

“IT” AND PERSONHOOD IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHYDOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v3i1.5>**Submission: March 10, 2023 Accepted: June 29, 2023**

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Vaal Triangle Campus, South AfricaEmail: mutshidzi.maraganedzha@nwu.ac.zaORCID No: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3428-2611>**Abstract:**

The question of the nature of “it” and the *progression*¹ from “it” to an “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s normative conception of a person has created divisions amongst philosophers in African philosophy. In this article, I attempt to offer a charitable interpretation of Menkiti’s use of an “it” to denote an individual’s life through the usage of epistemological and ontological tools to assess the individual’s performance. In doing so, I argue that a better account of the progression is from an “it” to an “it+” rather than from an “it” to an “it-it” as formulated by Edwin Etieyibo. This formulation of the nameless dead acknowledges that the latter “it” is significantly distinct from the first “it” as it possesses a number of properties that are distinct from its former “it”, with the moral force as the significant factor in its constitution. In this article, I seek to argue that accepting Etieyibo’s formulations of the latter “it” as an “it-it” risks complicating the normative account of a person conceptually.

Keywords: “It”, Personhood, Moral force, Community, Normative**Introduction**

In this article, I revisit the debate of the nature of “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s (1984 & 2004) normative account of a person. In Menkiti’s view, personhood is something that is earned over time. Personhood

¹ I have italicized the term progression and left-out “ontological” in this sentence intentionally, as I am of the view that Menkiti’s ultimate intention was not to talk about the notion of ontological progression as appeared in his works. But a proper reading of Menkiti will reveal that his intention of the usage of ‘ontological progression’ in his article is to serve a supporting role as an indicator for assessing the performance of the person in his/her novelty.

partly involves the progression from an “it” (child) to an “it” (nameless dead). The first and the latter “its” have the status of depersonalized moral property. The depersonalized property, here, simply means that the “it” is morally neutral. Even though I do minimally concur with Menkiti’s formulation of the progression of an “it”, there are some serious conceptual problems. The article aims to investigate the feasible interpretation of the nature of “it” as formulated by Menkiti. At the same time, I will attempt to reject a proposed nature of “it” by Etieyibo as analyzing Menkiti’s normative account of a person. Etieyibo (2018, 48) is of the view that an ontological progression is from an “it” to an “it-it”. He further contends that:

[T]his view of the ontological progression from an “it” to an “it-it”, which is underpinned by the idea of *moral force* is better than the ontological progression from an “it” to an “it” since the former takes into account, in my view, the difference between the child and nameless dead as well as takes the prior moral worth of the latter (the nameless dead) into account as valuable members of our collective immortality, notwithstanding the fact that their names have been forgotten. (ETIEYIBO 2018, 48)

He states that the difference between the two “its” is rooted in the idea that the first “it” is yet to be a person and later “it” was once a person (ETIEYIBO 2018, 48).

As much as both the “its” do possess the status of depersonalized standing, they are normatively distinct. In the normative distinction between the first and the latter “it”, Etieyibo (2018, 48) argues that the later “it-it” (nameless dead) is different from the first “it” by virtue of the fact that it has a combination of depersonalized moral standing plus a personalized moral standing gained through time. I agree with Etieyibo on the previous statement, but I am puzzled as to how he goes on to formulate the nature of the later “it” as an “it-it”. On this account, I find Etieyibo’s formulation of the nature of “it” to be inadequate as it risks creating conceptual problems.

This article is structured as follows; firstly, I discuss the normative idea of personhood, community and its praxis “it”.

Secondly, I seek to consider whether Menkiti's discussion of personhood is ontological, normative, or epistemological. I aim to argue that when we take a charitable interpretation, Menkiti's primary objective in formulating his concept of personhood was oriented toward normative considerations. Lastly, I attempt to articulate a plausible notion of an "it" that is less controversial that would enhance an understanding of the normative account of personhood.

Personhood, Community, and "It":

a) Personhood

Menkiti proposes a normative idea of personhood in which he argues that personhood is something that has to be achieved and is not given simply because one is born of human seed (MENKITI 1984; WIREDU 1992; IKUENOBE 2016). I will later demonstrate Menkiti's weakness in his presentation of what constitutes a normative account of personhood. But for now, I seek to offer a charitable account of a moral perfectionist idea of personhood that seems to be hinted at by several other utterances in Menkiti's articulation of how the moral concept of personhood looks in African thought.

Menkiti's normative notion of personhood admits to at least three distinct conceptions of personhood when closely examined. In his analysis of the debate between Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, Thaddeus Metz (2013, 13) identifies three ² distinct components of personhood, namely: (1) human being, (2) moral status, and (3) moral virtue. The first talk of 'person' or personhood in Menkiti's postulations is that of a metaphysical one. The talk of a person in this context is mainly concerned with descriptive features. By descriptive features, I mean most of the physical characteristics that constitute a human being.

The second notion of a 'person' is that of moral status. According to Metz (2012, 389), the idea of moral status is "the idea of something being the object of a "direct" duty, i.e., owed a duty in

² It is clear that Metz arrived at three distinct concepts of personhood, although, Motsamai Molefe agrees with Metz, he further proposes that there are at least four concepts of personhood. The fourth concept of personhood that Molefe (2020, 7-9) identifies in the debate between Menkiti and Gyekye is personal identity.

its own right, or is the idea of something that can be wronged". In light of this, an entity identified as a person is of moral significance and deserves our moral regard. This then regulates how we relate with other people. For instance, taking another person's life would be morally wrong since such an action causes harm to the person.

Furthermore, the idea of the moral status of a person is that we are attributing or we attribute respect to a particular entity by virtue of it possessing relevant ontological features (MOLEFE 2020, 7). In the moral philosophy literature, scholars take it that ontological features such as sentience, rationality, the soul, life, or basic capabilities have been invoked to generate different theories for moral status (IROEGBU 2005, NUSSBAUM 2011, SINGER 2009).

In Menkiti's conception of a person, the ontological idea of being a human is not sufficient for personhood (OYOWE 2018, 784). In other words, the ontological features of being a human, on their own, do not constitute personhood. This then entails that for a person to be a complete person there is an additional facet needed for a complete person to emerge. This leads to the third facet of the concept of personhood.

The third and final notion of a person in Menkiti's conception is that of moral virtue. The third concept of personhood represents the heart of African moral philosophy. In this, Menkiti articulates the core of his moral theory that forms the basis of African moral philosophy. Menkiti (1984) contends that personhood is not attained simply at birth:

...it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must 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. (MENKITI 1984, 172)

The central idea in the above quote is the capturing of the goal of morality wherein an individual is converted from a human being with a moral potential into a moral reality by decorating one's humanity with moral excellence (MOLEFE 2020, 32). Hence, in a situation where the individual behaves unworthily in the social-moral processes of transformation and does not even exhibit any elements of moral

excellence such a person individual would be considered a failure on personhood.

Menkiti further argues that:

As far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. 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 can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellences implied by the term. (MENKITI 1984, 173).

In the above extract, Menkiti argues that biological features or ontological makeup do not alone guarantee personhood to anyone. But what is vital is the individuals' performance and their relationship with their community. Hence, in Menkiti's view "full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society, indicates straight away that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes" (MENKITI 1984, 172).

b) Community

In African thought, as hinted above, personhood is not arbitrarily bestowed upon an ontological feature or a human being, there is a need for several social and ritual transformations until a human being (i.e. ontological features) attains personhood. This section seeks to address the conjunction between a person (with ontological features—that can also be understood as a person with the capacity to attain personhood) and community. It is in this conjunction that personhood gets to be attained. This position contrasts with the Western understanding of a person that takes certain attributes or features, such as consciousness, rationality, and autonomy, as the defining characteristics of a person. The African view of a person conceives the person as "...defined by reference to the enviroing community" (MENKITI 1984, 171).

Menkiti argues that the process of attaining and pursuing personhood in African thought, as distinct from Western thought, is

through a socio-moral process of transformation. In this socio-moral process, the individual is required to exhibit some elements of moral excellence at different stages of the socio-moral requirements. The main idea behind the above propositions is that a biological entity on its own does not constitute personhood. But for a person to attain personhood there is a personal journey in which the community also plays a vital role as a prescriber of the norms (MENKITI 2004, 326). In light of this understanding, personhood is clearly a journey of a biological human entity into a full person through the processes of socio-moral transformation. Hence, Menkiti argues that it will be difficult for one to talk of an 18-year-old moral giant but would have no trouble talking about an 18-year-old mathematical giant. This is well captured by this Igbo proverb “What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up” (MENKITI 1984, 172). Therefore, in order for an individual to be considered a person, they must exhibit moral excellence, which can only be achieved over time through living and actively fulfilling their moral obligations within the community.

Furthermore, a close look at the normative conception of personhood shows that Menkiti puts forth an agent-centred theory. For example, Augustine Shutte (2001), on this note, avers that:

The moral life is seen as a process of personal growth...Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into the community with others. So, although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded.

Similarly, Justice Yvonne Mokgoro (1998, 2) notes that African ethics requires moral agents “to achieve self-fulfilment through a set of collective social ideals”. Mogobe Ramose (1999, 52) also argues that a moral agent “is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to become a human being”. These African ethicists are clearly of the view that for a person to realize their own goal of personhood, they need to actively participate in the process of achieving their personhood. In a simple sense, the process of attaining personhood is agent-centred.

Thus, for one to be called a person and for such pronouncement to obtain, some moral triumph must be exhibited in the course of that individual’s life. To be called a non-person is to be

denied the status of moral achievement but without necessarily denying their humanity biologically speaking. This entails, in light of this understanding, that self-realization plays a major role in the process of one being bestowed personhood. It is necessarily part of the individual's obligation to realize their own goal of attaining personhood. The sole goal of morality—in this understanding—is to perfect one's humanity by developing certain moral dispositions so as to be a virtuous human being in the course of one's life. To emphasize this point, Tutu (1999, 31) avers that:

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu, u nobuntu'; 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring, and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours'.

These crucial ideas seem to emerge from Tutu's presentation of a person: (1) that an individual who has attained moral status is called a person. This is due to the fact that they are characterized as exuding certain moral virtues that the community has stipulated. (2) that certain relational virtues characterize a person. This means that a person is not an island but is mostly characterized by virtues of connectedness with others, through exuding moral qualities like kindness, generosity, hospitable, compassion, and friendliness (GYEKYE 1992; TUTU 1999; MOYO 2013). The idea of a person in African thought projects a relational morality. In other words, a person cannot exist without the positive relationships between the individual and others.

What is the role that the community plays in the constitution of personhood? In answering this question, Menkiti (1984, 172) argues that the community plays an instrumental role in social relationships— "during this long process of attainment [of personhood], the community plays a vital role as a *catalyst* and as a *prescriber* of norms". The two analogies employed by Menkiti (those of a catalyst and prescriber) suggest that social relationships play an instrumental role in the pursuit of personhood. A catalyst serves as a means in the chemical process, not an end. Social relationships and institutions serve as moral guides, but the agent's responsibility is to internalize and actualize the prescribed values. These two ideas lead

to the conclusion that social relationships are instrumental in creating enabling conditions for the moral agent to thrive.

c) *“It”*

One of the ideas that stand out in Menkiti’s analysis of the transformation of a person from a mere biological entity into a person is his usage of the term “it”. On this note, Menkiti (2004, 325) avers that the “movement of the individual human child into personhood, and beyond, as essentially a journey from an ‘it’ to an ‘it’”. According to Menkiti’s view, the transformation process from a mere biological entity toward personhood is sequential. The intervals of the sequence are seen in the light of the ontological progress of the person in pursuit of personhood. This sentiment is captured in Bernard Matolino, as he regards Menkiti to be making ontological claims rather than normative ones. Much of our attention on this matter will be addressed well in the next section. Motsamai Molefe and Mutshidzi Maraganedzha (2017) captured the lack of charitable reading of Menkiti on the part of Matolino. It is clear that those who take it that Menkiti was making ontological claims would be mistaken. This does not entail that Menkiti’s analysis is not befogged with confusion. Anyone who makes that claim will be misleading the readers and would simply be wrong. But this conceptual confusion in Menkiti’s analysis could have been dealt with better by simply pointing them out and we carry on with the most burning issue of establishing a more viable African ethical theory that is sensitive to the values of the community, or that is communitarian in nature. In recent work, Molefe (2020) attempts to show how best we can interpret Menkiti’s work and salvage a viable African ethical theory that is relevant and able to deal with bioethical issues like that of euthanasia and abortion.

Menkiti’s use of the word “it” to capture the movement of a person from a biological entity into personhood has suffered harsh criticism. I believe clarifying how the conceptual confusion came about in Menkiti’s analysis might be helpful. Presumably, it might be beneficial to question Menkiti’s usage of the notion of “it” in its great length. In his attempt to ground his normative theory of personhood, Menkiti certainly never intended to rely heavily on ontological features. But what Menkiti had sought to achieve was to bring about a theory that goes beyond a mere ontological feature of a human being. In turn, a theory that has a proper grounding in African communitarian

values. This can be seen in his attempt to distinguish between Western and African conceptions of a person. On this note, Menkiti (1984, 171) reminds the readers right at the beginning of his analysis that he seeks to present “a certain conception of the person found in African traditional thought”, that is different from its Western counterpart. This was a promising outline that Menkiti had set him to achieve. But what follows was a continuous slipperiness of conceptual issues. In this, he failed to clearly articulate the role of the ontological progression in his proposed moral theory. But a charitable reading of Menkiti can reveal that his usage of “ontological progression” is to serve as a time measure of the expectations upon the persons in the self-development towards personhood. Similarly, Etieyibo (2018) is of the view that personhood is primarily located in time. For Menkiti, time is a crucial factor. Without time, we would not be able to measure how a person who is on the journey toward personhood is doing. Hence, Menkiti (2004, 325) puts it in this fashion, time is essential and needs to be considered “...in-gathering of the excellences of the person as one age. One cannot miss the idea that for Menkiti to secure his moral theory, he needs a person who is biologically developing and at the same time engaging with the enviroing community”. Hence, he claims that it is easily conceivable to talk of an 18-year-old mathematical giant instead of an 18-year-old moral giant (MENKITI 2004).

For Menkiti, the progression or journey of a biological entity towards personhood is a process of moving from “it” towards “it”. But there are greater implications than just a mere claim that it is a movement from an “it” towards a latter “it”. In my view, this is the heart of his theory. Menkiti takes that the ontological progression of an “it” begins at birth with the child. At this stage, it is not linguistically wrong to refer to a child as an “it”. The reasons are that at this stage, a child is an individual biological person without any other morally relevant features, i.e. “...essentially an individual without individuality, without personality, and without a name” (MENKITI 2004, 326). It is through this process that a child would later grow and go through several ceremonies such as marriage. Although ceremonies can be performed by the person who is in pursuit of their own personhood, there are instances that such a person can actually fail at personhood. What determines if an individual attains

personhood is positive social relationships like being kind, compassionate, etc.

Menkiti conceives personhood as something that goes beyond physical death. He further states that ancestors are also taken as persons since they do not simply go out of existence after death. The person goes out of existence when they join the nameless dead. As Menkiti argues, “only when the stage of the nameless dead is joined does the person once again become an “it” is going out of the world the same way the journey first began. Thus, the movement is a movement from “it to an it” (MENKITI 2004, 327).

Menkiti argues that the designation of “it” at the first stage is one that has a depersonalized character. On a similar note, he further avers that the status of depersonalized character exists at the beginning and the very end of the individual. But the latter or the nameless dead “it”, Menkiti writes:

...at the very end of the described journey, I believe that the “it” designation also carries the ease of natural use and is the way it should be. The one contrast worth noting is that in the case of the nameless dead, there is not even the flexibility for the use of a named or pronominal reference, as with the case of a young child. The nameless dead remain its and cannot be designated as something else. (MENKITI 2004, 328)

He claims that the normative progression of the person goes beyond the world of the spirits. In conclusion, he notes that:

The observation can therefore be correctly made that a metaphysically significant symmetry exists between the opening phase of an individual’s quest for personhood and the terminal phase of the quest. Both are marked by an absence of incorporation – an absence underscored by the related absence of re-enacted names. (MENKITI 2004, 328)

Normative, Metaphysical, or Epistemological?

As discussed in the preceding, personhood is attained in the course of individual progression over time in Menkiti’s view. That is also known as the interval movement of an “it” to an “it”. But contrary to my formulation, Menkiti takes it that the interval movement of an “it”

to an “it” is an individual’s ontological progression. This is conceptually controversial. If we take it that Menkiti is making an ontological claim, then it will lead us to the idea that a person’s ontology has the capacity to warrant personhood. But clearly, Menkiti does not think that such a move is feasible in African thought.

If we accept the formulation that an interval movement of “it” to an “it” is an individual ontological progression, then we would be accepting the idea that the gradation of moral arrival, as stipulated by Menkiti, is symbiotic with the ontological status of personhood. Clearly, the difference between the young and the old is nothing much but just a mere epistemological status. It denotes that such an epistemological difference entails moral worth or moral worth is denoted from an epistemological status that older people harbor. The immediate statement above provides us with a valuable hint on how to understand Menkiti’s characterization of the idea of personhood. It is evident that the ontological difference in the intervals of time accounts for the epistemological difference between the young and the old. No matter how vast it can be, the epistemological difference cannot necessarily be taken as a clear representation of the ontological difference. Then what the elders have over the young is nothing more than just a simple superiority of knowledge in comparison to the young. As Dider Kaphagawani states:

...it is indeed the case that elders tended to have an epistemological monopoly over the young. But to concede this point is not to assert an ontological distinction between the elders and the young; rather, it is merely to point out an epistemological difference; the young are not ontologically less human than the elders. (KAPHAGAWANI 1998, 173)

This knowledge is vital in the day-to-day survival within the community in fostering virtuous relations that promote the general good of the community. But what is obvious is that such knowledge does not entail the ontological difference between the baby and the old. This simply demonstrates that the elders have become competent and knowledgeable in and around social issues, and the young have the capacity to attain such competence and knowledge in the future. Elders’ stipulated epistemological superiority does not constitute any ontological supremacy.

But now, the ultimate question here is what Menkiti had aimed in his expression of a peculiar personhood theory that is fostered by African and communitarian values. Some of the fundamental problems with Menkiti's idea of personhood had clearly been pinpointed by Matolino. Firstly, in his 2009 entry "The Malfunction of "it" in Ifeanyi Menkiti's Normative Account of Person", he claims that:

The first problem with Menkiti's argument is his attempt to ground the normative difference between babies and adults, in African thinking, through his alleged evidence of the usage of the English word "it" as an indicator of the ontological difference between babies and adults. (MATOLINO 2011, 28)

In the above quotation, Matolino offers an interesting observation when he says that "in the English language the word 'it' does not carry any moral or qualitative indication whenever it is used as a referential word" (MATOLINO 2011, 28). This statement is essential in the entire dismissal of Menkiti's theory of personhood by Matolino. It would be worthwhile to perform an autopsy of the key claim that forms the basis of Matolino's dismissal of Menkiti's theory of a person. So, he starts his analysis with some definitions and points us to how the word "it" is used in the English language. On this Matolino (2011, 28) says:

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary identifies the word "it" as a pronoun. It defines a pronoun as "any of a small set of words that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases whose referents are named or understood in the context. The dictionary also gives five possible ways of using the word "it." In cases where it is used to refer to people the word is used to make references that are not normative but comparable to words such as "he," "she," or "they."

It is in these definitive narrations that Matolino somewhat hints at the idea that he has some reservations with Menkiti's usage of the word "it". Then he goes further to say that the use of the word "it" to refer to people is used to make references that are not normative but comparable. I wish to admit in advance that this reading of the word "it" is clearly accurate on Matolino's part and there is nothing

controversial at this point. I can also ascertain that Matolino is not clearly in opposition or saying anything fundamentally distinct from what Menkiti had opted to do from the outset of his theorization. I will offer evidence on this claim in a bit, but let us attempt to understand Matolino's line of thought clearly to handle him with utmost care. Matolino's (2011, 28) argument against Menkiti's claims that "the proper meaning of the word can be obtained by a full understanding of the different contexts in which it can be used" (MATOLINO 2011, 28). For Matolino, for one to be able to understand the usage of the word, one needs to be able to read it or use it in a context. The ultimate usage of the word "it" is when Menkiti claims that it makes sense for someone to talk like this; "we rushed the baby to a hospital. It was sick". According to Menkiti (2004), this expression not only makes grammatical sense, but the grammar in this context insinuates that there is some ontological significance. At this point, I seek to admit again that Menkiti's commitment is a bit entangled with confusion, and presumably, it is this ontological inclination that leads his theory of personhood into some serious theoretical troubles. But I wish to say Matolino is right to say that Menkiti's usage of the word "it" overburdens itself with the ontological issues which are fundamentally problematic, and if this theory is not properly exonerated from this set of scepticism, it will suffer greatly.

In the following, I seek to provide a brief re-examination of Menkiti's normative account of personhood, taking into account the criticisms put forth by Matolino. I have already made a concession above that Menkiti is not entirely correct in his usage of the word "it" as Matolino has demonstrated. But I do have reservations about the actual conclusions that Matolino arrives at concerning Menkiti's theory, I suspect some bit of uncharitable reading in his handling of Menkiti. It is clear that I cannot rescue Menkiti's idea that there is normative bearing on the usage of the word "it" in reference to babies. It is clear that there are no ontological and normative bearings in the usage of the word "it" in reference to babies. But the question that I pose to Matolino is: does this theory need the usage of "it" either as normative or ontological to be sensible? My reading of Menkiti is that he does not need to refer to any sets of things in his usage of the word "it". What is apparent is that the usage of "it" can still make sense in the entire scope of Menkiti's theory without referring to either

normative or ontological aspects as the original theory³. Now this might sound a bit puzzling, as a number of my predecessors have failed to comprehend this simple thing. I think what makes them fail to see this is their simple issue of bias against Menkiti's normative account of a person. I think if the word "it" is used only to express the neutral status⁴ of the baby, it cannot be as controversial as Matolino has shown. But the neutrality status is not as innocent as we might think, as this neutrality carries quite a lot of other properties in the greater scheme of things in the theory of Menkiti. The neutrality status of the baby cannot be read without acknowledging the other two facets, in the case of its ontology and normative status. Babies are not treated and will not be treated like any other sets of "its". The sole reason behind the idea is that babies are human beings, and human beings possess moral status. On the other hand, the second facet is the ontological aspect. What makes us judge that such an entity is a baby is that it should exhibit certain ontological properties for us to be able to give it care and even moral regard.

As far as I am concerned, the ontological facets play a supporting role in Menkiti's theorization. What needs to be considered is the idea that Menkiti's sole aim was to formulate a normative theory of a person that exudes African values—to some extent offering an explanation of how personhood is attained in African communities. I am not trying to preempt the idea that this is the only way personhood is articulated and conceived in African communities.

But the main concern, as Polycarp Ikuenobe (2018, 87) rightly points out, is that "...Menkiti has conflated epistemological and thus moral status with metaphysical/ontological status or suggested that an epistemic status implies an ontological status". It is in this conflation of things that Matolino sees an opportunity to demonstrate to Menkiti that his theory is problematic. Matolino (2011), on this note, claims

³ I am clearly aware that I will not have any element of commendation of my reading of Menkiti on my simplistic expressions as at the conceptions and the writing of this manuscripts was already late.

⁴ My usage of notion of 'neutral status' is quite deliberate as I wish not to further create theoretical problems. I am of the view that 'neutral status' should be sufficient in the discussions as the assumption is that in a state wherein there are other things that had been incorporated to the child that status of the child will change, insinuate and preempt Matolino's (2011) quarrels with Menkiti that the first 'it' and the latter 'it' they are not similar. This position is correct.

that two main problems are fundamental in Menkiti's theorization of the notion of personhood. Firstly, according to Matolino (2011, 34), Menkiti does not offer a justification for the gradation of the ontological progression that bears on the status of personhood. He then accuses Menkiti of the idea that the gradation of the moral arrival is symbiotic with the ontological status of personhood. Hence, on this note, Matolino claims that the idea of moral arrival is overstated as it depends on the concept of 'time' not on the ontological progression that Menkiti appeals to. This is strikingly a good observation of Menkiti's theorization of personhood. I say so as this observation has greater prospects in the scheme of things in terms of how we should clearly interpret Menkiti's theory of personhood. The 'time' facet is vital in the assessments of the progress and the performance of the individual in the moral sphere for one to be bestowed personhood. But the 'time' facet cannot be useful on its own to measure the performance of the individual, other facets like the ontological and epistemology are necessary to see whether the individual is performing in line with the norms. It is at this moment, that we are able to revoke the epistemological facets to be able to see whether or not this individual is in actual fact performing. Hence, on the performance issue, Menkiti went to the extent that he claims that an individual can realize or fail in personhood. The picture I have been trying to portray above is one that makes Menkiti argue that personhood is the sort of thing that an individual can get better at or fail at. Hence, those who fail in their adulthood to attain epistemological tools that inform and guide their conduct are to be considered to have drastically failed personhood.

Reading attentively to the previous statement, one can see clearly that there is something quite vital that is at play or that there is more than one element at play. Firstly, there is an element of ontology that is at play. The ontological facet is a vital tool for seeing the performance of the individual. Secondly, there is the epistemological facet that seems to be another vital component in the entity of the narrative of Menkiti. The epistemological facet is another vital component in his theorization of the greater scheme of things. These two intertwined components are essential in assessing the progress of the individual in his/her acquisition of personhood, but we can only use them as tools and the markers of teasing out the individual's

performance. Hence, this theory cannot and will not make any sense without using these two components of epistemology and ontology.

What is evident is that the whole discussion of Menkiti is not ontologically or epistemologically orientated, but the main aim of his theorization is an attempt to give a theory of personhood that is normative in nature. I suggest that Menkiti's ideas were clear in his mind at the outset, but his ultimate version betrayed his original idea of offering a normative account of personhood that exudes, and is sensitive to, African cultural values. This is evident when he claims that "my aim in this paper is to articulate a certain conception of person found in African traditional thought" (MENKITI 1984, 171). This evidence is essential, as it is in that we can read Menkiti's initial intention, so his intention is to offer a "certain conception of...person found in African traditional thought" (MENKITI 1984, 171). But this does not entail that this is the only way 'personhood' is conceived in traditional African thought. In the usage of these words, it is evident that Menkiti was quite aware that there are other ways the idea of a person is conceived. Malawian philosopher Didier Nirayamanda Kaphagawani (1998) contends that there are three distinct theses that seek to articulate the African view of persons. The three theses he has in mind are stated as follows: firstly, there is the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels' "force" thesis. Tempels' extensively studied the people of the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and came to the conclusion that their metaphysics and worldview were to be found in their notion of force. Kaphagawani also applies this idea of force to the identity of persons; hence, he identifies Tempels' views on a person as a force thesis. Secondly, Kaphagawani identifies what he calls the "communalist" thesis. He admits that this thesis has its origins in Tempels' work, but he chooses to associate it with the Kenyan thinker John Mbiti. The third thesis is one propounded by the Rwandese thinker Alexis Kagame. I seek not to be bogged down with the merits and how distinct these theses are in this current project, but, if interested, Matolino (2014) labours on this point in his monograph titled "Personhood in African Philosophy".

Now, in view of the evidence shown above, does Matolino's criticism still stand? Menkiti's usage of "it" is problematic for Matolino as it is portrayed as not capturing the reality of things as we know them. His first criticism is that Menkiti does not use "it" adequately, and on that account, I concur with Matolino that there is

no need for any element of the relation of the word “it” to the normative and ontological facets, as the word “it” from the English usage does not carry any normative and ontological connotations. But I have shown that if we read Menkiti carefully, his usage of the word “it”, with all the contexts and its connotations, what we cannot shy away from is that the first “it” is one that is constituted by a neutral status. By the first “it” here, I mean the “it” of the child constituted by a neutral status. But the latter “it” is not constituted by the neutral status as a lot has happened in the course of that individual’s life. With this in mind, I turn my attention to Etieyibo’s considerations of the latter “it” in Menkiti’s normative account of personhood.

The Nature of the Latter “It”

I have shown above that the usage of an “it”—more especially the first “it”—does not cause any controversy if not aligned with normative and ontological connotations as Menkiti originally thought. In other words, the first usage of the notion of “it” that Matolino pointed out as controversial, I do not think is as controversial as he thinks. I have argued—if my interpretation is accurate—that Menkiti’s original interpretation is and was to make a claim that a baby possesses a neutral status. If this interpretation is accurate, then Matolino’s first criticism falls away and the other criticism still stands since Menkiti clearly failed to characterize the notion of the latter “it”. In these mischaracterizations, Etieyibo, like Matolino, addresses the conceptual issues in the latter “it”. In this section, I offer some uncontroversial interpretations of the nature of the latter “it,” one which does not create any conceptual problems for the theory of a person that Menkiti seems to propose.

Etieyibo (2018, 47) is of the view that the better way with which we can characterize the latter “it” is through “it-it”. Etieyibo (2018, 47) justifies his usage of the hyphen as follows:

The first and second “its”, on my novel account, is hyphenated. That is, there is a hyphen between the two “its”, as in “it-it” to indicate that although each “it” has a separate ontological status, there is a deep link between them — a connection that has to be spelt out more fully at another time, although I did gesture at the sort of connection one might be thinking of in

the section on Moral Force and the Ontological Progression from an “It” to an “It-It”.

In the above, Etieyebo claims that each “it” has a separate ontological status. But simultaneously, there is a deep link between them. For Etieyebo (2018) a connection has to be spelled out. I suggest that another autopsy is needed here to capture the conceptualization of Etieyebo’s latter “it clearly”. I say so as if we are to accept his characterization of things, we can easily mischaracterize the latter “it”. I wish to allude to the idea that Etieyibo is not correct in his characterization. If we are to accept this formulation, we will be in trouble with accepting some even further problems that arise with this characterization. The first and most fundamental problem that arises from this is that Etieyibo now seems to be talking about two distinct entities. If we can look closely at the statement that the latter “it”⁵ has a separate ontological status, then it would be evident that his usage of the latter “it” insinuates two distinct entities. Put differently, the characterization of “it-it” creates the impression that there is a marriage of two distinct “its” that possess different personalities. Accepting this characterization of the “it” of the nameless dead can be quite problematic if we trace it backward when the individual “it” was still alive. Worse, we cannot be able even to determine if the latter “it” possesses any moral force. This is not in any way an expression of any confusion.

I am of the view that if we are to bestow personhood in any person, that exercise on its own insinuates the very idea of the performance. If this consideration is true, then in an instance where there is a latter “it” that is characterized as “it-it” we will not be able to assess that person’s performance before their death. That is to say, we will not be able to attach any moral force to that latter “it-it”. This

⁵ The first “it” is assumed to be in a state of progression from T_1 towards T_n . I am aware that such characterization was not stipulate by Menkiti and neither any other scholar. But I am of view that such a characterization of things is assumed in their analysis of the progression of person. Furthermore, for us to be able to assess the performance of the individual we will need to be to use the *time* factor in the version of personhood that is proposed by Menkiti. The usage of the first “it” and latter “it”, demonstrates the point of the time interval in Menkiti’s theorization. But the usage of intervals in Menkiti’s theorization does not necessarily entails different entities or ontological separate entities.

is because if we are still talking about the same entity, it would be strange to characterize the latter “it” as “it-it”. Meanwhile, in the first instance our talk of “it” inferred that we are talking about a single entity. But in Etieyibo’s characterization, the latter “it” is said to be “it-it”, which betrays how we view things conceptually and pragmatically. So, I seek to suggest that there is a better way with which we can characterize things concerning the latter “it”. The problems start with when and how we conceive the role the ontological and epistemological progression plays in Menkiti’s theory.

Then, how can we properly characterize the notion of the latter “it” in a way that satisfies our intuition of the same entity? I suggest that a feasible and non-controversial way in which we can characterize the notion of “it” in Menkiti’s normative account of a person is to say that the movement of an “it” is from an “it” (simply symbolizing a baby’s neutral status) to an “it+” (Symbolizing the nameless dead, together with the moral force). Not only does this characterization satisfy our intuition of the same entity, but it has a capacity that can help to trace, the *to and from*, the performance of the individual towards being bestowed personhood and backward. So, what is this “it+” that I am referring to, what it entails, or how this “it+” is constituted? It is not difficult to stipulate the “it+” as it does not necessarily attempt to introduce anything entirely new in the greater scheme of things in Menkiti’s normative account of a person, the whole idea is that the “it+” is constituted by the moral force that the “it+” has acquired throughout their journey of life. This “it+” has shown competency through and through in the course of its life. On this point, Etieyibo (2018, 54) contends that “rather, it has some *moral force* — both in the fact that it has left its moral mark behind — a moral mark that has become part of the community’s history, moral life, experiences, and norms. Indeed, some of these may have been institutionalized. So, although its name may have been forgotten, its good deeds and acts may not have been forgotten. These deeds and acts that have been institutionalized may be called upon to guide human conduct, to serve as models and exemplars for young ones, others, and generations on how to live and to be morally useful and effective”.

Is Menkiti’s usage of “it” wrong? I beg to differ with Matolino, who holds that the first usage of the notion of “it” is wrong. I have

argued that the notion of the first “it” is wrong as far as it refers to or its connotations seem to be aligned with both the normative and ontological implications. But if the usage of “it” as originally intended by Menkiti was to capture the neutral status of the baby without any normative and ontological implications, this would be a better way to understand Menkiti. The usage of the first “it” is to make a claim that babies possess a neutral status wherein they do not have any name. Hence, in this state, they are in an impersonal state. They are not yet embedded in the community's social, political, and cultural life. It is clear that there is no instance in which the word “it”, when used in the English language, symbolizes or has any moral significance. So, from this, one can clearly see that Menkiti’s usage of the word “it” was technical. I am quite aware of his attempt of doing so, but a charitable interpretation will consider this very well that if we are to interpret the usage of the word “it” in a way that carries any normative and ontological implications, then Menkiti’s normative account of personhood will always be “befogged with, confusions, unclarities, and incoherencies” (GYEKYE 1997, 47).

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to demonstrate some of the fundamental problems with the notion of “it” in Menkiti’s normative account of personhood. I have argued that Matolino’s criticisms of Menkiti’s usage of an “it” could be side-stepped but not in its entirety. I have shown that I agree with Matolino, but our agreement ends on the idea that the latter “it” is not depersonalized as the first “it”. I disagree with Matolino as his ultimate aim is to dismiss Menkiti’s normative account of personhood. Hence, I differ with Matolino’s reading of Menkiti as I believe that the usage of an “it” is not entirely wrong. This is visible to the eyes of those who read Menkiti charitably. But if the usage of the notion of “it” as originally intended by Menkiti was to capture the neutral status of the baby without any normative and ontological implications, then it will not be wrong. The second problem of how the nature of “it” is conceived in Menkiti is visible in Etieyibo’s attempted characterization of the nature of the latter “it”. In this account of “it” I also have attempted to show that Etieyibo is not correct in his characterization of the notion of the latter “it”, in which he argues that it is a movement from “it” to an “it-it”. I demonstrated some serious reservations with this characterization of

the latter “it” as it seems to be talking about more than one entity. I say so because this formulation of things turns out to violate the intuitive idea that we are talking about a single entity. I have proposed a more feasible way of characterizing the latter “it” that goes beyond the controversies that are brought to light with how Etieyibo had characterized the latter “it”. I propose a non-controversial “it+” that is constituted by an instance of the moral force that this ‘it+’ has acquired throughout their journey of life. Hence, in light of the new proposed interpretation, I can further suggest that Menkiti was not entirely inaccurate in his attempt at the normative account of a person.

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