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Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue de Philosophie Africaine is published by Shikanda Publishing House, Haarlem, the Netherlands (http://shikanda.net/PRESS; shikandapress@gmail.com)

Volumes of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue de Philosophie Africaine* enjoy free-access availability at http://quest-journal.net

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Two Conceptions of African Ethics

by Thaddeus Metz

Abstract: Two Conceptions of African Ethics. I focus on D. A. Masolo's discussion of morality as characteristically understood by African philosophers. My goals are both historical and substantive. First, with regard to history, I argue that Masolo's analysis of sub-Saharan morality suggests two major ways that the field has construed it, depending on which value is taken to be basic. According to one view, the ultimate aim of a moral agent should be to improve people's quality of life, which she can reliably do by entering into community with other persons, while the other view is that community should instead be valued for its own sake, with the enhancement of welfare being morally relevant only insofar as it is part of that. I claim that Masolo does not indicate a clear awareness of how these two perspectives differ and is not explicit about how they relate to one another. After pointing out that Masolo is not alone in these respects, I, second, draw what is meant to be a definitive, clear distinction between the two ethical philosophies, and then provide strong reason to prefer the community-based conception of sub-Saharan ethics to the welfare-based one.

Résumé: Deux Notions d'Éthiques Africaine. Je me concentre sur la discussion de la morale de D A Masolo comme elle est typiquement comprise par les philosophes Africains. Mes objectifs sont à la fois historiques et substantiels. Tout d'abord, en ce qui concerne l'histoire, je démontre que l'analyse de la morale subsaharienne de Masolo suggère deux manières principales dont le champ d'étude l'a interprété, en fonction de la valeur qui est considérée comme fondamental. Selon une vue, le but ultime d'un agent moral devrait être d'améliorer la qualité de vie des gens, ce qu'elle peut faire de manière fiable en entrant en communauté avec d'autres personnes, alors que l'autre point de vue est que la communauté devrait plutôt être appréciée pour elle-même, avec l'amélioration du bien-être étant moralement pertinente que dans la mesure où elle fait partie de cela. Je démontre que Masolo n'indique pas la façon dont ces deux points de vue diffèrent et ne dis pas explicitement comment ils se rapportent l'un à l'autre. Après avoir rappelé que Masolo n'est pas le seul à ces égards, j'établis ensuite ce qui est censé être une distinction claire et définitive entre les deux philosophies éthiques, et donne de fortes raisons de préférer la conception communautaire de l'éthique subsahariennes á celle du bien-être.

Key words: African ethics, communitarianism, moral theory, partiality, sub-Saharan morality, welfare

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Mots-clés: éthique Africaine, communautarisme, théorie morale, partialité, moralité subsahariennes, bien-être

1. *Introduction*

D.A. Masolo is an elder in the African philosophical community, a wise historian of the field who has provided vital guidance to it. His latest book, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010),[57] discusses a wide array of topics and authors, ranging from Paulin Hountondji on indigenous knowledge to Kwasi Wiredu on the nature of mind to Leopold Senghor on socialism. It can be read not merely as providing an overview of major contemporary philosophies grounded in sub-Saharan traditional worldviews, as the author intends, but also, where Masolo is sympathetic to those he is expounding, as a communitarian philosophical anthropology, an account of what it means to be a human being with essential reference to her as part of a community.

In this article, I focus on Masolo's discussion of morality as characteristically understood by African philosophers. My goals are both historical and substantive, meaning that I use reflection on Masolo's book as an occasion to shed light not only on the nature of recent debates about African ethics, but also on African ethics itself.

With regard to history, I argue that Masolo's discussion of sub-Saharan morality suggests at least two major ways that the field has construed it, depending on which value is taken to be basic and which ones are deemed derivative. According to one perspective, the ultimate aim of a moral agent should be to improve people's quality of life, which she can reliably do by supporting community in certain ways, while the other view is that community should instead be valued for its own sake, with the enhancement of welfare being morally relevant only insofar as it is

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[57] All page references in the text refer to this book.

part of that. I claim that Masolo does not indicate a clear awareness of how these two perspectives differ and is not explicit about how they relate to one another. After pointing out that Masolo is not alone in these respects, as others in the field also appear to advance conflicting accounts of the values fundamental to African morality, I draw what is meant to be a definitive, clear distinction between the two major ethical philosophies.

Next, I provide what I deem to be conclusive reason to prefer the community-based conception of sub-Saharan ethics to the welfare-based one. I argue principally on grounds of philosophical plausibility, but also suggest that the community-based theory is more characteristically African than is the welfare-based one, despite the fact that some of the most influential African moral theorists, including Kwame Gyekye and John Bewaji, have expressed adherence to the latter.

I begin by providing an overview of the way Masolo approaches moral issues in *Self and Community in a Changing World*, namely, by articulating ways that African thinkers have construed the nature of personhood in search of a non-relativist ethic (sec. 2). After that, I demonstrate that Masolo's discussion points to two competing theoretical ways to understand morality in light of sub-Saharan values, one that takes community to be the basic value and the other that takes welfare to be (sec. 3). I investigate the logic of each approach, and also critically respond to the suggestion that both goods, and not merely one of them, should be deemed fundamental. Next, I argue in favour of a theory based solely on the value of communal relationships, contending that it captures uncontroversial elements of morality that not merely Africans, but also people more globally, tend to hold (sec. 4). I conclude by indicating some additional philosophical approaches to sub-Saharan morality that Masolo does not take up in depth but that would need to be in order to provide something like the final word on the most defensible conception of African ethics (sec. 5).

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2. *Morality à la Masolo*

Personhood is of course the conceptual category through which it is natural to enter into discussion of African thought about ethics. As is well-known, personhood, as understood among many black traditional peoples below the Sahara, is a value-laden concept, and one that admits of degrees. That is, one can be more or less of a person, where the more one is a person, the better. More specifically, to have personhood, or to exhibit *ubuntu* (humanness) as it is famously known among Nguni speakers in southern Africa, is to be virtuous, to be an excellent human being.

2.1. Ends v. Means

Supposing one wants to develop one's personhood, so construed, it is natural to pose the question of how to acquire it. Notice, though, that this question is vague, admitting of two senses that it is important to distinguish. On the one hand, one might be asking about what one or one's society could do in order to make personhood likely to be realized. This is a question about the *means* by which one could become a person, i.e., what would enable it or cause it. Here, Masolo discusses the views of Kwasi Wiredu, among others, who point out that, in order to become virtuous, human beings must be socialized in certain ways, and above all must engage in communication with one another, particularly about in/appropriate behaviour (e.g., 2010: 173). Such claims, I submit, are not controversial; who would, or reasonably could, deny that an infant left to his own devices on a deserted island would, after any number of years, be more animal and selfish than genuinely human or morally upright?

The truly contested issue occasioned by asking how to acquire personhood is what the essential nature of personhood is. What constitutes a genuinely human way of life? Which attitudes and actions are virtuous and why? What should be one's final end? These questions, which I take to be more or less equivalent for the field, are the ones philosophers are most interested in answering.

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Before analyzing the answers that Masolo addresses, I first point out that too often the language in his text blurs the distinction between the means by which one can obtain personhood and the nature of personhood itself. He, with a large thrust of the field, clearly believes there is a close relationship between being part of a certain kind of society and being a person, but the nature of the relationship too often is not characterized precisely. Sometimes Masolo uses *logical* distinctions to express the sort of relationship involved, which unfortunately gloss whether it is one of means or ends. For example, he says that 'if a person were to be isolated from society and be deprived of communication with other humans from birth they would be confined to a "solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish" and no doubt also very short life' (2010: 265). Pointing out that isolation is a sufficient condition for a bad life does not tell the reader whether social interaction is a means by which to live well or whether it is to live well in itself, our proper end.

Other times Masolo uses *modal* language to express the relationship between society and personhood, which is equally vague. Consider the claims: 'The intervention of society is, in this sense, a necessary requirement for our growth and development' (2010: 163) and '(A) world where everyone is left to their own fate cannot be a world of happy people' (2010: 246). Again, noting that self-realization would be impossible without social interaction does not indicate in what respect, viz., whether the latter is a necessary tool to bring self-realization about or is the content of self-realization as such.

Still other phrases, which are well understood as expressing a relationship of *supervenience* of personhood on society, are also ambiguous. Consider the claims that 'interdependence is what breeds the ideal human condition' (2010: 246), that 'attainment of human needs and interests is best served in union with others' (2010: 245), and that 'humans who are deprived….of the ability to communicate are deprived of something fundamental to their nature, namely, full participation in the world of persons' (2010: 165). Again, these statements beg the question of whether interdependence, union and communication are instrumental for bringing about human flourishing or whether they constitute it.

Masolo is not alone in speaking in ways that are ambiguous between a relationship of means and one of ends; recall the phrases ubiquitous among African philosophers that the community is ‘prior to’ the individual (see Senghor quoted in Masolo 2010: 231) or that the individual ‘depends on’ the community for her development (Masolo 2010: 174, 218, 226). My current purpose is to use Masolo’s text as an occasion to urge the field to be careful when discussing the precise nature of the relationship between social interaction and personhood.

2.2. Relativism v Universalism

Despite the vague turns of phrase, Masolo is of course aware of the conceptual distinction between means and ends that I am drawing, and he provides revealing discussions about the latter. What I find of particular importance in Masolo’s analysis of the nature of personhood is that he draws on African thought about it, while denying that such thought is applicable only to Africans. Masolo is emphatic about eschewing relativism (2010: 24, 106, 121, 130, 174, 180), which implies that he is in search of an ethic that applies to human beings generally, regardless of where they live or the culture in which they have been reared. In focusing on, and indeed favouring, sub-Saharan thought about ethics, he believes that African thinkers tend to have some insight into objective moral matters that others, particularly those from Western cultures such as Immanuel Kant, do not. That is a bold and intriguing perspective, one that differs from the much more dominant tendency of those who explore indigenous worldviews to suggest that the local is apt for locals and the foreign is apt for foreigners.

There are some phrases in Masolo’s book that readers might think are indicative of moral relativism, but I suggest they are best read otherwise. For example, Masolo often contends that personhood is closely related to: incorporating ‘the values deemed by society to be worth pursuing as goals’ (2010: 96); functioning ‘in the service of socioculturally imposed

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ends' (2010: 154); adjusting 'one's conduct in accordance with known or assumed expectations of other members within any relational circuit' (2010: 206); and protecting 'the customary ways through adherence to them' (2010: 243). Since norms and customs differ from society to society, it appears from these quotations that Masolo is committed to a relativistic view of personhood.

There are two reasons to think, in fact, that these phrases are consistent with Masolo's rejection of moral relativism. First, at several points, he is speaking about means, and not ends, pointing out that the way one develops virtue is through a socialization process that involves, among other things, learning how one's society functions and adapting to that society (probably 2010: 154-155, 205-206, 241). The basic idea is that children must become members of society *in the first place*, before they can take the next step and learn how to become *good* members. For instance, at one point Masolo is explicit about the '(communitarian) system of mutual dependence that adherence to custom produces' (2010: 263); conformity, here, is apparently deemed to be a means by which (in combination with other things, no doubt) community as a final end will be produced.

However, there are other places where it appears that Masolo is not making a point about means, but rather about ends, to the effect that a person is one who fulfils society's expectations (see esp. 2010: 96, 218-219, 243). I submit that, second, on a number of these occasions Masolo is presuming that what the community values will be what is of value to the community. Speaking of conformity to a community's norms, then, is often shorthand for reference to living in ways that that would benefit society, which is ultimately what matters (see esp. 2010: 96-97). And one does find, on occasion, Masolo qualifying which social expectations count, for instance, 'reasonable' ones (2010: 244).

Having established, then, that Masolo is seeking a universally applicable ethic that is informed largely by sub-Saharan values, I now turn to his characterizations of it. Sometimes he construes the nature of personhood in piecemeal terms, providing lists of specific virtues that a real person

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exhibits (2010: 171, 208, 218, 239-240, 251). Among other excellences, Masolo mentions being wise, being polite, exhibiting generosity, being loving, being a leader, working hard, and considering oneself to be bound up with one's fellows.

Of more interest to me are those occasions when Masolo goes beyond giving the reader a grab-bag of human goods, and instead discusses them from a theoretical perspective. At times Masolo aims to sum up what all virtues have in common, to provide a unified account of what makes something a human excellence. The claim that I will make in the next section is that Masolo discusses two theories of personhood that are not clearly distinguished, but should be.

3. Welfare v. Community

There are passages in Masolo's book indicating that personhood is constituted by, and not merely caused by, certain relationships with other human beings. The relevant relationships for Masolo and the African tradition more generally are communal ones, which he sometimes sums up as 'cohesion' (2010: 240). According to what I call a 'community-based' conception of personhood, one lives a genuinely human way of life just insofar as one enters into or prizes community with others. This theory 'posits the existence of others as an essential part of the very structure of the self' (2010: 249), such that realizing one's true nature is nothing over and above living communally.

Strong evidence that Masolo discusses such a view, if not also adheres to it, comes in a passage where he is looking for the fundamental moral value that would best explain interests in conditions such as promoting socialism, engaging in palaver, reconciling after conflict and living in a society in which people are routinely and deeply concerned about one another's well-being. Speaking in particular of the latter, Masolo says that

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> its value lies in the general or common conditions of relations that

> results from it, not just in this specific example but in all other cases and examples of good neighborliness….sociomoral states that every child is taught and that every right-thinking person is called upon to consider implementing as the objective of his or everyday conduct…..A life of cohesion, or positive integration with others, becomes a goal, one that people design modalities for achieving. Let us call this goal communalism, or, as other people have called it, communitarianism. In light of this goal, the virtues listed above also become desirable (2010: 240).

This is the clearest passage in Masolo's book expressing the theoretical view that communal relationship is what should be valued as an *end*, i.e., as constitutive of personhood, and not merely as a means to it (see also 2010: 194, 218, 263).[58] Cohesion is the apparent 'master value' that unites the particular excellences of generosity, a sense of belonging, hard work and the like; these traits make one a better person just insofar as they are expressive of, or conducive to, community. Vices, in contrast, are traits that tend to divide people, and particularly to promote conflict or discord between them.

As clear as the passage is, there are others in Masolo's book that suggest a markedly different theory about fundamental moral value. For example, at one point, Masolo says that 'no aspect of culture, however noble, is an end unto itself', such that a way of life should be given up if it fails to improve people's quality of life (2010: 122). And at other points, Masolo suggests that the value of cohesion is derivative and instrumental, lying in the effectiveness by which it makes people feel safe. Here, he says that

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[58] For another clear adherent to a community-based perspective, see the work of Desmond Tutu, who at one point says of African views of ethics, 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague' (1999: 35). Consider as well Peter Kasenene's remark that 'in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship' (1998: 21). See, too, the moral anthropological work of Silberbauer (1991: 20) and Verhoef and Michel (1997: 397).

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'individual and group security is fostered through a network of social relations ruled by a strong sense of unity and caring' (2010: 216), and that 'well-being is complete when (apart from material prosperity) people feel that they are in an atmosphere of positive relations with other members of society or neighborhood' (2010: 250). These passages strongly suggest what I call a 'welfare-based' conception of personhood, according to which one is more of a person, the more one acts to improve others' quality of life--something one can often do by *means* of entering into community.

Such a theoretical perspective is particularly salient in Masolo's book when he approvingly discusses Kwasi Wiredu's account of morality (2010: 172-174, 206, 265-266).[59] For Wiredu, good character and right acts are a function of sympathetic impartiality, in which one gives the well-being others equal consideration consequent to imagining what it would be like to be them. Although this smacks of utilitarianism, Wiredu is well-known for maintaining that such a morality is instead best captured by the Golden Rule, the principle according to which you ought to treat others as you would like to be treated if you were in their position. Masolo does not indicate a clear preference for the Golden Rule, but does suggest that moral principles are nothing other than 'criteria for survival and well-being' (2010: 172), and can be summed up by the prescription to create 'humane conditions that, at least, enhance the community's ability to reduce unhappiness and suffering' (2010: 250; see also 124, 155, 210, 244). By this welfare-based account of personhood, what makes a behaviour or character trait a virtue is that it reliably improves people's quality of life, where a vice in contrast is an action or attitude that tends to fail to do so or, indeed, makes others worse off.

The ideals of welfare and community are not completely unrelated; for Masolo, as for most African theorists of communitarianism, communal

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[59] Other influential African moral theorists who take well-being to be the basic value include Kwame Gyekye (1997: 50; 2010) and John Bewaji (2004).

relationships include ones of mutual aid.[60] However, there are at least three crucial respects in which community is not reducible to a relationship in which people are 'always concerned about the well-being of other people around them' (2010: 238).

First, the theories ground different fundamental explanations of why one ought to help others and would enhance one's personhood by doing so. The welfare-based theory says that one should share one's wealth, time, labour and so on at bottom because doing so is likely to make others' lives go better. In contrast, the community-based theory prescribes helping others ultimately because doing so would be part of what it is to enter into community with them, or perhaps to foster communal relationships among them.

Second, a natural understanding of the moral value of community is partial, at least to some degree. That is, prizing community implies caring for the well-being of one's own family and society more than that of others ('family first', 'charity begins at home'), which contrasts notably with Wiredu's morality of sympathetic impartiality. There is nothing in the Golden Rule indicating that one should provide greater weight to those related to oneself, when it comes to fellow-feeling and beneficent action consequent to it.

Third, and most starkly, community as understood by Masolo, and by the sub-Saharan tradition more broadly, includes relationships that have no essential reference to beneficence, mutual aid, etc. For instance, Masolo discusses relationships in which people identify with, or share a way of life with, one another, which are a matter of, on the one hand, experiencing a sense of togetherness (2010: 232, 240), and, on the other, having common customs, traditions, culture and the like (2010: 225, 226, 234, 244). Although such relationships *might* have the effect of improving people's well-being, they do not essentially include it.

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[60] For an analysis of the concept of community as it functions in African moral thinking, see Metz (2007).

Masolo is not the only one analyzing African thought about morality who is unclear about which values are fundamental and which are not. For example, I believe that Wiredu's corpus includes such ambiguity. On the one hand, as we have seen, Wiredu believes that morality from a sub-Saharan perspective is captured by the principle of sympathetic impartiality, particularly as expressed in the Golden Rule. However, when Wiredu famously defends a consensus-based form of democracy, he does so in large part by appeal to the idea that such a polity would produce harmony and reduce divisiveness in society (1996: 172-190).[61] Here, then, are two values: well-being and harmony; which one is fundamental? Similarly, Polycarp Ikuenobe in a fairly recent book-length treatment of African morality is vagueabout whether welfare or community is ultimately what matters from a sub-Saharan standpoint. One finds some passages indicating that African ethics essentially prescribes engaging in caring relationships or maintaining harmonious ones (2006: 6, 65, 114, 128, 138), and other ones saying that the promotion of human well-being is key (2006: 80, 103-104, 111, 119, 123, 127).

Now, I have been supposing that it makes most sense to presume that only one value, either community or welfare, is fundamental to morality, but what about the possibility that both are?[62] Perhaps cohesion and well-being should be pursued as separate ends that are to be prized for their own sake, and maybe they are often mutually supportive means with regard to one another. On this reading of Masolo's text, there is no contradiction as to which value is fundamental; rather they belong together side by side, as aims that are often compatible.

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[61] In other parts of his work, Wiredu points out that his people, the Akan, believe that human beings have a dignity in virtue of being children of God, a superlative worth that demands respect (1992). That is a third, apparently distinct, value, something that I address briefly in the conclusion.

[62] Something that Masolo has suggested at a workshop on The Philosophy of D. A. Masolo sponsored by the Philosophy Department at the University of Johannesburg 24-25 March 2012.

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Such a pluralist reading of the foundations of African morality might well be the most charitable way to read Masolo's text. However, I am in the first instance interested in pursuing a monistic interpretation of sub-Saharan ethics, mainly since one can know that more than one basic end must be posited only upon first having posited a single one and having found it inadequate. The project of systematically differentiating basic ends and considering which one, if any, would suffice to ground an attractive sub-Saharan moral philosophy is still in its infancy and is something toward which I aim to contribute. Therefore, in the rest of this article, I suppose not only that community and welfare are distinct ends, but also that it is worth enquiring as to whether one of them, on its own, is more plausible than the other and is a reasonable contender for grounding morality generally.

Another reason for being careful about the differences between welfare and community as fundamental aims is that, as I discuss in the next section, sometimes they prescribe divergent decisions. In this section I have sought to demonstrate that Masolo's discussion of sub-Saharan moral thought includes two logically distinct conceptions that he, along with others in the field, does not adequately differentiate. The differences between the two accounts of personhood should become all the more clear in what follows, where I argue that a community-based account of personhood is able to account for widely held moral judgments that a welfare-based one cannot. I will demonstrate that the logics of the two views have different implications for how to behave, some of which are more philosophically plausible than others.

4. *For a Communitarian Conception of Personhood*

In this section I advance two general considerations that to my mind provide adequate reason to reject the welfare-based conception of personhood, as characterized in Masolo's work, in comparison to the community-based one. The arguments are not intended to demonstrate

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that the latter is most justified relative to all competitors, only in relation to a morality that takes human well-being to be the sole basic value.[63]

4.1. The Relevance of Past Decisions

The first major argument for the community-based conception of personhood is that it, unlike the welfare-based one, can account for the moral relevance of decisions people have taken. Many of us, whether working in the African tradition or otherwise, have intuitions that sometimes the way we should treat someone in the present is to a large degree a function of how that person voluntarily acted in the past. Here are three examples, relating to punishment, self-defence and rationing.

Nearly all of us believe that it is grave injustice to punish someone known to be innocent of any wrongdoing. As is common to point out in the literature critical of utilitarianism, there can be situations in which meting out a penalty to an innocent person would be most conducive to the greater good, but in which doing so would be impermissible. The best explanation of why it would be immoral to punish an innocent includes the fact that the person is innocent, i.e., did not do anything wrong in the past.

A welfarist morality has difficulty accounting for that judgment. Utilitarianism famously implies that past actions are morally irrelevant in themselves; all that in principle matters, from this perspective, is whether what one does now will maximally benefit society in the future. Suppose one is a sheriff in a position to frame an innocent person, where such an action would alone prevent a marginally greater degree of harm to society. According to the principle of sympathetic impartiality, one should give everyone's interests equal weight, which would, like utilitarianism, appear to

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[63] I acknowledge that a more rights-oriented ethic, according to which the innocent have an equal claim to well-being, promises to avoid some of the objections I raise below. For an instance of such a view in the Anglo-American literature, see the work of Richard Arneson (e.g., 1989).

entail that one ought to punish the innocent person, since doing so, *ex hypothesi*, would satisfy the most interests. Or if one elects to apply the Golden Rule in this case, notice that the outcome is indeterminate: when placing oneself in the shoes of the innocent individual, one sees that one would not want to be punished, and when placing oneself in the shoes of those who would be harmed in the absence of such punishment, one see that one would want punishment to be inflicted so as to prevent the harm. The Golden Rule therefore provides no guidance about which course of action to take.

Turn, now, to issues of self- and other-defence, which are widely accepted among African societies in response to colonialism and perceived witchcraft, to mention just two salient examples. It is uncontroversial to hold that if someone is unjustly attacking an innocent person, that innocent (or a third party) may rightly use force for the purpose of warding off the threat. The rough principle operative in such cases is that burdens may be imposed on aggressors in order to prevent aggression toward those who are not aggressing.

However, a welfare-based conception of personhood cannot easily account for such a principle. Suppose a group of four men are trying to kill one innocent woman, merely because she belongs to a different ethnic group. It is incontrovertible that the woman (or, say, a police officer) may shoot the men, if necessary and sufficient to save her life. But that intuition cannot be accommodated by the Golden Rule, which would require her to put herself in the shoes of her aggressors and ask herself whether she would want to be shot. Since she would not, she would be wrong to shoot them. Similar remarks go for a more consequentialist interpretation of sympathetic impartiality; weighing up all the equal interests in living well, the lives of four outweigh the life of one.

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For a third and final example, consider the fact that nearly all of us believe that, in cases of scarcity, where one cannot distribute life-saving resources to all those who need them, it would be proper to save those who are not responsible for the fact of needing to be saved. For instance, suppose that a wife has become HIV positive because her husband cheated on her behind her back and did not use protection when doing so. And suppose that you, who have a single regimen of antiretroviral treatment, must choose which of them to save. You have strong reason to give the treatment to the wife and not the husband, and to do so because he is responsible for the fact that she needs the treatment and she is not.

But, again, a welfare-based ethic cannot accommodate that judgment. If you employ the Golden Rule, you discover that you cannot decide whom to save, since you would like to receive the treatment if you were in the position of the wife or in that of the husband. And a broader orientation toward well-being also appears to be indeterminate, supposing the consequences of saving one or the other would be the same. However, I submit that the past actions of the husband provide some, very weighty consideration to save his wife, and not him, in the case where you cannot save both.

A community-based ethic, at least when interpreted in a certain way, can account for the relevance of past actions in determining how one ought to treat people in the present.[64] Suppose one holds the view that one ought to treat people with respect in virtue of their capacity for community, or that one is more of a person, the more one honours (not maximizes) communal relationships. It follows from this sort of principle that one may act in an anti-social way toward those who are being anti-social, if necessary to stop or compensate for their anti-social behaviour. It need not be degrading of a person's capacity for community to treat him in an anti-social manner, when doing so is necessary to prevent or correct for a comparable anti-sociality on his part, for respecting another's capacity for community can require basing one's interaction with him on the way he has exercised it. Or, alternately put, it does not fail to honour the value of community to act in a divisive manner when doing so is necessary to prevent or make up for divisiveness.

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[64] The present analysis is drawn from Metz (2011, 2012a).

Such an analysis can account for the above intuitions about why it is unjust to punish the innocent but need not be unjust to punish the guilty, why it can be right to use force against aggressors, and why it would be suitable not to save those who are responsible for needing to be saved, when doing so would come at the expense of those who are not so responsible. It would be unjust to punish the innocent, since they have not behaved in an anti-social manner and punishing them would therefore fail to honour (their capacity for) communal relationships. It can be right to use force against aggressors in order to protect the innocent, since being divisive toward those being divisive does not disrespect the value of community. And, finally, it would be right to ration life-saving treatment away from those whose anti-sociality is the cause of their need for it, when doing so would prevent the victims of their anti-sociality from dying.

4.2. Non-Harmful Wrongdoing

So far, I have argued that viewing personhood entirely as a matter of doing what one can to improve others' quality of life, as discussed in Masolo (2010), has great difficulty accounting for the moral relevance of past actions at a principled level, and that, in contrast, a community-based conception of virtue can do so with relative ease. Now I argue that there is a second class of actions that the welfare-based view cannot easily accommodate, namely, those in which one agent does something to another, albeit without her knowledge that anything has changed. In many of these kinds of cases, it is plausible to maintain that the other's well-being is not reduced, but that the action is wrong or a vice nonetheless.

For a first example, consider the case of a spouse who systematically cheats on you behind your back, and is so careful and conniving that you have virtually no chance of finding out. Or think about a team of medical researchers who observe intimate behaviour of yours, such as bathing, without telling you they are doing so and for what purpose. Or imagine a situation in which people insult you behind your back—perhaps literally in the form of deftly pinning a derogatory sign on the back of your shirt

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and then removing it before you have a chance to discover it. Or suppose that I break into your house in order to sleep in your bed, listen to your stereo and bathe in your tub while you are away at work, taking care to ensure that things are organized so that you can never know I was there. I presume that readers, whether working in African or Western traditions, believe that these actions are wrong, at least to some substantial degree.

In all four cases, there is no apparent reduction of well-being on the part of the one acted upon, and not even the realistic threat of such, given the way the hypothetical scenarios are framed. When one applies the Golden Rule, the actions appear permissible. After all, if I put myself in your shoes and imagine what it would be like to be you, I do not come away feeling bad. Masolo or Wiredu might reply that I would feel bad upon sympathizing with you in the situation in which you were aware of what I propose to do. However, the damning response to them, I think, is that what I am proposing to do to you includes *not* making you so aware.

Similar remarks apply, I submit, to any other interpretation of sympathetic impartiality. To sympathize with someone is roughly to experience a negative emotion such as sorrow toward another's unhappiness consequent to empathizing with it, where empathy is a matter of imagining what it is like to be the other person. When I imagine what it is like to be you upon breaking into your house and using your things while you are away and unaware of what I am up to, there is no unhappiness on your part with which to sympathize. It follows, then, that I do no wrong and exhibit no vice, on a welfare-based conception of morality.[65] However, in this case, and the others above, there would in fact be action incompatible with personhood.

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[65] One might propose a different conception of well-being, according to which one is objectively worse off if treated in these ways, something that Pedro Tabensky has suggested to me in conversation. However, such a conception does not square with a principle of sympathetic impartiality, to which Wiredu and Masolo adhere, and it strikes me mushing together distinctions that are better kept apart, namely, the disvalue of harm done to an individual, on the one hand, and, say, that of disrespectful treatment of a person, on the other.

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The community-based conception of personhood can do much better on this score. As discussed above, part of what is involved in a communal relationship is engaging in mutual aid, acting so as to improve others' quality of life, but another part is sharing a way of life, where this includes experiencing a sense of togetherness and participating in common activities. It is these latter values that would be flouted by the present actions. To genuinely *share* a way of life with others requires transparency about the way one is interacting with them. To relate to others without their informed consent is to treat the value of community, or those individuals capable of it, with disrespect and hence is incompatible with developing one's personhood.

In this section, I have provided two major arguments against a welfare-based conception of personhood and in favour of a community-based one. With Masolo, I am interested in articulating a conception of ethics that is both African and plausible. I submit that, on both grounds, community is to be favoured over welfare, supposing one is interested in formulating and evaluating a moral theory grounded on a single basic value.

5. Conclusion

D.A. Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* is a magisterial, sympathetic overview of themes in contemporary African philosophy, occasioning reflection on several key facets of characteristic sub-Saharan thought about morality. I have argued that a close reading of the text indicates two different conceptions of human excellence that neither Masolo nor many in the field have adequately recognized are distinct, or at least are worth analyzing as having separate logics. According to one theory, an individual develops personhood or lives a genuinely human way of life solely to the extent that his attitudes and actions improve others' quality of life, while according to the other, he does so just insofar as he honours communal relationships, which include mutual aid but are not exhausted by it and also include sharing a way of life with others. I have worked to

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show that these two perspectives are distinct, and furthermore that they have different implications about how we ought to live. Finally, I have argued that the implications of the community-based account are more plausible, and hence that it is more worthy of belief than the welfare-based one.

I conclude by noting that welfare and community do not exhaust either Masolo's discussion of African ethics, or the literature on it more generally. There are additional categories that appear to be good candidates for basic values that merit exploration in other work. For example, at one point Masolo mentions the idea that human beings have a dignity (2010: 124; see also 119, 237-238). To have a dignity is roughly for an individual to have a superlative final value that is independent of usefulness to others or social recognition. Human dignity is a moral concept that is apparently not reducible to well-being and that might well be distinct from community, too, and it is one that is well known for being believed by many traditional African cultures (e.g., Gyekye 1997: 63-64; Deng 2004). For another example, Masolo touches only briefly on the vitalist tradition in African ethics, according to which attitudes and actions ought to promote life-force, either in oneself or among one's fellows (2010: 13, 234-235). Here is another a promising candidate for a fundamental good, apparently distinct from welfare and community, that has its own logic and has been explored and developed by theorists such as N. K. Dzobo (1992), Bénézet Bujo (1997), Laurenti Magesa (1997) and myself (Metz 2012a, 2012b). In defending a community-based conception of personhood relative to the welfare-based one discussed in Masolo's book, I have not shown that the former is the most African and the most plausible; that would require engaging with additional major strands of ethical thought that one finds below the Sahara.

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