

**Who gets a place in Person-Space?**  
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**Introduction**

We notice many interesting overlaps between the views on personhood of Ifeanyi Menkiti and Marya Schechtman. Both philosophers distance their views from the individualistic ones standard in Western thought and foreground the importance of extrinsic or relational features to personhood. For Menkiti, it is ‘the community which defines the person as person’; for Schechtman, being a person is to have a place in person-space, which involves being seen as a person by others. But there are also striking differences. Schechtman sees this aspect as expanding the scope of personhood to infants and those who are severely mentally disabled. Menkiti thinks that there is a line to be drawn at some point between those humans that are persons and those who are not. It must be borne in mind that the two philosophers have different aims in their writing – Menkiti is presenting a traditional picture of personhood rather than actively arguing for that view<sup>1</sup>, whereas Schechtman is arguing for an alternative to mainstream Western views on personal identity. Even so, we argue that something is to be learned from placing the two views next to each other – first, that there is a view in the Western tradition much closer to the traditional African one than those considered by Menkiti, and second, that the comparison is to the cost of Schechtman’s divergence.

**1. Menkiti’s traditional African view**

In ‘Person and community in African traditional thought’ (1975) Menkiti presents a version of what may be described as the strongly normative view of personhood, as

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, comments he makes in its support suggest that he does endorse it to some extent and uses it as a foil against characteristically Western views of personhood.

a contrast to Western views. This view combines three potentially independent criteria, each of which is necessary and all of which are jointly sufficient for personhood. The first two may be regarded as internal, subjective criteria, in that they refer to facts intrinsic to the individual. To count as a person, in the strongly normative sense, it is necessary that one is a certain type of physical thing, viz. a human being related to others in the context of a community. Menkiti requires that whatever goes by the description 'person' be a human *organism* that goes through 'a process of social and ritual transformation' until it becomes a person (Menkiti: 172). In undergoing the kind of transformation Menkiti has in mind, the individual comes to see herself as part of a community, and so as related to specific others. As such, it seems more appropriate to speak of a human being as related to others and not as some isolated entity.

Over and above this, it is required that a human being, related to specific others, also develops a certain level of psychological maturity to count as person. For Menkiti, personhood is not simply a given because one is born of a 'human seed.' It requires some degree of 'maturation' (172). This would include the capacities for rational and moral deliberation, which are crucial for what Menkiti refers to as 'moral function.' By 'moral function,' Menkiti has in mind 'a widened maturity of ethical sense' and the ability to discharge 'the various obligations defined by one's stations,' which transform a non-person to a person in the normative sense (176). So, to the extent that these highly developed psychological capacities are crucial for participation in the required way in community, they are also necessary for personhood.

The significant departure from the Western view is that these physical and psychological constraints are not seen as sufficient. 'It is not enough,' writes Menkiti, 'to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it' (172). In addition, a further normative, public criterion ought to be met for a psychologically mature human being to count as a person. The requirement is that they use the requisite higher-order capacities in the right way. This means that they fully participate in the life of the community and exhibit, in behaviour, appreciation of and compliance to the relevant moral and social rules and are seen by others as doing so. Proponents of the view, including Menkiti and Gail Presbey, typically insist that both this participation and group recognition are crucial for personhood (Presbey, 2002: 57).

The normative constraint – that social and moral norms regulate the behaviour of individuals in specific ways – is not arbitrary. There appears to be support for it in employment of the appropriate terms for ‘person’ in some, if not all, African languages. Menkiti’s own illustration of this point focuses on the English language, but similar references have been made to African languages as well.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, the point is that besides simply picking out the cognitively mature human individual, the relevant terms for personhood in these languages only apply to a human being who has been able to align her behaviour to the social and moral norms of her particular society and has been recognized by others as doing so. Moreover, simply pointing to the physical and psychological features of the individual, without mention of the normative constraint, would fail to fully capture the accompanying intuition that the cognitive maturity and functioning of a typical person is not possible outside the context of a human community. ‘Without incorporation into this or that community,’ says Menkiti, ‘individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description ‘person’ does not fully apply’ (172). Since this is the case, and since human communities are characterized by behaviour-guiding norms, it should follow that facts about behavioural compliance are fundamental to the understanding of personhood.

There are two features of the strongly normative view worth highlighting for our present aims. The first is that normative considerations are constitutive of personhood, and not merely subsequent to it. As Gyekye puts it, the ‘pursuit or practice of moral virtue is *intrinsic* to the conception of a person held in African thought’ (Gyekye 1997: 50 (our emphasis)). The second is that it is also *strongly* normative in that it requires that substantive norms *directly* constrain behaviour of agents in such a way that the difference between compliance and non-compliance with respect to those norms amounts to the difference between being a person and being a non-person or being a person to a notably lesser degree. This way of characterizing the normative feature of personhood can be distinguished clearly from a weaker view. On the weakly normative view, it is not necessary that individuals carry out specific duties to count as person; instead, they are simply objects of respectful and dignified treatment in virtue of possessing certain features.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Wiredu 2009, for discussion of ‘Onipa’ in the Akan language and Gbadegesin 1991 for discussion of ‘Ènìyàn’ in the Yoruba language.



## 2. Schechtman's Person Life View (PLV)

The core of this view is that "To be a person is to live a 'person life'". This goes along with a view on personal identity: 'Persons are individuated by individuating person lives; and the duration of a single person is determined by the duration of a single person life (Schechtman 2014: 110). This account of personhood occurs in a discussion of personal identity with a focus on offering an alternative to mainstream Western 'psychological continuity' and animalist accounts of identity (as well as her own earlier 'narrative self-constitution view') which share a Lockean view of personhood, whereby persons are distinguished by having self-consciousness and the capacity to act for reasons.<sup>3</sup> To that extent her aim coincides with Menkiti's - both are concerned to distance themselves from a view that personhood turns on having sophisticated psychological capacities.

The initial idea of the view is that a person life is the sort of life lived by an enculturated human being. It follows a typical development from dependent infant, through the development of physical and psychological attributes which are required for moral maturity and which might also at some stage be lost. It accepts that humans can live very different sorts of lives, but points to a very general shared form of development across cultures.

Importantly, Schechtman's PLV also emphasises that a person life is lived in a culture and in interaction with other persons. A crucial aspect of being a person is being engaged in characteristic interactions with other persons and against a background of social and cultural institutions; she talks of this as having a place in 'person-space' (2010: 279; 2014: 114). This social aspect of personhood is one which was gestured at in her earlier theories, but is brought to the fore in this version.

Schechtman suggests that *person life* should be seen as a cluster concept. It is a cluster of biological, psychological and social functions which work together, but – unlike in the psychological continuity theory which requires only the psychological one, or Olson's animalism which requires only the biological – no one of them is

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<sup>3</sup> The classic psychological continuity theory is to be found in Parfit (1984), Olson's animalism in Olson (1997) and Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view in Schechtman (1996).

necessary and sufficient by itself for living a person life. While all three functions are usually coincident - and their coincidence forms 'the true nature of the relation that constitutes continuation' (2014: 150) - they can come apart, and someone can still live a person life in the absence of any particular one. An example of this would be someone in the late stages of senile dementia; though they no longer have any sort of sophisticated psychological capacities, their continued human existence and the way they are treated by their loved ones means that they continue to occupy the same place in person-space and to live their person life.

### **3. Points of agreement**

Menkiti is contrasting the traditional view he outlines with Western views of personhood in general. He mentions some Western views that might seem to come closer – Rawls's account and existentialism – but still points to significant and deep differences even with those. Schechtman's PLV, however, bears a far more striking resemblance than either of those to the view he has expressed.

Both views accept that biological and psychological factors have a role in personhood. Menkiti acknowledges the place of the 'biological set through which the individual is capable of identification' (172), as well as the importance of self-identification – of the individual coming to see themselves as a person.<sup>4</sup>

Schechtman has biological and psychological continuities as parts of the cluster that personhood involves. But, crucially, both views insist that these factors are not enough.

For Menkiti's traditional African view, as well as for the PLV, social factors have an importance not usually reflected in Western views. Over and above having certain biological and psychological features, being a person is also a matter of fitting in to a social structure in particular ways. Personhood is also a matter of participation in communal life. Menkiti talks of 'incorporation into the community' (172) as a requirement for personhood and that involves being recognised as a person and

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<sup>4</sup> He puts it as 'the individual comes to see himself as man' (172). There are obviously issues that call for comment in this, but we will not focus on those issues here. The gendered nature of the communitarian understanding of personhood is investigated in XXXX.

interacting according to the ‘social rules by which the community lives’ (173). Schechtman says that the relevant question as to whether an individual is a person is ‘whether the day-to-day activities of the individual and the way she is treated by and interacts with others are part of the general form of life of typical enculturated humans’ (Schechtman 2014: 113). These activities require a ‘social backdrop’ – a ‘set of practices and institutions ... within which the kinds of activities that make up the form of life of personhood become possible’ (113). ‘Being brought into the form of life of personhood may be defined as being accorded a place in person-space’ (114). That sentence neatly applies to both views.

It is an important part of both views that these social interactions are not simply subsequent to and dependent on the distinctive biological and psychological features of persons, but are prior to those, and the most fundamental requirement of all. Menkiti says that, on the traditional African view, ‘the sense of self-identity which the individual comes to possess cannot be made sense of except by reference to these collective facts’ (172). It is, he says, ‘the community which defines the person as person, not some static quality of rationality, will, or memory’ (172). Schechtman, as we have seen, stresses that personhood is only possible against a certain kind of social backdrop. She also argues that the psychological features often seen as independent markers of personhood are not independent at all, but bound up with social interactions. ‘In order to develop psychologically and physically as human persons typically do, it is necessary to mature in an environment that provides the proper scaffolding and social support for such development’ (Schechtman 2014: 112).

At this point, someone might well contest that the views are not as similar as we are making out. It can plausibly be argued that, despite the points just drawn from Schechtman’s text, her PLV does not have quite as fundamental a place for the social as does Menkiti’s view. Recall that, as she outlines her account, *person life* is a cluster concept, comprising psychological, biological and social continuities which usually function together and no one of which is itself necessary for personal survival if the other two are in place. On the face of things, that allows that there could be personal survival when psychological and biological continuities exist, but social continuities – such as the continued treatment of an individual as a person and the same person – are absent. But while that reading is consistent with Schechtman’s general description of person life as a cluster concept, it is not

consistent with the detail of her account. In line with the points of the previous paragraph, she actually is committed to social continuities in all cases of personhood and personal survival. This emerges particularly clearly in the context of her discussion of brain-transplant thought-experiments:<sup>5</sup>

*it is essential* to the judgment that a person survives a “whole-body transplant” that the transplant product is able to pick up the thread of the life of the person who enters surgery. This can happen only if the transplant product is accorded the appropriate place in person-space; that is, if she is treated as ... the continuation of the original locus of concern.

(Schechtman 2014: p. 152, our italics)

A more accurate account of how her cluster concept works is that for continuity of a person life there must be two of the three continuities, one of which is social continuity. Other strong claims she makes confirm this interpretation:

once the case stipulates that the person who results from the transfer *is treated as and responds as* the original person the implication that the cerebrum donor survives as the whole body recipient *follows immediately*.

(Schechtman 2014: p. 153, our italics)

If that implication follows immediately, then it is a necessary condition and social factors are indeed as fundamental in her account as they are in Menkiti's.

Those are all important points of convergence, and there is another in their views about non-human animals. Both accounts exclude these from personhood. Menkiti is firm about this: ‘an extension of moral language to the domain of animals is bound to undermine ... the clearness of our conception of what it means to be a person’ (177). He is even willing to deny rights to animals, though it may only be those rights ‘implied by the duties of justice’ to which he refers (177). The denial follows on from a discussion to the effect that those rights depend on a capacity for moral sense, ‘a capacity, which though it need not be realized, is nonetheless made

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<sup>5</sup> Willingness to consider such fantastic thought-experiments might well be a divergence between Menkiti and Schechtman. Or perhaps not – she has strong misgivings about them. But even so, her discussion reflects the point about her commitment to the social aspect of a person life that we wish to make. XXXX offers a more detailed discussion of her views on the matter.



most evident by a concrete exercise of duties of justice towards others in the ongoing relationships of everyday life' (177). Since animals have no such duties, they would not have the corresponding rights (whatever those are).<sup>6</sup>

Schechtman is less decisive in her exclusion of animals, but nevertheless agrees that they fall outside of person-space. Looking at her reasons for what gets included in person-space will take us to the central differences between her view and that of Menkiti, and that is the subject of the next section.

#### **4. The point of divergence**

The central point of divergence does not concern non-human animals, but whether all humans have a place in person-space.

An aspect of the traditional African view that Menkiti stresses is that becoming a person is a process - 'a long process of social and ritual transformation' until 'the full complement of excellencies' truly definitive of a person<sup>7</sup> is attained (172). Schechtman by no means ignores the process involved in attaining full moral status. She has much to say about the typical development that a person goes through. Following Katherine Nelson (Nelson 2003), she stresses especially how individuals develop moral capacities and consciousness as they become able to tell narratives about their lives (Schechtman 2014: 79). This was the focus of her earlier 'Narrative Self-Constitution' view of persons and their identity (Schechtman 1996). The central role of the individual in their own constitution there is one from which Menkiti is keen to distance the traditional African view - that is a difference he highlights between it and existentialist thought. Schechtman's shift away from her earlier view to the PLV brings her in many ways closer to the view Menkiti describes. She shifts attention from the individual's narrative to the narrative of those around them, and makes the point of how the process of forming a self-narrative depends on pre-existing relationships with others.

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<sup>6</sup> His position is made slightly unclear by his arguments for the exclusion of animals based on the possibility of their inclusion allowing them equal demand for resources to humans. The discussion is too brief to make a decision on exactly what he takes the exclusion criterion to be.

<sup>7</sup> Menkiti says 'truly definitive of man'.

Children ... become Lockean selves gradually, precisely because they *already* have relationships with mature persons, interactions with whom provide the scaffolding that allows the child to develop the full range of practical capacities associated with mature personhood. (Schechtman 2014: 80)

But these shifts still leave an important gap between her view and Menkiti's. On Menkiti's view, the process of becoming a person is one which an individual can fail to complete.

Personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. (Menkiti: 176)

It is not just a matter of having relations to others in a community, it is one of 'moral function', by which he means behaving in morally mature ways towards the community. As a result, children (for instance) do not qualify as persons. In their case, there is an absence of moral function in this sense (175), or otherwise, they do not satisfy the strongly normative constraint on personhood, and they are only on their way to becoming persons.

Strong demands on agency also occur in Schechtman's view – there cannot be person-space without those who meet these standards. But on her view, morally mature behaviour is not required for a given individual to have a place in that space. She argues that 'person-specific activities' go well beyond the discharging of one's obligations and such 'forensic interactions' (Schechtman 2014: 78). It is a mistake to focus only on morally mature behaviour and its requirements and to ignore the full range of person-specific activities, which certainly include children.

Singing duets, dancing a tango, picnicking in the park, playing tag, racing to the deep end, watching the big game together, telling ghost stories by the campfire, and sharing popcorn at the movies are all forms of interaction that are unique to persons even though they may involve no direct judgments of moral responsibility or assessments of prudential concern.

(Schechtman 2014: 77)

She wants to go even further than this and include individuals who will never develop to moral maturity. She appeals to the actual case of Hilde Lindemann's hydrocephalic sister Carla.

Each of us in the family...saw Carla in a slightly different light. Acting out of our various conceptions of who she was, we made a place for her among us, treating her according to how we saw her, and in so treating her, making her even more that person we saw. Because I played with her, she was my playmate. Because my mother cared for her at home, she was a member of the household.... All of us, singly and severally, were contributing to what it meant to be Carla. To the extent that our narratives reflected faithfully who she was within our family, even we children...were taking part in the creation and maintenance of something morally valuable.

(Lindemann 2002: 32, cited in Schechtman 2010: 280)

Carla would never develop sophisticated psychological or moral capacities or even more basic human psychological ones, but was nevertheless capable of interpersonal interactions in being played with and cared for, as well as being dressed, sung to and shown things. Schechtman suggests that this taking part in 'person-specific practices' gives her a legitimate place in person-space and she is included by the PLV (2010: 281).

Schechtman suggests that to exclude children and those like Carla from personhood marks them off as 'a different sort of *thing*' and insists that while young humans like this are treated as different, they are not treated as different sorts of thing (2014: 120). They take part in person-specific practices and 'live as persons in a myriad ways'. That is the crux of her argument for inclusion:

If we look at our lives it becomes evident that we do view others who lack the forensic capacities as persons ... and interact with them in decidedly interpersonal ways. (Schechtman 2014: 78)

It is not a revisionary argument suggesting that we change our views and expand the class of persons, but that those who have not achieved full agency or fulfilled the moral obligations of their social position already fall under that concept. She backs it up by noting that

When we encounter other humans we automatically see them as persons and interact with them as such. It is not at all surprising that we treat our conspecifics in this way – there are very good reasons that our evolutionary history would have selected us to do so. The points I want to emphasise here are first, that we do not typically *decide* on the basis of explicit reasons to take (or not take) this attitude towards particular others, and second, that taking this attitude toward particular kinds of others is not only natural but also institutionalized as part of our social and cultural infrastructure.

(Schechtman 2014: 113-114)

## 5. The significance of the divergence

Children, then – both typical and atypical ones like Carla – have a place in person space for Schechtman, but not for Menkiti’s traditional African view. Menkiti’s picture has three relevant categories: non-human animals, children (and others) who are human, but are not persons, and human persons. The differences are not simply conventional, but metaphysical ones. Whereas Schechtman denies that there is a difference in kind between children and human persons of the sort there is between animals and humans, Menkiti insists that for the traditional African such a metaphysical difference exists.

What we have is not just a distinction of language but a distinction laden with ontological significance.

(Menkiti: 174)

This is reinforced by both linguistic and other behaviour, he suggests.

Consider this expression: “We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived *it* was dead.” We would never say this of a grown person. Of course, with a child or new-born, reference could also be made by use of a personal pronoun, with the statement reading instead: “We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived he/she was dead.” This personalizing option does not, however, defeat the point presently being made. For the important thing is that we have the choice of an *it* for referring to children and new-borns, whereas we have no such choice in referring to older persons.

(Menkiti: 173-4)

He is making that point about languages in general, English as well as African ones. There is a more specific social point that he makes as well.

In the particular context of Africa, anthropologists have long noted the relative absence of ritualized grief when the death of a young child occurs, whereas with the death of an older person, the burial ceremony becomes more elaborate and the grief more ritualized – indicating a significant difference in the conferral of ontological status. (Menkiti: 174)

We could just mark this down as a disagreement – a reflection of Menkiti’s contention that Western views, even one like Schechtman’s which overlaps, are different from African ones – and leave it at that. But we think the disagreement is more significant than that, in that it provides reasons to question important claims on her side of the debate.

Neither Menkiti’s nor Schechtman’s account is particularly convincing on the animal/person distinction, though there is clearly a case to be made for a significant metaphysical difference here. The reasons Menkiti offers for a human/person distinction are also less than convincing. That such a linguistic distinction can be made and that it is held as a deep distinction in traditional African views is not that much of a case. Admittedly, his task is not to establish the distinction, but there is also a case to be made here and hearing reasons to support it from African thought would have been a welcome contribution. Nevertheless, what he does offer us is a clear indication of the weakness of Schechtman’s case and of important problems in it.

Schechtman’s case for recognising as persons those who do not and may never reach moral maturity has three central strands to it. She contends that we actually view such individuals as persons, that we interact with them in interpersonal ways, and that – even though some developments humans normally go through are ‘game-changing’, there is a continuity of relationships across these changes that lessens the significance of those developments.

The second and third points are suggestive and interesting ones, but do not go very far in establishing the personhood of either typical children or children like Carla. That we interact with them in interpersonal ways does not make them persons. Persons act with all sorts of non-persons in interpersonal ways: pet animals being the obvious example and one with which Schechtman acknowledges she has to cope (2014: 121). All of the person-specific practices she mentions (telling stories to, showing things, dressing in clothes, singing to) are practices in which pets get included. But this does not make those pets persons. Calling these ‘person-specific practices’ and inferring that all involved are persons simply begs the question. The point is that they are person-specific because only persons can be the agents of such practices – the recipients are another matter altogether.<sup>8</sup>

Mention of agency is important here. Both Menkiti’s account and mainstream Western accounts require of persons that they be moral agents as well as moral objects. It is becoming such an agent that is the game-changing development, whether that point is seen as developing a self-narrative or self-consciousness or another such transformation that marks a significant difference – it is indeed *game-changing*. That it is a process, as Menkiti stresses, does not alter this. And that is really all that Schechtman’s point about the continuity of relationships before and after consists in. The fact that those who will become moral agents have special relationships with mature persons which continue into their time of full agency does not make the game-changing developments less significant, and does not imply the extension of personhood to them.

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<sup>8</sup> Schechtman denies that the exclusion of animals, and the inclusion of Carla is arbitrary. She points, for instance, to the different reactions a family would have to hearing that their child will never be able to talk or dress herself as opposed to hearing this of their pet poodle. She writes,

Humans are not easily excluded from person-space and poodles are not easily included. This is not a simple convention or species prejudice; it is based on differences between the ways in which humans usually develop and poodles never do. Nor is it to say that if a mutant poodle developed reflective self-consciousness and language, it would be in principle impossible to include him in person-space. The fact is, however, that no poodle ever has developed in this way, and we have good reason to suspect none ever will. (Schechtman 2010: 281)

But this makes the point more acute rather than solving anything. The non-human animal would have to display forensic capacities in order to be granted a place in person-space. The human does not have to. The fact that humans typically do develop them does nothing to alter the arbitrariness of this criterion of personhood.

The crucial question, then, is whether Schechtman is correct that we actually view the individuals in question as persons. It is here that Menkiti's account presents the greatest hurdle. He denies that they are viewed as persons by (at least) traditional Africans – they are seen as humans who may become persons, but as non-persons. This flies in the face of Schechtman's assertion that all humans are naturally seen as persons by other humans. And therein lies the fundamental problem – Schechtman's argument that we view them as persons depends on universality for it to do the work she wants it to. That some people regard them as persons will not make them so; she is suggesting that the structure and workings of a human society, regardless of its peculiar cultural details includes them as persons. She explicitly acknowledges this:

Human infants are automatically accorded a place in person-space, and so are caught up immediately...in the kind of interactions and activities typical to persons at the beginning of their existence. ... The crucial point is that it is not a specific social organization which is required, but only the general kind of complex, normative, symbolically mediated organization we find in human societies and cultures. (Schechtman 2014: 118)

Menkiti's account presents a counter-example to these claims and suggests that Schechtman's PLV, though appealing in many ways, has a central element that is more parochial than she acknowledges. This means that her account should be seen as a revisionary one, and one which fails to present an adequate justification for an expanded personhood. In the light of Menkiti's account, the PLV will need a different sort of argument for its inclusivity.

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