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Engaging with the Philosophy of D.A. Masolo

by Thaddeus Metz

Abstract: **Engaging with the Philosophy of D. A. Masolo.** This is an introduction to the special issue of *Quest* devoted to D. A. Masolo's latest book, *Self and Community in a Changing World.* It situates this book in relation to not only Masolo's earlier research on African philosophy but also the field more generally, sketches the central positions of the contributions to the journal issue, and in light of them makes some critical recommendations for future reflection.

Résumé: S'engager avec la Philosophie de D. A. Masolo. Ceci est une au numéro spécial de *Quest* consacré au dernier livre de D.A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Il situe ce livre par rapport non seulement aux recherches antérieures de Masolo sur la philosophie africaine mais aussi au champ plus générale; il esquisse les positions centrales des contributions au numéro de la revue, et fait quelques recommandations essentielles à leur lumières pour une réflexion future.

Key words: D. A. Masolo, African philosophy, identity, method, knowledge, sub-Saharan morality, personhood

Mots-clés: D. A. Masolo, philosophie africaine, identité, méthodes, connaissance, moralité subsaharienne, personnalité

1. Overview

Professor Dismas Masolo is an elder in the African philosophical community, a well-known contributor to the field from Kenya alongside the likes of John Mbiti and Henry Odera Oruka. Masolo's most significant contribution, at least up to now, has been his *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, published in 1994 and still in print 20 years later. As most scholars of African philosophy know, it is a critical, wide-ranging

discussion of a variety of the metaphysical, epistemological and methodological themes that largely dominated the field in the post-war era.

Self and Community in a Changing World, published in 2010, is Masolo's major sole-authored follow up.[1] It, too, is in the first instance a work of the history of African philosophy, albeit peppered with independent judgment, and it also discusses important authors and ideas from Francophone, Anglophone and, often enough, indigenous language literatures.

Self and Community in a Changing World differs from the earlier book mainly with regard to the topics on which it focuses, namely, philosophical anthropology, ethics and politics. Whereas major themes in *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* are Tempels' ethnophilosophy, Mbiti's conception of time, and Kagame's categories of being, in the new book salient topics are the nature of mind and personhood in Kwasi Wiredu's oeuvre, the analysis of immorality to be found in work by the poet and anthropologist Okot p'Bitek, and communitarianism and socialism in Leopold Senghor's writings.

As it is fairly rare for substantial, single-authored monographs to be published in the field of African philosophy, at least by such a well-regarded thinker, a number of us based in South Africa decided to come together for a two-day workshop at the University of Johannesburg in March 2012 in order to critically analyze various facets of *Self and Community in a Changing World*, and to do so in the presence of the author himself. Those of us who gathered came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of nationality, ethnicity, age and philosophical orientation. The present volume of *Quest* consists of selected proceedings from our conversations with Professor Masolo.

[1] Notable papers since *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* and leading up to *Self and Community in a Changing World* include Masolo (1997, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Also worth mentioning is *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, a collection of essays edited by Masolo and Ivan Karp (2000).

2. Methodology and Epistemology

Although the main thrust of Masolo's latest book discusses human nature, its communal orientation, and how best to live in light of it, when doing any sort of African philosophy methodological issues are hard to avoid. Masolo takes up a variety of them, as do contributors to this volume.

In his article, Mogobe Ramose addresses the questions of which language(s) to use when doing African philosophy and what the ethical import is of this choice. Masolo by and large recommends that philosophers write in their indigenous tongues, but makes what Ramose calls a 'concession' that these languages are not well suited for 'practical professional' purposes (Masolo 2010: 44). Ramose disagrees, contending that it is best to do African philosophy in an African language, and unethical not to do so for tending to lead to distortion, even suppression, of other peoples' cultures.

Ramose does not argue that one should *never* do African philosophy in a non-African language. After all, he has written his own article in English, while advancing a moral perspective that is presumably grounded on an African worldview. One might wonder, however, whether the fact that Ramose has expressed himself in English suggests that there are indeed 'practical professional' reasons that often recommend discussing African philosophical issues with a non-African vocabulary. Is there a tension here or not?

Another contributor who explores mainly methodological issues is Pedro Tabensky. Whereas Ramose discusses which linguistic means to use when doing African philosophy, Tabensky reflects on the proper final ends of doing it. Most of those doing African philosophy are interested in obtaining knowledge, or at least justified belief or the truth, but Tabensky finds in Masolo's work the suggestion that there are also non-epistemic reasons to do it, namely, to overcome 'dependency' on others, especially intellectuals who come from a Western culture that spawned colonialism. Tabensky maintains that there are additional non-epistemic reasons that

do and should drive people to engage with sub-Saharan philosophy and worldviews, namely, interests in promoting self-esteem, the ability to cope with stressors, and other forms of psychological health.

Tabensky's essay explores the subtle tensions that exist when one does philosophy for competing aims; although it is rare that self-esteem will be enhanced by believing in a perspective recognized to be false, there are probably many times when it can be improved by believing in a view that is false but not recognized to be, perhaps because of a self-deceptive neglect of evidence. How to balance cognitive interests in knowledge or justification with non-cognitive concerns to be self-confident or otherwise motivated is a tough matter of judgment.

That is true not merely in the first-person case, but also when interacting with others. Suppose that by deceiving others one would be likely to foster their self-esteem to an important degree. What should one do? Or, setting deception aside, one might sensibly ask whether it was right for Tabensky to present the findings of his article, or for Masolo to discuss them publicly with Tabensky, or for me to suggest that they be published in this journal. Is it so clear that *informing* people about their competing interests in the epistemic and the non-epistemic will foster the right balance between them? Does so informing favour the epistemic, perhaps to the detriment of the non-epistemic? If Tabensky is correct that interests in 'discovering the world' need to balanced with those in 'creative world-making', should he perhaps have kept his mouth shut, and not shared that very discovery?

Kai Horsthemke can be read as having little patience for non-cognitive values in his critical discussion of Masolo's sympathy toward something he believes is fairly called 'indigenous knowledge'. One motivation for the comparative dimension of Masolo's work, e.g., where he contrasts Kant's conception of human nature with Wiredu's, is that there are different perspectives on knowledge that vary depending on their cultural origins and that can be judged in terms of their similarities and differences. Horsthemke is interested in whether one can sensibly do more than just

compare. It appears that two perspectives can conflict about a common subject matter, and, if so, which is to be believed, and for what reasons? Merely because beliefs have been long-standing and widely held in a particular locale does not mean they are justified, so Horsthemke maintains, which, for him, means that automatically labelling such beliefs 'indigenous *knowledge*' is inappropriate. Whether they are constitutive of knowledge is something that has to be ascertained over time.

One sympathetic to Tabensky or Masolo might suggest some non-cognitive reasons for bestowing the dignity of the title of 'knowledge' on African beliefs. Or it might be that the word 'knowledge' tends not to be used so literally by advocates of so-called 'indigenous knowledge', and is meant merely to indicate a system of beliefs, abstracting from whether they are justified or not. Note that if African beliefs have not yet been determined to count as knowledge, Masolo's comparative project still seems worth undertaking. However, Horsthemke's question about which beliefs to hold consequent to the comparison does beg for an answer.

Horsthemke is interested in what might be called 'objective' knowledge claims, those about the nature of reality as it truly is. In contrast, in his contribution Abraham Olivier takes up 'subjective' knowledge about what it is like for an individual to experience the world in a particular way. More specifically, Olivier primarily aims to answer the phenomenological question of what it is like to be an African (which differs from the ontological question of what it is to be an African). In general, Masolo conceives of a variety of issues relating to the self in communal terms. Running with that general perspective and extending it to experiential issues, Olivier constructs a way by which to grasp—in relational or social terms—the content of a characteristically sub-Saharan way of perceiving the world.

Olivier does not suggest that he is an African, and even suggests that he is not one, and so one might wonder whether he is suitably qualified to speak about what it is like to be an African. Doesn't it take one to know one? In reply, Olivier would likely claim that his article is not intended to

provide a detailed account of what it is like to be an African, but instead an analysis of the general social structure that would necessarily inform such an account. If that is correct, then another paper waits to be written that would fill in the details.

3. Morality: Status, Virtue, Rightness, Justice

The remaining four contributions to this special issue focus on four distinct aspects of morality. First off, Kevin Behrens notes that the word 'personhood' is central to debates in both African ethics and Western bioethics and that in both discourses personhood is distinguished from mere biological species. These facts give one *prima facie* reason to doubt that personhood is 'the pinnacle of an African difference in philosophical theory' (Masolo 2010: 135), a view that Masolo attributes to Kwasi Wiredu with apparent approval. However, Behrens ends up contending that, upon reflection, one sees that the same word is used differently in the two discourses.

In a sub-Saharan context, 'personhood' most often indicates virtue or human excellence, a quality that varies from individual to individual based on her attitudes and decisions. In contrast, Anglo-American bioethicists use the same term to pick out moral status or standing, a feature that is often thought to be invariant among individuals (or at most to vary based on differential capacities, rather than actualizations of them). Basically, in the West, a person is one owed moral treatment, whereas below the Sahara, a person is one who has given others moral treatment they are owed.

The title of Behrens' article speaks of 'two normative conceptions of personhood', but it is worth noting a third, descriptive understanding of personhood, one that is arguably shared by both traditions. This third sense of the word 'person' is roughly the idea of an individual aware of itself over time and able to act consequent to deliberation, such that human babies are not yet persons and God is always already a person (on some

conceptions). This concept of personhood is ontological, and does not include any moral ideas about values or norms. I submit that the Menkiti-Gyekye debate on personhood should be revisited while keeping an eye on these three distinct senses of 'person'.

In her article titled 'Personhood: Social Approval or a Unique Identity?', Mpho Tshivhase is clearly addressing the sense of personhood as human excellence or good character. She finds in Masolo's lengthy discussion of this characteristically African concept two logically distinct respects in which relationship with community might make one virtuous, but she questions both, and for the same basic reason. At bottom, Tshivhase doubts that human excellence is entirely a function of other-regard or relationality. She argues that at least some of what constitutes a genuinely human way of life is individualistic, involving ideals of autonomy and authenticity that communal considerations fail to capture.

One way of putting Tshivhase's point is to say that 'a person is a person through other persons', but not *merely* through other persons. No doubt many African philosophers, including Masolo, will want to contest her position, and it would be of interest to see how they might do so. Note that it will not suffice for critics merely to point out that sub-Saharan philosophy has its own, social or relational ideals of autonomy and authenticity, according to which one is governing one's true self just insofar as one is a communal being. For Tshivhase's point is that there are non-communal, irreducibly individualist elements to the best understanding of these values.

In my contribution, I focus not on good character but rather right action. I argue that Masolo's discussion of the nature of sub-Saharan morality indicates two conceptions of what fundamentally makes actions permissible that he, along with the field more generally, does not adequately differentiate. On the one hand, there is the idea that an act is right insofar as it promotes the welfare of those in the community, while, on the other hand, there is the view that an act is right insofar as it fosters (or honours) communal relationships, some of which include welfare promotion. I

work to clarify the differences between these approaches, and to argue that the latter is preferable to the former.

Of course some in the field might welcome a pluralist basis to morality, and contend that both approaches are not only typically African, but also philosophically attractive. Perhaps permissible behaviour from a sub-Saharan perspective is that which either promotes well-being or enters into community. However, I work to show that there are cases in which one cannot do both and must choose between them, requiring an answer to the question of which is to be preferred to the other. In addition, I maintain that moral concerns about the well-being of others are adequately captured by a prescription to prize communal relationships.

In the final contribution, Bernard Matolino raises serious concerns about a tendency to 'essentialize' African thought in communal terms. Although he is content to grant that communitarian views have been very influential in sub-Saharan philosophy, he firmly rejects the idea that a philosophy counts as sub-Saharan only to the extent that it is communitarian. In addition, Matolino believes that an overriding interest when theorizing about justice and related matters in social and political philosophy should be to establish and hold positions that are plausible for accepting kernels of truth in modernity, regardless of whether they are African or not. On both counts, Matolino finds Masolo's approach to communitarianism welcome, more welcome than both the 'extreme' form of communitarianism associated with Ifeanyi Menkiti (1979) and the 'moderate' form that Kwame Gyekye famously advances (1997: 38-70).

Defenders of Menkiti or Gyekye will of course want to consider whether Matolino has succeeded in providing reason to transcend the duality between them that has dominated the field for about 20 years. In addition, it is worth considering whether, even if one should reject both Menkiti and Gyekye, one should accept Masolo. Another sensible project to undertake at this point is to consider whether there are problems with Masolo's version of communitarianism that should lead us to search for still another version.

4. How to Learn from Elders

While some contributors agree with the views that Professor Masolo supports in *Self and Community in a Changing World* and develop them further, and while others disagree with them and point us in a different direction, all have found his new book to provide the occasion for serious philosophical reflection. A good book is not the last word, but is instead one that prompts many more words.

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