Good and Beautiful:  
A Moral-Aesthetic View of  
Personhood in African  
Communal Traditions

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Abstract  
I articulate an African view of personhood that combines beauty and goodness—aesthetic and moral features. I discuss the idea of communalism, which provides the social and moral values and belief system that give meaning to this view of personhood. I use ideas from some African ethnic traditions, or some people’s account of these traditions, as examples to illustrate this view. The similarities in these examples from different ethnic traditions indicate that it is reasonable to characterize this view as a common theme that may plausibly represent many African cultures. This essay does not seek to provide an anthropological descriptive view, but a plausible philosophical stance on how we ought to understand the idea of personhood in African cultures. I do not suggest that all African cultures or traditions have exactly the same view or that they hold this view in the same way, extent or degree. Obviously, there may be minor differences that do not alter the essence of the view.

Many of the authors quoted in this paper who have written on African philosophy use the phrase, ‘African culture’, ‘African tradition’, ‘African view’ or ‘African society’. Thus, it has become commonplace in African philosophical circles that when the prefix ‘African’ is used in the literature on African philosophy, it does not imply that Africa is a monolith or that its traditions are static. There is a recognition that some traditions have changed or are changing. The use of ‘African tradition’ usually indicates a generalizing theoretical
abstraction about some *enduring* and *dominant* similar themes or ideas in many African traditions. It is also meant to contrast ‘African’ with ‘Western’ traditions, and to also respond to Western critiques of Africa as a group. It is used in a similar way in which the prefix ‘Western’ is used in the literature. This notion of ‘Western’, which is replete in the literature, does not suggest the West is a monolith, but rather, a reference to some similar dominant themes in Western thought.
INTRODUCTION

I articulate an African view of personhood that combines beauty and goodness—aesthetic and moral features. I discuss the idea of communalism, which provides the social and moral values and belief system that give meaning to this view of personhood. I use ideas from some African ethnic traditions, or some people’s account of these traditions, as examples to illustrate this view. The similarities in these examples from different ethnic traditions indicate that it is reasonable to characterize this view as a common theme that may plausibly represent many African cultures. This essay does not seek to provide an anthropological descriptive view, but a plausible philosophical stance on how we ought to understand the idea of personhood in African cultures. I do not suggest that all African cultures or traditions have exactly the same view or that they hold this view in the same way, extent or degree. Obviously, there may be minor differences that do not alter the essence of the view.

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which is replete in the literature, does not suggest the West is a monolith, but rather, a reference to some similar dominant themes in Western thought.

COMMUNALISM AND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BEAUTY AND GOODNESS

One feature of communalism, which is a core element of African cultural traditions, is its normative (moral and aesthetic) conception of personhood. This conception implies that one is considered a person in a robust sense, only when one consistently acts or behaves in ways that are considered morally acceptable. Thus, he is a ‘truly beautiful’ person, which is both a moral and an aesthetic judgment, or perhaps, an aesthetic judgment with a moral connotation or underpinning. It is pertinent to indicate that when other objects are evaluated as beautiful, it has a different connotation, in that it has no moral implications or underpinnings. Usually, the aesthetic judgment about one’s beauty or the moral judgment about one’s goodness is understood as something that supervenes on certain descriptive features or facts about a person, a person’s character, actions, or behavior. These features and facts define what it means for a human being to be beautiful as opposed to other objects.

Barry Hallen illustrates the connection between goodness and beauty in African traditions with examples from the Yoruba culture. He says: “In ordinary, everyday Yoruba discourse the term most frequently mentioned of fundamental relevance to aesthetic concern is ewa, which is normally translated into English as ‘beauty’. But rather than being primarily associated with the arts or crafts, its most common usage, as might be expected, is with reference to human beings.” This idea of beauty as applied to humans, which involves an aesthetic judgment, is not simply a
judgment about physical beauty based on one’s physical features, but a judgment about one’s moral qualities and social abilities to behave in acceptable ways in order to meet one’s social-moral obligations. Such judgments are based on communal values and standards of behavior. Communalism indicates that a community may, based on its values, the implied obligations, and social recognition, shape an individual’s identity as a normative person.

This idea of personhood is morally constituted by, and embedded in, a community, social environment, cultural beliefs or traditions, which indicate the normative standards, value commitments, social obligations, interpersonal relationships, and mutual dependencies. It is on the basis of these that one is identified and defined as a ‘morally beautiful’ person, which makes one a person in a robust sense. Thus the essence of the African view of the connection between the goodness and beauty of a person is that moral goodness is a normative necessary condition for a person to be truly and strictly considered beautiful, and to be a person in the robust sense. When one is described or evaluated as a beautiful person, one can infer that such a person has elements of moral goodness, and that one who lacks moral goodness cannot be described as a truly beautiful person. However, in order to appreciate the connection between the aesthetics (beauty) and morality (goodness) that are essential to the African conception of personhood, we must first, understand their broad view of art as social and functional creations, and their view of the standards for evaluating art, as contrasted with the modern Western views and standards.

One essential African standard for determining the beauty of art is social-functionality. We may capture this view of art with the following quote from Leopold Senghor: “For in black African art is not a separate activity, in itself or for
itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft in fact.”iii It is important to underscore the idea that art is a social activity, a way of life, and a technique of living, in that art is not simply what one person creates solely to be appreciated for its beauty. Art in African cultures is a functional activity that has meaning, value, and relevance within the social context and norms. This implies that works of art are created to serve some practical purposes or goals within a particular community. According to Onyewuenyi, “The needs of the community determine the artist’s production. His art is never ‘art for art’s sake’. He is responsible to his society.”iv Art and the process of art creation is a form of living which involves various types of actions and behavior. An art that has no relevance is not considered art—it is just a ‘thing’, an ‘object’, or ‘junk’.

On this broad view of art, an individual’s action or character is his ‘artistic creation’ that is responsible or sensitive to the community and its values. This process of ‘character creation’ by the individual, which is shaped by the community and its values, requires acculturation and internalization of communal values. One’s actions in relation to one’s character are aimed at achieving communal goals and interests, on which individual interests and needs depend. As a social activity, art—in terms of both creation and appreciation—is guided by social norms and standards. Thus, one’s artwork is oriented and geared toward social-functional appreciation. The need for art and artist to be sensitive to the interests and values of the community implies that art is ‘depersonalized’ or ‘socialized’. The artist cannot just create anything he wants. An artist cannot claim that his art is a manifestation or reflection of his own feelings and idiosyncratic taste or aesthetic value. A person cannot ‘create’ her character based on her personal feelings or taste. Aesthetic values and tastes are never individual, they are social or communal. Similarly, moral values are
communal, hence an individual cannot claim to have acted, or seek to justify his action based on his own feelings, value, or taste; actions must be sensitive to communal values.

In affirming the social, moral, and functional nature of aesthetics and art in African traditions, Onyewuenyi states: “One function of the art is making explicit the images by which a society recognizes its own values and thus offering a means by which the members of a community may express and evaluate new elements in their lives.” As such, art exemplifies a communal world view and a person’s character; it represents a conception of, and expresses a feeling about, the social world, life, and reality. People’s lives and reality are founded on and shaped by their social-cultural beliefs and moral values, which their art, lives, and actions also manifest. Art may be abstract or realistic. Abstract art is inspired by the reality that one experiences, one’s beliefs or imaginations about reality, or one’s understanding of those experiences, based on the conceptual scheme that is shaped by communal life, values, and beliefs. Realistic art is a representation or interpretation of how one sees or understands reality in the context of communal life, values, and beliefs.

One might, prima facie or naively, criticize this African normative view of personhood which synthesizes moral and aesthetic judgments or features by saying that the description or evaluation of a person as beautiful, when in fact one implies a moral judgment about the moral goodness of a person, is a misunderstanding of a figureative, extended, or an attenuated use of ‘beauty’ which is non-aesthetic. For instance, when one says that another person is ‘cool’ in contemporary vernacular or slang, it does not indicate or describe the temperature of the person. Rather, it is used figuratively as a judgment about or a description of the person’s looks, attire or dress,
demeanor, disposition, or attitude. One may argue that the African idea of describing or evaluating a person as beautiful in the moral sense of goodness is a figurative descriptive use of beauty which does not imply a purely normative aesthetic judgment. The notion of ‘cool’ in contemporary vernacular or slang is particularly instructive here in comparison to the Yoruba concept of beauty or ‘cool’, because ‘cool’ in contemporary slang and among the Yorubas, may connote a positive aesthetic judgement about one’s physical appearance or demeanor. It may also connote a positive moral judgment about one’s acceptable behaviors, interaction with others, or moral attitude or disposition.

However, this possible naive criticism about how the Yorubas and some African cultures may have misunderstood the figurative use of beauty is wrong because, according to Barry Hallen, the Yorubas distinguish between physical and moral beauty. Physical beauty is for the Yorubas, an ‘outer beauty’ which is considered superficial and unimportant. This kind of beauty is ephemeral and fleeting. It can change very drastically and significantly with situations. For instance, a person with an ‘outer’ beautiful face can be permanently disfigured in an instance and become physically ugly. The more important and fairly permanent kind of beauty is the inner moral beauty that reflects a person’s character, disposition, values, virtues, and attitudes. These qualities are more difficult to cultivate. But once they are cultivated, they are less easy to destroy. The most important observation and lasting judgment that can be made about a person is about his inner beauty or moral character. It is one’s character or inner beauty that determines what one does; and what one does, is also a reflection of one’s inner beauty. This point is summarized by Hallen’s maxim “Handsome is as handsome does.”
One important character trait that the Yorubas consider to be an inner beauty is patience. This involves the ability to be calm under stress or pressure. This virtue is described by Robert Thompson in terms of being ‘cool’. Interestingly, the concept of ‘cool’ has an important aesthetic connotation in Yoruba culture, which also highlights the logical connection between moral goodness and beauty. The concept of ‘coolness’, being calm and patient, is an important moral virtue or value that speaks to one’s dignity and strength of moral character or inner beauty. Hallen argues that, “Good/beautiful moral character tends to be associated with persons who generally appear composed, self-controlled, patient, and alert.” However, one might critically respond to this idea by saying that it is unclear how being patient is an aesthetic value or something that can be considered beautiful. We might begin to unpack this idea by quoting Thompson, who says: “Yoruba, in brief, assume that someone who embodies command, coolness, and character is someone extremely beautiful and like unto a god.” One might say that the physical expression or manifestation of patience and calmness is considered beautiful.

However, one’s physical demeanor, appearance, or expression of patience or calmness is a reflection of the inner calmness of the person that involves his moral character and dignity. Thus, Hallen argues: “A mind distinguished by patience, especially in difficult or problematic situations, informs a consciousness that maintains self-control and optimal communication with itself and its environment.” The implication is that the Yoruba’s aesthetics regarding the outer beauty of the demeanor a person with respect to being calm and patient must originate from the inner moral beauty of being calm and patient in the mind and in character; it is the coolness of the mind and character that allows a person to maintain a patient and calm appearance and demeanor. Such a person has social functionality because he is better
able to contribute positively to the community. It is pertinent to note that in a different sense, besides being calm in demeanor, a person’s physical beauty does not necessarily indicate an inner moral beauty. For instance, if one has a physically beautiful face based on facial structure and the proportionality of the different parts, it does not necessarily mean that one has an inner moral beauty.

When the aesthetic idea or standard of beauty is applied solely to physical objects or works of art and craft made by humans, it has a different implication and connotation. Because objects do not have the rational creativity that will engender moral character or virtues, and ‘inner beauty’ that can be so evaluated, the aesthetic-moral standard of human beauty cannot be applied to objects. It is, therefore, a category mistake to apply this human standard of beauty to objects or works of art. These objects and art are aesthetically evaluated, primarily, for their social sensitivity and usefulness, and perhaps, secondarily for their physical structural arrangement of their parts. There is something instructive about the beauty and goodness of a face based on its structure and proportionality—it reflects a kind of harmony and order. Based on the African view of ontology, the goal and aim of things in reality and of artistic creation are to achieve harmony, unity, balance, and order. The ability to achieve this goal or seek this aim is considered a standard or criterion for goodness and beauty. The idea of harmony is coextensive with or logically connected to the idea of social functionality. In other words, social functionality is a measure of harmony and order, in that a thing or person is useful or functional only insofar as it creates or conduces harmony and order in the community and reality.

A person or a thing is considered good, and thus, beautiful, if directed toward achieving or enhancing harmony and order in reality of which the community, people, and things are a
part. This idea of considering something as aesthetically beautiful and morally good if it is conducive to harmony is expressed by the Yoruba’s idea of coolness as both an aesthetic and a moral criterion. For the Yorubas, a person is physically beautiful because he has a ‘cool’ face, and an object such as a carving is beautiful if it is ‘cool’. Aesthetic coolness is understood here to connote balance, order, and harmony. To buttress this point, Thompson says the Yorubas may aesthetically evaluate a carving as follows: “The face of the object was rounded and the features were balanced and composed.”xii This work of art is deemed beautiful largely because there is order, harmony, and balance in the structure and different features of the face. The idea of moral coolness or goodness also derives from balance or harmony in action, behavior, character, and attitudes, and their ability to conduce and enhance balance and harmony in a community, society and reality. According to Hallen, “It is in this way that the aesthetic of the cool underlies and structures the morality of the cool, the beautiful, and the good.”xiii

AFRICAN VIEW OF ONTOLOGY AND THE BASIS FOR AXIOLOGY

Any art or action that is considered a form of artistic creation, can either be both good and beautiful, or bad and ugly, because it enhances and conduces balance and harmony in nature, reality, and community. An understanding of a people’s worldview is necessary for understanding their standard of beauty and view of art, which are usually inspired by their beliefs about or view of reality. It is pertinent to indicate that Africans have a holistic worldview that consists of interconnected religious, cosmological, epistemological, and axiological elements and dimensions. Uchendu argues that “To know how a people view the world around them is to understand how they evaluate life, and a people’s evaluation of life, both temporal
and non-temporal, provides them with a ‘charter’ of action, a guide to behaviour.”\textsuperscript{xiv} The implication of this statement is that a people’s view of ontology has implications and practical relevance for their axiological or normative (aesthetic and moral) views. The way they view reality implies how they evaluate or value it, and how they evaluate or value reality indicates how they will act or behave within or toward it, and what they will create.

The dominant ontological view in many African traditions is that reality is a unity that aims toward balance and harmony. It is seen as a composite of natural forces and an interconnected continuum of natural elements, and it exists by virtue of its unity, balance, and harmony. Temples indicates that, “The African thought holds that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship.”\textsuperscript{xv} This ontological relationship implies that the connections that people have with one another, other creatures, and entities or things, involve efforts to maintain unity and harmony in reality. Senghor argues that traditional Africans see reality and nature as a life force, and for them, “the whole of the universe appears as an infinitely small, and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of life. It is He who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces.”\textsuperscript{xvi} This suggests that God who is the source of life is also the source of the design of reality’s unity, which requires harmony and balance.

Vernon Dixon argues that the essence of this traditional African world view, is markedly different from the modern Western view:

\begin{quote}
In the Euro-American worldview, there is a separation between the self and the non-self
\end{quote}
(phenomenal world). Through this process of separation, the phenomenal world becomes an Object, an it. By Object, I mean the totality of phenomena conceived as constituting the non-self, that is, all the phenomena that are the antithesis of subject, ego, or self-consciousness. The phenomenal world becomes an entity considered as totally independent of the self. Events or phenomena are treated as external to the self rather than as affected by one’s feelings or reflections. Reality becomes that which is set before the mind to be apprehended, whether it be things external in space or conceptions formed by the mind itself.xvii

Modern Western thoughts see reality in terms of a dichotomy between the subjective reality from the perspective of humans and the objective reality. The objective reality exists independent of a human subject and it is logically different from a human conception of it. The modern Western view of ontology distinguishes between inanimate and animate objects, and thus, finds features by which things and reality can be categorized into types. But the traditional African worldview sees things as interrelated.

To buttress the African view, Senghor argues that: “As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, every thing—be it only a grain of sand—radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfillment.”xviii I should emphasize the idea that people use their view of reality as a basis for their actions and artistic creations to bring the universe to fulfillment. This fulfillment involves achieving harmony, which in essence exemplifies beauty and goodness. This idea
is also bolstered by Innocent Onyewuenyi’s description of African ontology, i.e., the conception of the nature of ‘reality’ or ‘being’ as a dynamic force. He argues that: “The concept of force or dynamism cancels out the idea of separate beings or substances which exist side by side independent of one another. ...”\textsuperscript{xix} As a contrast, such an independent, atomistic, and separate conception of substances in reality, he argues, is what characterizes modern Western view of ontology. The implication is that such separate and atomic substances lack unity and harmony that characterizes African ontology.

Tempels captures this very idea when he argues that the African thought system, as instantiated with respect to the Bantus, holds that things in reality are forces that help to preserve the bond that one has with others, and that reality involves some intimate ontological relationships and interactions among beings. In his view, “It is because all being is force and exists only in that it is force, that the category ‘force’ includes of necessity all ‘beings’: God, men living and departed, animals, plants, mineral.”\textsuperscript{xx} However, forces may differ in their essence: we have divine, celestial or terrestrial, human, animal, vegetal, and material or mineral forces. These forces exist and interact in harmony. The proper interaction among forces for the purpose of achieving or enhancing unity and harmony, or the lack, thereof, is the basis for explaining phenomena: events, occurrences, the creation of works of art, human actions, and behavior. Human beings and their creations are a part of this composite reality, which is fundamentally, a set of mobile life forces. Natural or created objects and the whole of reality are interlocking forces in a unity always seeking to maintain equilibrium.

When we see reality as a continuum of order, unity, and harmony, then human beings are in a sense a beginning, and
in another sense, an end. According to Senghor, humans constitute “the end of three orders of the mineral, the vegetable, and the animals, but the beginning of the human order.” On this African ontological view, there is no gap or distinction between humans and the phenomenal world of ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ objects, as well as between ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ objects; they are interrelated and one is an extension of the other. As such, Africans ontologically, conceive of themselves, their community, and actions as being in harmony with nature. Such harmony is the basis and standard for beauty and goodness. Dixon underscores this view as follows:

Their aim is to maintain balance and harmony among the various aspects of the universe. Disequilibrium may result in trouble such as human illness, drought, or social disruption. ... According to this orientation, magic, voodoo, mysticism are not efforts to overcome a separation of man and nature, but rather the use of forces in nature to restore a more harmonious relationship between man and the universe. The universe is not static, inanimate or ‘dead’; it is a dynamic, animate, living and powerful universe.

According to African cosmology, anything that happens to disrupt balance and harmony in life or reality, such as a person's illness, is considered to be bad and ugly. And because illness involves disharmony, disruption or lack of balance, it is considered to be lacking goodness and beauty.

As such, the treatment of any illness seeks to bring life and reality back into balance and harmony, and thus, their original beauty and goodness as designed by God. Human
actions and creations are understood, and evaluated in terms of this view of ontology and cosmology. With respect to this mode of understanding, I should note that, the essence of my point in articulating the African view of ontology is not to examine its soundness with respect to the truth of the associated beliefs or statements. Rather, it is meant, primarily, to explore how this view provides a reasonable ontological and logical foundation for making sense of the African aesthetic and ethical views, and the corresponding evaluative practices; that is, whether their aesthetic and ethical views are valid. In other words, if we accept their beliefs and views of ontology and cosmology, then whether we can logically accept (at the least, inductively) or make sense of their aesthetic and ethical views and practices. The African view of cosmological design suggests that God imposed harmony in the arrangement of things in nature, and that such harmony is inherently good and beautiful. There are reasonable efforts in people’s actions and creations to keep nature and reality, of which the community is a part, in this harmony.

From this view of ontology and cosmology, Africans believe that there is no clear-cut ontological distinction between an ‘object’ (say, a work of art or action) and a ‘subject’ (say, the artist or actor), in the sense that this distinction implies that the ‘object’ is to, or may, be known, appreciated, evaluated, and comprehended objectively and independent of the ‘subject’. This distinction is, in part illegitimate, because the ‘object’ and ‘subject’ are both socially, morally, and ontologically embedded in a community, nature, and reality to form a harmony in unity. There is no separation among artwork, the one who creates it, and the one who appreciates and evaluates it for social relevance and functionality, and its conduciveness to ontological and cosmological harmony. Reality is what is experienced, known, valued, and
evaluated by humans, based on their robust social and ontological interactions and communion with it. Traditional African world view has no use for the idea or theory of an objective reality that exists independent of its being known by anyone. On this view, values, beliefs, people’s actions, artistic creation, and objects make sense only when they have practical relevance to people’s personal lives that are coextensive with their communal social lives.

According to Rosalie Cohen, the African view of ontology which blurs the distinction between ‘object’ and ‘subject’, implies epistemologically,

> a narrowing of perceived conceptual distance between the observer and the observed. The observed is perceived to be placed so close to the individual that it obscures what lies beyond it, and so that the observer cannot escape responding to it. The individual also appears to view the ‘field’ as itself responding to him; i.e., although it may be completely objective and inanimate to others, because it demands response it is accorded a kind of life of its own.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Traditional African views explain and understand phenomena by placing them in the context of their ontological relations and social context of common sense experience, beliefs, and value system. The quest for explanation is basically a quest for, or an attempt to, find some underlying unity and harmony in an apparent diversity, to find simplicity in what appears complex, to find order in what appears to be a disorder, and regularity in what appears to be irregular or anomalous, in order to bring it within the ambit of the standards of goodness and beauty.
Western view of ontology usually makes the distinction between the natural and supernatural world. This distinction makes reality complex and diverse with disharmony and conflict between the natural and supernatural world. But the African worldview does not make any distinction between the natural and supernatural; they are both seen as two aspects or dimensions of a unified and harmonious reality. According to Mbiti, “the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much so that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them.”xxiv The implication of this ontological view is the epistemological view that the primary mode of accessing or knowing this unified reality is through having various forms of experience in and with this world. It is believed that many spiritual or supernatural entities and their activities are manifested in various forms of physical experiences. Hence, “the diviner who diagnoses the intervention of a spiritual agency is also expected give some acceptable account of what moved the agency in question to intervene. And this account very commonly involves reference to some event in the world of visible, tangible happenings.”xxv Thus, the epistemological African stance, on which their social-functional axiological view depends, is fundamentally, experiential and pragmatic, in that African people derive knowledge from their robust social-functional experience of, and interactions with, a unified harmonious reality.

As Senghor indicates: “The African is, of course, sensitive to the external world, to the material aspect of being and things. ... he is sensitive to the tangible qualities of things—shape, color, smell, weight, etc. ... .”xxvi The subject is not passive with respect to an objectively unknown reality; the subject is an active aspect of reality; the subject understands, experiences, and knows reality by interacting, communing, and shaping it. To know, interact with, and experience
reality is to evaluate and value it, which involves imposing our moral and aesthetic values on it. An un-evaluated, unknown, un-experienced reality—a reality that one cannot interact with—is a reality does not exist. Reality is nothing or does not exist, if it is not, in some form, experienced, interacted with, known or morally and aesthetically evaluated; it is only when something is known, experienced, interacted with, and evaluated, that it becomes a reality. The experienced and evaluated reality is the existent reality that is considered substantive and valuable, and it is then given due worth and reverence because it comes from God, and as such, good and beautiful. The African view of ontology, which exemplifies harmony, goodness and beauty, also has religious implications and underpinnings. According to Mbiti, “to understand their [Africans’] religions we must penetrate that ontology.”xxvii

The African view of ontology involves a kind of unitarian naturalistic pantheism: the view that everything is a unity that is holistically natural, holy, good, and beautiful, and that God is in, and the source (designer and creator) of everything ‘natural’, as well as their harmony, beauty and goodness. We should recollect that the supernatural is part of the natural. Mbiti articulates this robust African world view of the ontological and cosmological basis for religion, and thus, axiology as follows: “Expressed anthropocentrically, God is the Originator and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the centre of this ontology, the Animals, Plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives, provides a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them.”xxviii African religious beliefs presuppose the harmony and unity in God’s creation as the basis for the sacred and reverent. Reality involves a holistic community and a holy communion among mutually reinforcing natural life forces consisting of
human beings, human communities, spirits, gods, deities, stones, sand, mountains, rivers, plants, and animals.

AFRICAN COMMUNALISM, AXIOLOGY, AND VIEW
PERSONHOOD

The idea of harmony underlying the holistic and unitarian view of reality explains the connection between goodness and beauty, and it encapsulates the standard for evaluating them. Thus, beauty and goodness are either equivalent to or imply harmony, and ugliness and badness are either equivalent to or imply disharmony. The notions of beauty and goodness, which are seen as exemplifying harmony or vice versa, are expressed in human behaviors or actions of all kinds. These actions are manifested in art creation and human interactions with others, which are all geared towards creating harmony. This ontological view is the basis for saying that if one’s action (including artistic creation) is seen as fostering or leading to disharmony in nature, community, and reality, then it is considered bad or ugly. And hence when such actions are seen as enhancing harmony, they are considered beautiful and good. Thus, it makes sense to say that one’s action, character, or a person is ugly or beautiful. This standard of ‘human beauty’ that involves goodness is applied to individual character to provide a moral and aesthetic definition or characterization of personhood, such that if one is not truly beautiful in this moral aesthetic sense, then one is not a person in the true or robust sense.

There are two plausible conceptions of personhood. One is the descriptive, physical-metaphysical and the other is the normative, moral-social. In many African traditions, the idea of a person has both descriptive (physical and metaphysical) and normative (social, moral and aesthetic) dimensions. xxix A descriptive conception of personhood seeks to analyze the features and ontological make-up of an isolated individ-
ual. It examines whether a person is immaterial or material, or whether a person is made up of one or two essential natures. For instance, the metaphysical analysis of the nature of the mind and body, and the relationship between them involves a descriptive account of personhood. This dominant metaphysical view in Western philosophy indicates that people must see and identify themselves descriptively as isolated atomic individuals who have mental, physical, and psychological features of personhood outside, independent, and irrespective of the normative and cultural structures of their community and their relationships with others that define and sustain a community. The conception of personhood in African worldview is not a purely descriptive metaphysical conception of an isolated and atomic individual, but primarily, a normative (social, moral, and aesthetic) conception.

However, a normative conception of personhood depends on, or assumes that there is a metaphysical, physical and descriptive dimension of a person. The moral and aesthetic judgment about a person as beautiful, and the subsequent social-communal recognition, assumes certain physical features and the metaphysical view that a person is not a ‘determined’ object governed by physical laws over which a person has no control. It thus assumes that a person is a physical entity that has a mind, is metaphysically free, is capable of rational, voluntary, and moral agency, and hence can be ascribed obligations, and moral responsibility. So, one cannot be called a person strictly in a robust sense if one has not satisfied the normative moral and aesthetic criteria. It is common in African traditions to say that ‘one is not a person’ or that an individual is simply a ‘thing’ or an animal, in that he has not acquired, achieved, or exhibited the normative status of a robust person as a truly beautiful person. However, one cannot satisfy the normative moral and aesthetic criteria of personhood, if one does not have the
descriptive metaphysical-physical features. For example, one cannot evaluate a chair, as failing to satisfy the normative criteria of personhood if such an ‘object’ does not have the descriptive metaphysical-physical features of personhood. It is in a similar sense that one cannot evaluate an object or artwork as beautiful in a human sense of having both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ beauty.

Segun Gbadegesin alludes to this very idea by indicating that the Yoruba concept of a person “has a normative dimension as well as an ordinary meaning.”xxxiii We may understand the ‘ordinary meaning’ here to indicate the physical, psychological, and metaphysical dimensions. However, you need these two dimensions to make a robust sense of personhood, a beautiful person. Similarly, you need the two dimensions of human beauty—inner and outer—for someone to be truly beautiful as a combination of goodness and beauty. Such a beautiful and robust person is holistic, balanced, and in harmony with, or fully socially integrated into, the community of values and standards of behavior and interactions. It is only then that one can be in harmony in and with himself. The African idea of communalism implies that the community with, its values, plays a central role in helping one to cultivate and then achieve the status of a morally beautiful person. Gail Presbey argues that the normative (social) conception of personhood is based on an intragroup moral and social recognition, and not on the descriptive metaphysical features of a person.

According to her, “the Massai (and some other African groups’) concepts of ‘personhood’ are not to be understood primarily as metaphysical stances on the nature of the self, but rather as descriptions of intragroup recognition.”xxxiv Such recognition implies that there are normative standards of communal evaluation and recognition that indicate a view of personhood. One acquires a social, moral, and aesthetic
A robust sense of personhood, therefore, cannot be the extreme individualistic, rational, isolated, autonomous, solipsistic, and atomistic being, who is divorced from the community, and reasons independently of communal values. Rather, personhood involves a rational, emotional, and a communally embedded individual who has been sufficiently equipped with the attitudes, beliefs, and values of his community. These values, which are conducive to harmony in the community and reality, include caring, sympathy, human welfare, and mutual interests. As Gyekye indicates, “The concern for human welfare constitutes the hub of the Akan axiological wheel.”

By axiology, I understand him to mean a value system that includes both morality and aesthetics. These values shape one’s conceptual scheme, which gives meaning to one’s actions, behavior and artistic creations. According to Onwuanibe, “Personhood is a manifestation or presence through a body, but never identifiable with it.”

This implies that a person is not simply an object that can be analyzed in terms of some physical and
metaphysical characteristics; he is a subject in whom communal values are imparted.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} This idea of personhood requires that an individual sees himself and is seen beyond his own individuality and the descriptive physical-metaphysical features, and in light of the communal moral and aesthetic values and the underpinning beliefs about reality, in terms of the need to maintain harmony.

To buttress this point, Onwuanibe argues that, “the transcendence or subjectivity of the human person finds expression in the egalitarian spirit.”\textsuperscript{xxxix} This transcendence or egalitarian spirit is exemplified in the ability to act in ways that are conducive to harmony, based on the value of caring and mutual interests, of which one’s interest or well-being is a part or in harmony with. The goal and organization of the community, with respect to harmony, are such that the choices and actions (including artistic creations) that are beneficial to the community are also reciprocally beneficial to the individual. Such choices and actions require internalizing communal beliefs and values by a process of socialization and acculturation. Such internalization engenders one’s ability to make choices and act accordingly to achieve harmony. The moral character that the communal values help one to create is what makes one a person, a moral person—a truly beautiful person. This communal idea of personhood involves the idea that the harmony of a community, which is an indication of the greatness of its culture, is reflected in its ability make individuals robust and truly beautiful persons. This involves committing the human person and her development or aspiration to what the culture stands for—its values and beliefs. And the decline in the values of a significant number of people—their badness or ugliness—may also indicate the ugliness, badness, or a decline in the values or culture of a community and vice versa.
Julius Nyerere uses the idea of *Ujaama* (which translates into family or brotherhood) to articulate the egalitarian value and caring spirit, which is the basis for harmony in African communal tradition, and also the basis for the communally embedded and integrated self, a truly beautiful person. He argues that, “In traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us.” This reciprocal idea of caring and human welfare that enhances harmony among individuals in community can be couched in terms of the fair production and distribution of goods, services, and responsibilities in a community. According to Nyerere, the harmony underlying “the organization of traditional African society—its distribution of the wealth it produced—was such that there was hardly any room for parasitism.” Because the society was organized on the basis of the communal ethos of caring and duty, there was an equal and mutual social responsibility for everyone to work and contribute to the community and human welfare, and to make sure that every person is taken care of. This social-functionality of humans and their actions created harmony.

This normative idea of personhood implies that people aimed to be exemplars or role models that others can look up to. By one’s actions, one is creating a character exemplar that is modeled for others, especially the young, regarding how to behave and what constitutes a truly beautiful person. This involves exemplifying communal transcendental humanistic, aesthetic and moral values. Hord and Lee indicates that the African communal tradition must be seen in “the flowering of a humanism that places the community rather than the individual at the center...” The connection between humanism and communalism, based on the view of ontology as a unity and harmony in reality, implies that the interests of the community and those of individuals as humans cannot be separated in a way that creates a conflict
between them. For Lee and Hord, communalism “is the idea that the identity of the individual is never separable from the sociocultural environment. ... it is constructed in and at least partially by a set of shared beliefs, patterns of behaviour, and expectations.”

This worldview is further illuminated by Menkiti’s contrast between the African and Western idea of personhood.

[W]hereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description ‘man’ must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community. As John Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”

The conclusion that Menkiti draws from this African conception of a person is that the needs, reality, and existence of the community are coextensive with to those of the individual. The needs of the community do not supersede or undermine those of individuals, rather the needs and interests of individuals derive from, and depend on, those of the community, and vice versa, insofar as those interests and needs are geared toward human welfare which is conducive to harmony. The attitudes, sentiments, motives, intentions, and the moral and aesthetic dispositions of an individual are formed by virtue of her belonging to, embedded in, constituted by, and being in harmony with a community. So,
for Menkiti, “the sense of self-identity which the individual comes to possess cannot be made sense of except by reference to these collective facts.”

Just as the community helps to define normatively the individual as a person rather than as “some isolated static quality or rationality, will, or memory,” so also is personhood—a truly beautiful person—defined by the values and beliefs of the community. The idea of personhood in African traditions involves a set of axiological qualities that is acquired developmentally in the process of participating in communal life and acting responsibly to meet the requisite acceptable communal expectations or standards that specify relevant responsibilities. This worldview implies a view of a community that says that we cannot see the community simply as the collective aggregation of all the individuals who choose voluntarily to belong to the group. In other words, the community is not this non-organic random collection of atomic and loose individuals. The African worldview sees an individual as a ‘communal organism’. According to Menkiti, “We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellences seen as truly definitive of man. And during this long process of attainment, the community plays a vital role as a catalyst and as prescriber of norms.” Thus, Menkiti argues that ‘we' (as a reference to the organically constituted community) in African traditions is not simply the aggregated sum of people; rather, it is a reference to an organic community involving a thoroughly fused ‘we'.

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON AFRICAN IDEA OF PERSONHOOD

The idea of community required by this world view and idea of personhood, is what Menkiti calls, a constituted view,
which he contrasts with the modern Western collectivist view. Such a community is organically constituted as a group of persons, principles, relationships, interests, processes, and structures, which as a composite, defines values, character traits, and moral responsibilities, on the basis of which the community is sustained in harmony and one is recognized by one’s contribution to such harmony. The individual is integrated into, constituted by, and in, the community by the gradual organic processes of acculturation, initiation, socialization, education, and ritual integration. This communal process of constitution or integration, as Wiredu argues, is subtle. According to him, “The integration of individuality into community in African traditional society is so thoroughgoing that, as is too rarely noted, the very concept of a person has a normative layer of meaning. A person is not just an individual of human parentage, but also one evincing in his or her projects and achievements an adequate sense of social responsibility.” This social responsibility involves mutual concern and caring that conduces harmony. As Menkiti indicates, the “community ... not surprisingly, is bound by considerations of mutual concern... .” This mutual concern is the basis for the communal responsibility and the spirit of caring.

The idea of communalism involves a set of values and relationships that transcend individuals or their simple collectivity. So, the communal ‘constitutive’ notion of community is not reducible to the individuals because the community is not additive; it is not simply the addition of the individuals, values, institutions, and structures of the community. As a member of a constituted community, one has the obligation to contribute to it and sustain its harmony. Thus, Verhoef and Michel indicate that “an individual is obligated to contribute to the community not because it is expected of him or her, but because it [the community] is him or her.” They go on to say that, “the concept of person
in the African world view is first and most importantly that of community ... this means not that the individual is selfless, but that the self is the community." lviii We may recollect that the person and the community are ontologically not separate—they are a unity in harmony. Personhood is normatively, cosmologically, and ontologically tied to and in harmony with the community by virtue of being constituted, such that one’s life, creativity, actions, and motivation derive from such a connection to one’s community.

The different African accounts of personhood and community have been criticized for overemphasizing the community to the detriment of the individual. Although Menkiti argues that the African idea of personhood ought to be understood primarily as a normative, and not a metaphysical-descriptive stance, it appears he is not always not clear about the precise nature of personhood: whether it is ontological or normative, and the relationship between the two. lvii This lack of clarity has engendered a criticism of his view by Kwame Gyekye. Menkiti sometimes suggests that the normative sense of personhood is an indication of an ontological status. This ‘ontological’ manner of speaking may have (mis)led people like Gyekye to believe that Menkiti is providing a metaphysical account. lviii It is pertinent to recollect that African axiological views are dependent on and can only be properly understood based on their view of ontology or reality as a unity and harmony. When people say in African traditions that ‘an individual is not a person’ or that a person is not good or beautiful, it is meant to be a normative judgment that one has not behaved morally or act properly based on accepted values and the goal of achieving harmony in reality. Such utterance is neither meant to, nor does it deny, that the person lacks the relevant ontological status or descriptive metaphysical or psychological features of personhood. However, it does have
an ontological implication, which is that he is out of balance and harmony in and with himself and others, his community, nature, and reality. This ontological view regarding disharmony is a basis for the moral and aesthetic judgment that he lacks goodness and beauty.

In criticizing Menkiti, Gyekye argues that the idea of a person acquiring full personhood or becoming more of a person metaphysically is bizarre and incoherent. Such view, cannot but be riddled with confusions, unclarities, and incoherencies.\textsuperscript{lx} But if we appreciate that the idea of personhood in African traditions is a normative idea, and that one achieves or attains the normative standard or feature progressively and developmentally, then we can appreciate and make sense of the idea of acquiring full personhood as a moral and beautiful person, and why an individual cannot have a meaningful sense of personhood outside of the communal normative structures that shape and define a person.\textsuperscript{lx} Gyekye insists that social commitments, relationships, and moral responsibilities, are not essential features of a person and they cannot be said to be defining features of personhood. According to him, “The individual is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but she is, also by nature, other things as well; that is, she possesses other attributes that may also be said to constitute her nature.”\textsuperscript{lxi} This suggests that being social or moral is similar to other accidental features of a person, which are not intrinsic or essential to one’s personhood, and as such, they do not define a person’s essence.

Based on the view that the essential features of personhood must be viewed metaphysically and not socially, aesthetically or morally, Gyekye argues:

A human person is a person whatever his age or social status. Personhood may reach its full
realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits; he, *qua* person, thus becomes the subject of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he cannot be defined by what he acquires. One is a person because of what he is, not because of what he has acquired.\textsuperscript{xii}

For Gyekye, a person is an entity in which the necessary metaphysical features inhere, and this entity is logically prior to and independent of a community. This represents a very narrow metaphysical view of personhood with a lacuna that the more robust Africa normative axiological (moral and aesthetic) view seeks to fill. This African view insists that one must contextualize the abstract metaphysical view of personhood by making it relational to one’s community. So, Gyekye’s critique suggests that he assumes that the African view of personhood is a metaphysical view. To the extent that the African view is not, primarily, a metaphysical view, but has merely used it as the foundation on which its normative moral and aesthetic view depends, Gyekye may be said to be attacking a strawman.

However, Gyekye does accept that if the African account of personhood is understood as a moral thesis, then it is interesting and relevant for understanding the communal structures and value systems in African societies. Thus, he says: “With all these said, however, this aspect of his [Menkiti] account adumbrates a moral conception of personhood and is, on that score, interesting and relevant to the notion of personhood important for the communitarian framework.”\textsuperscript{xiii} In Gyekye’s view, this moral account of personhood is fundamentally correct because:
The judgment that a human being is ‘not a person’, made on the basis of that individual’s consistently morally reprehensible conduct implies that the pursuit or practice of moral virtue is intrinsic to the conception of a person held in African thought. The position here is, thus, that: for any p, if p is a person, then p ought display in his conduct the norms and ideals of personhood. For this reason, when a human being fails to conform his behavior to the acceptable moral principles or to exhibit the expected moral virtues in his conduct, he is said to be ‘not a person’. The evaluative statement opposite this is, ‘he is a person’ means, ‘he has good character’, he is peaceful–not troublesome’, ‘he is kind’, ‘he has respect for others’, ‘he is humble’. The statement ‘he is a person’, then, is a clearly moral statement. It is a profound appreciation of the high standards of the morality of an individual’s conduct that would draw the judgment ‘he is truly a person’.lxiv

Gyekye accepts that in African traditions, one’s behaviors, character, and actions must conform to and be in harmony with acceptable moral and social principles, and that the ability to act in ways that are conducive to harmony in a community and with others is the basis for determining whether or not one has acquired personhood—and thus, truly beautiful.

His point in the above quote is that being called a person implies that ‘one has good character’, one is peaceful–not troublesome’, ‘one is kind’, ‘one is respectful of and to
others’, or that ‘one is humble’. As discussed earlier, these qualities are those that characterize the ideas of harmony and balance, and the Yoruba ideas of ‘inner and outer beauty’ and ‘coolness’. These qualities are manifested in positive outer demeanor and appearance that represent outer and physical beauty and moral goodness. In spite of his admission of the merits of this African view of personhood, Gyekye argues that the emphasis on communal values and the need for individuals to attain the moral and aesthetic values of goodness and beauty based communal values and standards implies a radical form of communitarianism, which seeks to reduce “a person to intellectual or rational inactivity, servility, and docility.”

On this radical view, a person is “held as a cramped or shackled self, responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure.” This idea of personhood vitiates or diminishes individuals’ talents, creativity, initiatives, and ingenuity. As such, it may prevent individual from truly achieving, creatively, moral and aesthetic excellence.

In Gyekye’s view, individual excellence which derives from his own creativity cannot be seen as a derivative from the idea of communal excellence, because communal excellence constrains individual creativity, ingenuity, and excellence. He argues that a reasonable community must recognize the claims and demands of the community (in terms of social obligations) and the freedom and creativity of the individual. So, what we should expect to find in any society is some various degrees of balance between individualism and communalism, in that some societies may have more or less individualism than communalism, and vice versa. Every society must find a proper balance between the communal interests and individual freedom and creativity and the relative importance of each in a given situation. It is clear that an individual and her interests are dependent on, coextensive with, and cannot be detached from the
community and its interest. To couch communalism in terms of what is beneficial to the community does not imply that the community’s interest and welfare are antithetical to the individual’s interests, welfare, creativity, and rational life plan. Such conflict exists only when we do not see reality, individuals, and community as a unity in harmony but as separate and in conflict.

CONCLUSION

The balance and harmony that Gyekye wants between the needs of the community and those of individual are precisely what the African view seeks to capture by its view of community and the normative conception of a person as good and beautiful. This idea of balance or harmony, which is exemplified in the conception of moral and aesthetic value systems and standards, is based on the view of harmony in ontology, and the need to maintain an ontological balance. So, one is a person in a robust sense, a truly beautiful person, only if one is a moral person. And one is a moral person only if one has harmony and balance or ‘coolness’ in one’s character, and one is able to act in ways that are conducive to being in harmony with others, one’s community, and reality. To have harmony in one’s character will also involves creating works of art, including one’s character and actions that are in harmony with reality and with the community, or sensitive to its values by being socially functional. This implies that the aesthetic value or standard of beauty for humans is logically connected to the moral value or standard of goodness, both of which depend on the idea of harmony in reality, the world, nature, and community, of which the individual human person, his actions, and harmony are an integral part.
NOTES


v Onyewuenyi, p. 423.


vii Hallen, p. 243.


ix Hallen, op. cit., p. 243.


xi Hallen, op. cit., p. 242.

xii Hallen, p. 225.

xiii Hallen, p. 232.


xviii Senghor, p. 49.
xix Onyewuenyi, op. cit, p. 424.
xx Tempels, op. cit, p. 67.
xxi Senghor, op. cit, p. 49.
xxvi Senghor, op. cit, p. 48.
xxvii Mbiti, op. cit, p. 88.
xxviii Mbiti, op. cit, p 89.


Presbey, p. 257.


Onwuanibe, p. 186.

Onwuanibe, p. 187.


Nyerere, p. 165-166.

Nyerere, p. 163.


Hord and Lee, pp. 7-8.

Ifeanyi Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional


Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” p. 179.


Heidi Verhoef and Claudin Michel, op. cit., p. 396.


Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, p. 49.

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, p. 49.

This point is made eloquently by Marina Oshana, “Personal

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, op. cit., p. 47.


Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, op. cit., p. 49.

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, p. 50.

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, p. 56.

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, pp. 55-6.

Gyekye, Tradition and Modernity, pp. 36-70.