

Authors meet critics: What is a person? Untapped insights from Africa

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Philosophers invoke the concept of a ‘person’ widely—not only as a basic building block for normative theories prescribing conduct, but to furnish a conceptual grounding for political and social philosophies about a just state. The concept is legion not just in philosophy, but across a wide swath of disciplines, including psychology, law, biomedicine, anthropology and others. The oldest known meaning of the word ‘person’ relates to performance before others in fiction or real life: the Latin *persōna*, referred to a mask used by a player in a dramatic role, or the part or role played by a person in life.

Today, broad agreement about personhood exists at a high level of abstraction, yet sharp divisions emerge as we move closer to the ground. Philosophers generally agree that to be a person differs from being a member of a species, and generally characterise ‘person’ in normative, rather than purely biological, terms. They generally converge in thinking that ‘person’ indicates a superlative moral worth, variously expressed as dignity, rights or deserving to be respected or treated as an end. However, little consensus exists when it comes to delineating necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood or determining whether particular beings (or things) count as persons. Are fetuses, cows, great apes, trees, soils, ecosystems or artificially intelligent social robots persons? People holding religious views may ask, ‘Is God(s) a person?’ Views diverge.

As we cross borders not only of time, but culture, accounts of personhood splinter further. Compare the account of persons frequently espoused by people

indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa with the one predominant in the West today. African personhood often underscores that persons exist only within their communal relationships. This idea finds expression in pithy sayings, such as, *a person is a person through other persons*, and *I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am*. According to this way of thinking, ‘without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description ‘person’ does not fully apply’.¹ Western personhood differs strikingly, stressing that persons hold the source of their exceptional moral worth inside themselves, in capacities such as sentience, consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, self-motivated activity or language. Unlike both African and Western personhood, some societies in Melanesia and India regard persons as ‘permeable or partible’.² For example, the Nakaya, a hunter-gatherer community in south India, reportedly consider ‘person’ to be an abstraction, referring to human forms (or to other non-human beings or objects) which we relate to in certain ways. The attribution itself serves not to differentiate solitary ‘individuals’ but to recognise a relational composite or ‘dividuals’.

This book navigates distinct and culturally complex philosophies of persons by bringing them into conversation, focusing on the two philosophies that we, the authors, know best: African and Western. It explores these philosophies as moving pictures, rather than stills, crossing not only boundaries of society and culture, but historical time. Drawing insights from each tradition, we formulate and defend a new philosophy, *Emergent Personhood*. *Emergent Personhood* borrows from African philosophy the insight that social relational qualities undergird personhood. From Western philosophy, it takes the conception that all humans are moral equals. Building on these ideas, *Emergent Personhood* offers a new philosophy of persons.

This book tackles these and other concerns by beginning a conversation between Africa and the West about what a ‘person’ is. As the conversation gets underway, a central aim will be to look

for a philosophically compelling vision of personhood that incorporates insights from each tradition. Since the meanings of terms like *person* are never settled, our goal is not to put debate about what a ‘person’ is to rest. Instead, it is to shift the direction future debates take.

► *Chapter 1: A Conversation Between Africa and the West*. After clarifying key concepts, Chapter 1 characterises the philosophies of persons ascendant in Africa and the West today. It identifies differences along five key parameters: extrinsic/intrinsic, earned/unearned, scalar/binary, changing/stable and foundational/derivate. We ask when these differences emerged, and trace their origins from the early Patristic era to the Middle Ages, and the predominance of Christianity in the West. We point out that strong affinities existed between Africa and the West before the rise of Christianity, noting similarities between African philosophy and early Greek and Roman views.

► *Chapter 2: Emergent Personhood*. Chapter 2 asks, what led the West to abandon the older Greek and Roman view of persons? What was gained and what was lost? After weighing this, we set forth five requirements that an adequate account of personhood must meet. This lays the groundwork for introducing a new philosophy of persons, *Emergent Personhood*. *Emergent Personhood* distills the most compelling insights from African and Western views. We distinguish human and non-human persons and unpack the notion of ‘speciesism’. Chapter 2 closes by examining the implications of *Emergent Personhood* for the moral standing of prenatal human life.

► *Chapter 3: Personhood Across the Lifespan*. Chapter 3 explicates *Emergent Personhood* further, considering its implications for human beings across the lifespan. We distinguish our view from contemporary African and Western approaches. Unlike some African accounts, *Emergent Personhood* commits to the moral equality of human beings. In contrast to some utilitarian and Kantian approaches, it rejects the position that older adults with intellectual impairment have less moral status or are not persons.

► *Chapter 4: Becoming a Non-Person*. Chapter 4 delves into the question of how human personhood ends. After clarifying the distinction between biological death and the death of a person, we distinguish *Emergent*

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Personhood's account from African and Western views. We consider the proposal to hasten death for people who request it, and explore moral duties toward the newly dead and ancestors.

- ▶ *Chapter 5: Zombies and Robots.* Chapter 5 shifts the focus to non-human persons. It brings to light affinities between Emergent Personhood and some African views: both share the belief that consciousness is not necessary for being a person. This opens the door to greater inclusivity and personhood for artificial intelligences. After engaging with a series of objections, the chapter concludes that artificial entities that relate to us but lack conscious states can be persons if they stand in sufficiently close, prosocial relationships with human beings.
- ▶ *Chapter 6: Animals and Nature.* Chapter 6 considers whether animals, soils, rocks, or ecosystems could have the high moral status we associate with persons. We argue that Emergent Personhood can countenance personhood for varied types of beings and objects yet prioritises humans. It offers an approach that purports to be compelling for human beings, rather than aspiring to a 'view from nowhere', or an ethics for all living things, rational beings or creatures that can suffer.
- ▶ *Chapter 7: Space Aliens and Terraforming.* Chapter 7 thinks expansively about the world beyond Earth. It applies Emergent Personhood to extraterrestrial life and lands, and considers what duty, if any, calls for protecting pristine extraterrestrial

environments for their own sakes. We explore extremophiles (organisms that thrive in environments hazardous to humans) and illustrate ethical challenges using science fiction examples. The chapter concludes that if they exist, extraterrestrial creatures, and the lands and planets they live on, can acquire personhood in ways similar to the ways non-human terrestrial beings and lands can.

Stepping back, it should be apparent that our book does philosophy differently. It breaks ground by engaging the concept of 'person' across borders. Rather than cordoning off one tradition and using it as a point of contrast or difference, our technique showcases both African and Western thought, revealing both affinities and differences. Weaving them together into a new philosophy, Emergent Personhood, we show how untapped insights from Africa contribute to a more enlightened view of persons, one less tethered than mainstream alternatives to the particular cultural, economic, and historical moorings of contemporary Western thought.

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