The technological enhancement of human behaviour would then be morally objectionable insofar as it waters radicalizes the normative conception of personhood. This radicalization would be in the form of a radical change from normative personhood, where individuals strive to achieve personhood and succeed or fail at it, to technologized personhood, where personhood would be technologically engineered.

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