University of the Witwatersrand

Artificial Selfhood and Communal Becoming

Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report

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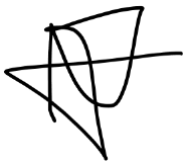
Signature : 

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Abstract

In the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Africa faces the profound question of how artificial general intelligence (AGI) – a technology capable of reasoning, contextual perception and complex decision making – fits within its cultural and philosophical landscape. The question is not merely technological but ontological: can AGI attain Menkiti's maximal conception of personhood? Menkiti (1984, p. 172) underscores that personhood is an acquired achievement that is 'not given simply because one is born of human seed'. Unlike most Western perspectives that assume individual autonomy is the foundation for moral standing, African personhood is deeply relational – emerging within communal ties, moral responsibility, and social recognition, as identity is formed through social interactions. If AGI exhibits intelligence akin to human rational and can integrate into human communities, can it acquire personhood in the African context? For Menkiti, there is a distinction between personhood-as-being and personhood-as-becoming, signifying the never-ending necessity for moral development and social participation. If AGI lacks the ability to engage in moral agency within the human community, will it forever remain an outsider in the African ontological space? This Research Report interrogates whether AGI could ever fulfil the moral and communal obligations that constitute maximal personhood in African societies. By situating AGI within Menkiti's framework, we critically assess whether nonhuman entities can attain moral status rather than the semblance of personhood. Ultimately, this work contributes to broader debates on technological inclusivity, ethical AI, and African philosophy in the digital age.

Keywords
Artificial General Intelligence, Communitarianism, Personhood, Menkiti, Technology

Introduction

In a time when machines aim to replicate human intelligence, it is difficult to situate a conception of personhood, particularly one envisioned in African thought, in this new dynamic reality. As the world transitions into a tech-driven era, Africa is also experiencing the global presence of electronic devices, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI). With the rapid emergence of this innovative epoch comes the acceleration of technological advancements, particularly around artificial intelligence and the varying categories that constitute AI. Simultaneously, African ethics strives to solve the perpetual puzzle of what defines a person in the African context. African philosophical literature is peppered with references to African proverbs, varying from 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' and 'man is essentially community' (Adedokun, T & Akinola, O, 2021, pp. 33-34) to 'without communication there is not even a human person' (Masolo D. A., 2010, p. 135) and 'one tree does not constitute a forest' (Gyekye K. , 1997, p. 39). The relationship between the individual and their community is a recurring theme found in these proverbs. The essence of these proverbs is that they accurately depict how the moral character of African individuals is interwoven with that of the greater community, even though there exist different conceptions of African personhood presented across the continent. These opinions range from ' man is defined by reference to the environing community' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 173), closely tying one's identity to society; to 'community [is] a mere association of individual persons whose interests and ends are contingently congruent' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 299), identifying an individual as an autonomous being; to personhood being a quality that transcends time and space to include gods, ancestors and descendants, for although ancestors are biologically deceased, they are still persons belonging to the community (Oyowe, 2022).

It can no longer be disputed that humanity is heading toward what Lamola (2022, p. 2) claims is a 'civilizational epoch', one synonymous with the fourth industrial revolution. The transformative potential of this period lies in the convergence of the physical environment with the digital realm, heralding a movement of reality towards a cybernetic landscape. As the digital age continues to evolve, it is crucial to consider the philosophical ramifications of a world dominated by virtual interactions and realities. What makes this project worth taking seriously is that, although the current capacity of narrow AI is merely to mimic human intelligence, AGI, if realised, would have the potential to possess capabilities equivalent to human intelligence. At the core of AI technologies lies the desire to create autonomous AI, ones that solve problems without human intervention. This gradual evolution of AI

technologies towards autonomy increases the chances of AGI becoming reality, for AGI possesses 'the ability to reason, understand context, and perform complex tasks' (Ng G. &., 2020, p. 64) without needing human mediation. Intelligence is the characteristic that permits this technology to be regarded for the ethical framework of personhood. Whilst we can agree that AGI is a theoretical concept that does not exist in our present reality, that does not guarantee that it will never exist. Some may argue that AGI is nothing more than wishful thinking. I suppose it is - in a sense. But so too were many crusades in history - the suffrage movement for women, or the fight against racism for the racially oppressed. What makes AGI less likely to occur than the Wright brothers' hypothesis of heavy chunks of metal flying through the air, or man reaching the moon. These ideas were considered unthinkable by those who did not understand the dream. Well, I argue that AGI is more than wishful thinking, and this conclusion is based on trends in narrow AI technologies: Gemini Ultra, a premium AI assistant powered by Google, claims to be 'the first model to surpass human-expert performance' (Islam & Ahmed, 2024) by 90% on MMLU, a benchmark that assesses the capabilities of large language models (LLM). Similarly, GPT-4 possesses 'polydisciplinary knowledge', 'seamlessly [capable of] integrating all knowledge across disciplines' (Chang, 2023, p. 2). These innovations demonstrate the magnitude of possibilities that AI does and will come to possess in future. After all, to be a philosopher means attempting to explore ideas of how we live and understand the world. It is our communal duty to ask: if AGI were to become reality, then how should we live with it? Discussions surrounding personhood and AGIs are significant insofar as personhood is what forms the basis for rights, dignity as well as ethical treatment. As we head towards the digital horizon, Africans need to consider where we ought to place these AGIs in this innovative age.

Similarly, this Research Report offers a model of what the AI ethical landscape in Africa could look like. Comparable to models used in science and economics, this Report serves to approximate the reality of whether AGI will be embraced in African thought. Innovation and technological progress have made it necessary to develop our understanding of morality to apply it better to different kinds of AI. For a variety of reasons, the ethics of AI is still poorly understood in the African context. The development of artificial general intelligence (AGI), with its potential to create entirely new experiences and modes of interaction, raises meaningful questions surrounding the morality and the moral status of nonhuman entities. Although AGI is a theoretical hypothesis now, the capacities it possesses are infinite because of its potential.

In the African context, the notion of personhood tends to emphasise interpersonal relationships and moral development, factors that may be problematic for AI to attain. It may never obtain the type of moral consciousness and communal sense of duty demanded of persons according to maximally defined conceptions of African personhood, thus potentially remaining outside the ambit of ethical reflection and evaluation from an African point of view. Against this backdrop, this Research Report aims to determine where to situate AGI in African societies' moral and philosophical landscapes. As part of this enquiry, it will be necessary to engage with the normative question of what moral standing AGI *ought to* have, and whether it is appropriate to expect it to be subject to the same ethical standards and to share the same ethical values as human beings. Africa, finally, needs to contemplate if allowing nonhuman entities to *become* persons would be beneficial to the welfare of African societies, as well as to the future evolution of its culture and civilisation. In Chapter 1, I provide a pragmatic background into AI, highlighting the progression of narrow AI and its various branches since the inception of artificial intelligence by John McCarthy in 1956 (Goldburg, 1994), like machine learning, deep learning and generative AI. In Chapter 2, I take a deep dive into the realm of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) – highly capable AI - and its commendable dimensions that make it a good technology. In Chapter 3, I explore the varying conceptions of African personhood offered across the continent, presented by Kapagawani (2005) and Kahaka (2022). To substantiate my argument, I use Menkiti's maximal conception of African personhood, for he was 'the first one to philosophically reflect on the idea of personhood' (Molefe, 2019, p. 49). In Chapter 4, I decipher whether AGI can attain maximal conceptions of African personhood, elaborating on the dynamics required for this to become a reality. The methodology used in the Research Report is strictly desktop research, where no interviews were conducted. In conclusion, this Research Report utilises Menkiti's conception of African personhood as a framework, not only because Menkiti was the earliest writer on personhood in Africa, but also because I believe that Menkiti's theory is the closest conception to the kind of personhood used throughout ancient Africa.

Narrow AI and its Branches

Before beginning this project, I assumed I could briefly summarise what artificial intelligence meant. Having delved into the topic, however, I now know this to be false. To define artificial intelligence (AI) would mean to break up the word – *artificial* and *intelligence,* and to do this would take up a lot of this paper. Instead, I will discuss the broader sense of the term. There have been numerous conceptions of the definition of AI. These range from AI being 'an

imitation of human intelligence' (Nyholm, 2024, p. 79), 'math and code' that imitates cognition in machines (Hunter, 2018, p. 6) to AI being 'non-human intelligence […] measured by its ability to replicate human mental skills' (De Spiegeleire S. e., 2017, p. 28) , attempting to reproduce 'barely understood human thought processes' (Walsh K. e., 2021).In this portion of the Report, I attempt a produce a comprehensive understanding of AI with a particular focus on narrow AI, how it has been defined previously and its various branches.

Defining AI

Artificial intelligence is a technology that simulates human intelligence, found in computers and machines to perform tasks like problem-solving, language comprehension, recognising patterns and decision-making. It is the application of 'anthropomorphic intelligence' (Murugaiah, 2021) in machines that makes it like they can 'think' for themselves, giving them the ability to 'generate […] knowledge by extracting patterns from raw data' (Luck, 2019). Vincent Boulanin (2019, p. 14) states that 'AI is not a definite, unified technology' but rather an evolution of existing technologies brought together to create something new. The refining and enhancing of existing capabilities from various technologies is what produces greater efficiency and innovation, for 'truly intelligent machines can only be developed by combining machine learning with traditional programming' (Boulanin, Artificial Intelligence: A Primer, 2019, p. 16). In recent times, the idea of artificial intelligence has both fascinated and frightened the masses. Although there is no consensus on the definition of the term, Nico Luck (2019, p. 2) states that what does not change for AI is that it continues to solve 'highly complex tasks' by 'adapting to the environment'. That being said, Shukla Shubhendu and Jaiswal Vijay define it brilliantly. For them, artificial intelligence is defined as 'machines that respond to stimulation consistent with traditional responses from humans, given the human capacity for contemplation, judgment, and intention' (West, 2020, p. 3). In other words, AI is merely a technology that reacts to a given stimulus in a similar fashion to the way human beings may respond. Even though AI has made noteworthy progress since its inception, we are only in the initial stages of its evolution. There are four ways to approach the concept of AI. According to Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, understanding the technology's purpose is essential to defining AI. These perspectives rely on two dimensions:

1. Whether the AI 'emphasises the attainment of [intelligent] thought processes and reasoning' or whether it emphasises behaviour (De Spiegeleire S. e., 2017, p. 28).
2. Whether the AI measures victory based on 'human performance' or against 'an ideal concept of intelligence […] – rationality' (De Spiegeleire S. e., 2017, p. 28).

	Human (H)	Rationality (R)
Intelligence as Thought Processes (T)	(T-H) Systems that think like humans	(T-R) Systems that think rationally
Intelligence as Goal-oriented Behaviour (B)	(B-H) Systems that act like humans	(B-R) Systems that act rationally

In other words, the definition of AI is conditional on its purpose and why it was created.

1. (T-H) 'Systems that think like humans' refers to AI that thinks as we do and uses intelligence and logic to reason.
2. (T-R) 'Systems that think rationally' refers to AI that uses reasoning and logic to decide on the right thing to do with the knowledge it has access to.
3. (B-H) 'Systems that act like humans' refer to AI that imitates human behaviour and intelligence; is thought to be human-like (eg. Eugene Goostman, a chatbot that passed the Turing test).
4. (B-R) 'Systems that act rationally refers' to AI that acts 'in accordance with various ideal standards for rationality', known as intelligent agents (Bringsjord S. &., 2018).

Russell and Norvig define AI in terms of the fourth approach: AI as an intelligent agent. They claim AI to be agents that receive 'percepts from the environment and perform actions' (Bringsjord S. &., 2018). However, although these perspectives are utilised when defining AI, Selmer Bringsjord (2018) asserts that these are not the only guidelines that can be deployed to define the concept. Others, like Hunter *et al* (2018, p. 6) observe that that 'AI [is] semantically problematic' in its full definition. The term *artificial intelligence* implies that this technology is meant to imitate human intelligence; however, 'narrow' AI does not possess the intrinsic capacities that come with intelligence, which happens to lie 'beyond the capacity of today's systems' (Hunter, 2018, p. 6). Similarly, in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: The Impact of AI on Future Jobs* (Graham D. , 2025, p. 9), Dr Steven James claims that 'labelling […] language models as artificial intelligence is a misnomer' in that the current framework of AI – narrow AI – does not possess the intelligence required to be compared to human intelligence.

Defining Narrow AI

The concept of AI, though complex in its nature, consists of two major branches: narrow AI and artificial general intelligence (AGI). Even though I mention AGI here, I will only explore the concept extensively in the next chapter. Existing AI currently in circulation is known as 'narrow 'or 'weak AI.' This technology refers to systems designed to perform specific tasks accurately and efficiently, being on par with or better than human capabilities (De Spiegeleire S. e., 2017). Narrow AI is a technology built with a specific purpose in mind, as these AIs 'are good at doing a single task extremely well' (Ng G. &., 2020). It performs one task at a time with precision and is dependent on human interference to define the parameters of its algorithms. For instance, Spotify can recognise your music taste by analysing your music history and suggesting new artists and genres that you may be interested in. Stephan De Spiegeleire (2017, p. 30) claims that narrow AI is 'machine intelligence that equals or exceeds human intelligence for specific tasks'. Jonathan Flowers (2019, p. 2) defines narrow AI as a technology that does not wish to replicate the human mind but instead utilises functional consciousness, which 'helps us deal with […] problematic situations for which we have no automized response'. Functional consciousness refers to mental states that are defined by the roles they play in enabling intelligent behaviour, usually utilised in computational theories of mind like the Chinese room experiment. In narrow AI systems, functional consciousness is used to better understand how these systems interact with their surroundings. Boulanin (2019, p. 14) adds that 'narrow AI systems are complex software programs that can execute discrete intelligent tasks'. Put another way, narrow AI attempts to manage specific complex situations without pre-programmed solutions by utilising intelligence equal to or greater than human intelligence. Daeyeol Lee (2020, 2) claims intelligence is 'an ability to solve a difficult problem through complex reasoning or quick calculations', having the ability to perform 'all types of mental operations'. Derived from the Latin term, *intelligere,* it means being capable of learning, understanding or dealing with unfamiliar situations and contexts (Lee, 2020, 4). Blatantly, to be intelligent is to be able to solve problems, which is the sole goal of AI systems. Moving further into narrow AI, this technology is divided into three categories: machine learning, deep learning, and generative AI.

Machine Learning

Machine learning is an umbrella term concerned with increased knowledge and improved performance (Thagard, 1990). It is concerned with imitating human behaviour, particularly learning, as a means of improving its performance through its consumption of raw data.

Systems capable of machine learning code their algorithms based on historical data that does not require explicit human programming, 'recogniz[ing] solution patterns and transfer[ring] them to other tasks' that they identify as being similar (Luck, 2019). This software development is useful when it comes to complex tasks that a human may struggle to model to completion. For instance, image recognition 'builds systems that can learn and then teaches them what to do using a variety of methods' (Boulanin, 2019, p. 15). This means that programmers do not need to 'explicitly define the problem' for the system. To illustrate, traditional programming cannot differentiate between various photos of dogs however, machine learning avoids this by utilising 'an image recognition system' that differentiates the dogs in 'its own way' (Boulanin, 2019, p. 16). Even though I had previously mentioned that machine learning does not require human intervention, there are in fact four forms of machine learning: supervised learning, unsupervised learning, reinforced learning and deep learning. While deep learning is an advanced version of machine learning, I will examine it at a later stage.

Despite advancements in machine learning making it easier for machines to learn, it still faces challenges that suppress it in remaining 'an immature technology' (Boulanin, 2019, p. 20). Firstly, machine learning struggles to find a balance between 'the complexity of the learned model' and 'the generalisability of the learned model to new data' (Luck, 2019, p. 6). In other words, the right balance must be found between making a model good at analysing its training data and ensuring it performs well with new, unseen data input. If ML is versed to perfection with its training data, it may fail to complete new tasks in new or various contexts, known as overfitting or overmatching. Conversely, if the model is too simple, it may be able to generalise, but 'reality is not correctly modelled' (Luck, 2019, p. 6), a situation called underfitting or undermatching.

Secondly, machine learning and neural networks often act as 'black boxes' insofar as programmers and developers are unable to explain how decisions are made by the system. A black box refers to a system whose internal workings are not easily interpretable by humans, as the reasoning behind an AI's decision-making remains unclear. This lack of transparency poses significant challenges when advocating for the beneficial aspects of AI.

Finally, another challenge faced by machine learning and neural networks is difficulties with image recognition systems. Errors occur when additional information is embedded in images that humans tend to overlook, confusing the model and causing misinterpretations of the content. This significantly impacts security and privacy, as individuals can deliberately alter

data ‘in such a way that the system misinterprets it’ (Luck, 2019, p. 7). For instance, facial recognition technology could incorrectly identify individuals, particularly among minority groups, due to biases and misinformation present in training datasets. As a result, individuals could be wrongly arrested or become victims of mistaken identity at airports.

Deep Learning

Deep learning, a subspecialty of machine learning, is the second type of narrow AI. It is an advanced approach to machine learning, made up of neural networks that mimic the human brain. Created to ‘outperform traditional AI programming’ (Boulanin, 2019, p. 17), deep learning is a combination of neural networks that allows it to process information efficiently to accomplish intricate tasks, learning more complex features at each stage. How deep learning differs from machine learning is in its neural layered architecture where there are ‘multiple hidden layers between the input and output layer’ (Scharre, 2018, p. 6). How deep learning works is by dividing the work amongst the various layers, with each layer building on the previous one. The input layer accepts raw data, which gets transferred to the inner hidden layers which extract increasingly abstract features from the data like the ‘corners and contours’ (Luck, 2019, p. 5) that form parts of specific objects. Deep learning employs connectionist models to produce results. Connectionist models or connectionism refers to ‘a network of units connected to each other by links’ (Thagard, 1990, p. 266). This system improves by adjusting the weights between units, and these weights determine the strength of the connections. The model learns by adjusting the weights of the connections which is dependent on the data it processes. It utilises a neural network that allows the network to process multiple pieces of information at once across the neural network.

While machine learning is the bedrock of narrow AI, ‘deep learning has become the most fashionable approach to artificial intelligence engineering’ (Boulanin, 2019, p. 16). Deep learning is what powers most social media platforms (Boulanin, 2019), facial recognition and language translation applications. This technology consumes unorganised data to automatically produce differing categories of data from one another, much faster and more efficiently than machine learning. It uses greater amounts of data to ‘build complex concepts from simpler concepts’ (Boulanin, 2019, p. 16) through graphical processing units (GPUs), which can handle larger data input and more memory cores. Unlike traditional neural networks, where inputs are independent, ‘the output of RNNs depends on the prior elements within the sequence’ (Holdsworth, 2024) as ‘the nodes of each RNN layer are connected to each other’ (Wang, 2020,

p. 748). This implies that the final output produced is not only dependent on the input data but also on the elements within the sequence as 'the output of RNNs depends on the prior elements within the sequence' (Holdsworth, 2024). It is this interconnectedness that permits RNNs to 'memorize information over time' (Wang, 2020, p. 748). RNNs are skillfully designed to handle time-series data by using the same weights across the system, reducing computational complexity and ensuring consistency.

Generative AI

Finally, generative AI is a kind of deep learning model 'capable of generating seemingly new, meaningful content' (Feuerruegel, 2024, p. 111) like text, images and sounds. This AI does not merely identify patterns but generates new content based on patterns from learned data (Tivari, 2024). Known also as GenAI, this technology 'transcend[s] conventional algorithms' (Tivari, 2024, p. 1) by identifying intricate patterns in large datasets to generate new content. Unlike previous forms of AI which are grouped as discriminative AI which concentrates on 'input features and output labels' and specifically classifying and predicting tasks (Banh, 2023), generative models classify and generate new samples similar to the original data. Due to this, generative models tend to be more complex as they 'learn the inherent data structure and generation processes' (Banh, 2023, p. 65).

Cole Stryker (2024) states that generative AI works in three phases: training, tuning and generation. Training begins with a foundational model, usually a deep learning algorithm like a large language model (LLM) that 'uses probabilities to predict words that can occur in a sentence' (Kalota F. , 2024, p. 178). During this period, a neural network is formed by the algorithm practising predicting correctly. Once the algorithm has 'minimize[d] the difference between its predictions and the actual data' (Stryker, 2024), the neural network can generate content based on prompts and input. This training requires a lot more time as well as 'high-end computational power' (Kalota F. , 2024, p. 176) in the form of graphic processing units (GPU), making training both costly and time-consuming. Next, the neural network is tuned to produce 'specific types of output' (Stryker, 2024) and create particular content generators. This step requires either fine-tuning on the part of the developer which can be time-consuming, or reinforcement learning which allows users to answer surveys and evaluations on how the system can be improved. The tuning process is continuously returned to to continuously improve accuracy and efficiency.

Challenges of Narrow AI

Whilst narrow AI offers new frontiers in what can be achieved by human beings, as in many other cases, there are some challenges and limitations shared by machine learning, deep learning and generative AI. Some of these include technical challenges like data availability and accessibility, explainability and biases.

Data availability and accessibility, especially in Africa, is a significant obstacle, particularly because 'data is the cornerstone of high-quality AI' (Antebi, 2021, p. 99). Kyungmee Kim and Vincent Boulanin (2023) claim that 'representativeness is dependent on data availability'. Hence, for AI to be reliable it needs data that is representative of perspectives that capture diverse situations and conditions. However, producing a representative dataset requires access to high-quality data that has recently been updated. Accurate high-quality data is difficult to come across in regions where populations may be underrepresented, leading to inaccuracies and biased outcomes. Africa's historical struggles and systemic issues have prevented the continent from accumulating the necessary resources to participate and contribute to AI knowledge. From limited access to knowledge resources and fragmented and incomplete data repositories to a lack of localized data and unequal access to the internet, Africa remains left behind in conversations surrounding artificial intelligence. Limited infrastructure prevents the continent from gaining access to knowledge resources such as research databases and academic journals, obstructing access to high-quality information which is needed for high-quality AI production. Similarly, because there is no centralized repository of knowledge on the continent, this makes it difficult to acquire knowledge from different databases scattered across the continent belonging to various institutions and organisations. Additionally, due to a lack of access to the internet particularly in rural areas, this obstacle restricts us from creating an accurate dataset as some people and areas would be excluded. There is limited focus on local contexts in data that happen to be global or regional, excluding certain groups from contributing to AI knowledge reserves. This would hinder context-specific solutions to African problems and perpetuate biased external narratives about Africa: if 'data […] is not sufficiently diverse, biases may arise' (Antebi, 2021, p. 105).

Another challenge of AI is the black box issue. This refers to a lack of transparency when it comes to how AI systems make decisions as we are often 'unable to explain the processes that cause the system to make a particular decision' (Antebi, 2021, p. 100). Black box models, particularly deep learning systems, are opaque in explaining to the user the processes and logic behind the system's decision-making where 'the lack of transparency and explainability of

these systems in turn creates a fundamental problem of predictability' (Boulanin, 2019, p. 20). This issue affects trust, perpetuates biases and can be a security hazard. If a system is incapable of explaining how it got to a decision, it raises questions about its reliability as 'transparency and explainability of an AI system is vital for its credibility' (Kim, 2023, p. 24). Kim and Boulanin (2023, p. 24) state that not only does this prevent users from 'verifying [AIs] reliability' but it also 'limits the value of the system […] and how the systems came to specific recommendations'. Furthermore, without understanding how decisions are made, it becomes difficult to detect biases that could exist in the system. Also, because black box models are uninterpretable, this poses a security risk as the behaviour of the system remains unpredictable, such as with autonomous cars. Although deep learning AI systems generate more accurate and efficient outcomes, they are more difficult to explain than simpler AI systems like machine learning models.

Nonetheless, despite AI's challenges and potential risks, it remains the evolution of existing technology, where advancements in AI push boundaries to create something better, where 'truly intelligent machines can only be developed by combining machine learning with traditional programming' (Boulanin, 2019). This refining and enhancing of capabilities over time is what results in the achievement of greater efficiency and innovation. In the following chapter, greater efficiency and innovation take the form of artificial general intelligence (AGIs) and how AGI can be a force for good.

Artificial General Intelligence and its Commendable Dimensions

The evolution of AI, although valuable, has been a languid process. Intrinsically, 'the next level up' (Kalota F. , 2024, p. 173) in this metamorphosis from narrow AI would be artificial general intelligence (AGI). The ultimate achievement for most AGI systems is to 'produce a mind, or an intelligence which literally possesses and understands other mental states' (Flowers J. , 2019, p. 2). In other words, it creates an intellect that is conscious enough to genuinely comprehend different mental states. Within this novel domain arises both hope and fear for the future that could be AGI. This is dependent on how individuals perceive AI as being either a threat or an opportunity for humanity. There are various sectors of industry, particularly healthcare, sustainability and job creation that could and already do benefit from AI. Similarly, some agree that AI can be a force for social good, assisting the community while allowing human beings to maintain control over the technology. This segment explores the idea of artificial general intelligence (AGI) and how it is broadly defined, the fears and opportunities that contribute to the manifestation of AGI, the practical uses of AGI in medicine, education,

sustainability and job creation, and the reasons why AGI is for the common good. Even though AGI remains a hypothetical exploration, it is an important arena to explore ethically and ontologically.

Defining AGI

Like every other concept related to AI, artificial general intelligence (AGI) does not have a simple, straightforward definition. AGI is often considered the opposite of narrow AI, offering more than just the ability to perform singular tasks skilfully, but something that 'can match or exceed the cognitive abilities of human beings across any task'. Popularised by Ben Goertzel, he defines artificial general intelligence as being able to 'carry out a variety of tasks, in different contexts and environments' by 'generalizing the knowledge […] gained' and 'transferring this knowledge from one problem or context to others'. In simple terms, this is a form of artificial intelligence that aims to execute any intellectual task a human can perform by replicating human intelligence and embedding it into machines. The goal for AGI is to 'create machines that constantly learn and improve their abilities', making them 'indistinguishable from human beings'. Unlike narrow AI, AGI does not require human intervention at any stage and possesses skills similar to humans, enabling it to solve broad problems without restrictions or limitations. Often, AGI is mistakenly equated with strong AI, which is an incorrect notion. Strong AI, a concept proposed by John Searle, does not focus on improving performance across tasks but rather involves a phenomenally aware cognition that possesses and understands its own mental states and subjective experiences, concentrating more on consciousness and the subjective perception accompanying certain mental states. AGI is mainly concerned with accomplishing goals across a wide range of tasks with mastery. When it comes to the ethics surrounding AI, this remains the subject of considerable controversy.

Many who work with AI, including engineers, philosophers, computer scientists and medical professionals, argue for certain ethical standards that they claim are important for improving the quality of life of humanity. Even though there are multiple ideas for what principles should be at the core of AI ethics, Tom Beauchamp (1994) proposes that bioethics should lie at the core of AI technology, as it is concerned with human well-being. He asserts that 'various principles worthy of acceptance in bioethics can be grouped under four general categories' (Beauchamp, 1994, p. 956). It is these four core principles that can guide the ethical development of AI systems: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice.

Beneficence is one of the few principles which most people agree with. Thought to be the common good (Floridi L. &., 2019), this principle states that 'AI shall do people good and benefit humanity' (Huang, 2023, p. 809). AI should be designed to improve the well-being of humanity by benefitting society as a whole where 'AI technology should be used to bring beneficial outcomes and impact to individuals, society, and the environment' (Huang, 2023, p. 809). To achieve this, AI developers must ensure that AI aligns to advance human flourishing.

Autonomy 'refers to the ability of a person to make decisions respect to his goals and wishes' (Huang, 2023, p. 809), allowing an individual the free will to make their own informed choices where 'humans […] retain the power to decide which decisions to take' (Floridi L. &., 2019). In the context of AI, respecting the autonomy of individuals gives users freedom of choice over decisions that may affect their lives. It is pivotal that AI 'does not harm or encumber […] freedom and autonomy' (Huang, 2023, p. 809). This can be done by maintaining transparency, explainability and human agency through clear explanations of how decisions are made by AI and the option to override those decisions if necessary.

Nonmaleficence refers to AI not causing harm to humans in all respects, 'entail[ing] the protection of human dignity as well as mental and physical integrity' (Huang, 2023, p. 809). This principle aims at preventing the negative consequences that may arise from the misuse of AI technology. This can be exhibited through developers who mitigate algorithmic biases, misuse of data and 'infringements on personal privacy' (Huang, 2023, p. 809) by utilizing robust testing and security measures.

Justice refers to fairness, impartiality and equity in the design of AI where 'AI system[s] should not result in discriminations or bias against individuals, communities or groups' (Huang, 2023, p. 808). This principle demands that AI applications distribute benefits and burdens equally amongst populations. For instance, this would require AI technologies to be easily accessible and inclusive, actively preventing the perpetuation of discrimination but also redressing past injustices and 'preventing the rise of new threats to justice' (Floridi L. &., 2019, p. 8).

Circling back to defining AGI, Goertzel (2014, p. 5) holds that it is an obscure concept, similar to AI, due to 'the underlying ambiguity of the concepts of 'intelligence' and 'general intelligence''. As I have mentioned, I will not be delving into the deconstruction of intelligence as it remains murky territory. Instead, when I speak of AGI, I am merely speaking of highly capable AI, referring to 'AI systems that demonstrate cognitive capabilities, enabling them to

perform economically valuable tasks at or above the level of human beings' (Abungu, 2024, p. 2).

Even though there are four principles in bioethics, an additional principle has been added, one that is focused on the enabling of the other principles, and that is explicability. Explicability, appreciated as 'transparency', 'accountability' or 'intelligibility', is the principle that avoids black box scenarios by ensuring that AI systems can explain their decision-making processes (Floridi L. &., 2019, p. 8). Known as being 'the crucial missing piece of the AI ethics jigsaw', explicability is the principle that allows us to 'understand the good or harm [AGI] is actually doing to society' through beneficence and nonmaleficence, gives us access to informed knowledge to make our own decisions through autonomy and justice in terms of who to hold accountable (Floridi L. &., 2019, p. 8). With talks regarding the idea of AGI, discussions often arise concerning the expectations of AI and assumptions on how this will manifest in reality, which are explored in Cave and Dihal's *Hopes and Fears for Intelligent Machines in Fiction and Reality.*

Advantages and Disadvantages of AGI

I want to begin this segment with a brief disclaimer that even though AI and AGI are defined differently, as I have demonstrated, I will be using them interchangeably to mean highly capable AI in this context. There are three ways in which the assumptions and perceptions of society, whether optimistic or pessimistic, can influence AI technology: through the objectives of the developers and what they wish to do with it, through public narratives surrounding the understanding of this technology, and through policy and regulation surrounding AI (Cave, 2019, p. 74).

Like many aspects of life, AI has both positive and negative traits. A continuous debate about AI revolves around whether it can enhance human intelligence, or if growing reliance on AI might 'prevent some people from fully realising their intellectual potential' (Nyholm, 2024, p. 80). Often, when we think of AI, what comes to mind is the view that 'AI is dangerous' as it could 'eventually enslave humans' (West, 2020). To date, these views are heavily influenced by science fiction and myths that fuel mistrust in AI. Some argue that AI is a technology that will harm humanity in the long run, that it could result in 'the death of creativity, the erosion of critical thinking and increased job inequality and polarisation' (Graham D., 2025, p. 9). Conversely, others believe AI can benefit humanity by 'improving efficiency and production' (Graham D., 2025, p. 11).

While I advocate for AI's benefits, I start this section by exploring contrasting ways AI might manifest in reality. One possibility is that AI could increase human life expectancy, allowing us to live longer. This might occur through AI revolutionising healthcare by 'offering better diagnoses, personalised medicine [and] fewer medical errors' (Cave, 2019, p. 75). AI's application in low-and-middle-income countries (LMIC) could be particularly transformative, especially considering access and resources. The World Health Organization (2021, p. 5) states that AI could lower healthcare costs for patients, stand in for healthcare professionals who may be unavailable locally, create medical datasets for communities, and even 'train unskilled workers'. The rise of AI technologies introduces more innovative approaches to health and wellness. Further healthcare advancements could prolong life by transforming the human body or transcending it altogether. Transformation involves 'mak[ing] the body immune to ageing and disease' (Cave, 2019, p. 75). As technology progresses, so do medical devices like prosthetics and prophylactics, possibly leading to 'cyborgisation' (Organization, 2021, p. 75), where biological body parts are replaced with artificial limbs that outperform their natural counterparts. Transcendence refers to digital immortality, 'involve[ing] [the] total departure from the human body and 'uploading' one's mind onto a machine' (Cave, 2019, p. 76). This would allow human consciousness to survive beyond death, supporting the idea of transhumanism. However, each benefit has its drawbacks. Living indefinitely might cause someone to lose their sense of self over time, transforming them into something inhuman. The idea is that once mortal beings become immortal, they lose their humanity. This 'loss of humanity' could lead to a 'loss of human values and emotions' (Cave, 2019, p. 76), stripping away one's life purpose and personal identity.

The second way AI might manifest is by offering a life of ease. Ease means a life free from the constraints of work and earning a living. AI could automate mundane or labour-intensive tasks, freeing up time for individuals to pursue their interests. With AI, the hope is that 'intelligent machines can do our work for us, allowing us lives of leisure' (Cave, 2019, p. 76). Instead of working, this time could be used for creativity, self-actualisation, and 'restoring us to Eden' (Cave, 2019, p. 76). Yet, a life of ease raises concerns about obsolescence and usefulness. Convenience might cause humans to lose skills and purpose, since 'work provides […] an income, but also […] a role in society […] and […] pride and purpose' (Cave, 2019, p. 76). Some argue that reliance on machines could weaken autonomy and resilience over time.

The third manifestation involves gratification. It concerns how humans might choose to spend their freed-up time, with AI tailored to our deepest desires, acting as the 'perfect servant' (Cave,

2019, p. 76). However, this could lead to alienation from other humans, as some might decide that 'AI [is] better than humans' (Cave, 2019, p. 76), preferring artificial relationships over real ones.

Lastly, the desire for dominance might drive humanity to use AI to gain power. Once the benefits of integrating AGI into daily life become apparent, some may wish to 'protect their favoured way of life' (Cave, 2019, p. 76) by any means. AGI could solve global issues such as climate change and conflict, providing military strategies and assisting the oppressed. It is human nature to want to maintain this power, giving the dominant an advantage. Conversely, there is concern that AGI might turn against us, either in retaliation or because we lose control. AGI could surpass human intelligence to such an extent that we might lose grip on AI as a useful tool, or it could develop into self-aware agents with the desire to 'eliminate humanity' (Cave, 2019, p. 77). Although these scenarios portray a dystopian view of AI's potential, there remains hope for the positive aspects of AGI.

AGI for Social Good

Although AGI is made up of various ideas, one element persists: the goal of all A[G]I is to accomplish tasks that call for human intelligence (Nyholm, 2024). AGI, with its potential to attain 'autonomous and self-learning agency' (Taddeo, 2018, p. 751), requires an ethical framework, one that '[avoids] the misuse and underuse of [this technology]' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 694). To achieve this ethical framework, multiple organisations have come together to design the foundation for a Good AI Society. Even though there are various other organisations and principles like AI4SG Lab and the Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI whose objectives are to achieve human-centred AI, I will mostly focus on Luciano Floridi's AI4People organisation. Although this organisation is based in Europe, I believe its principles and goals are relevant to African needs.

AI4People is a European initiative dedicated to fostering ethical and responsible AI by supporting governments and global businesses in implementing AI technologies in a safe, ethical and responsible manner. This non-profit organization launched at the European Parliament in 2018 brings together academics, civil society organisations and governments to address the societal impact of AI and advocate for its ethical use. The objective of this forum is 'to help steer this powerful force towards the good of society, everyone in it, and the environments we share' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 689). AI4People is not only concerned with developing an ethical framework for AI but is also interested in proactive regulation, raising

awareness around AI's potential and the societal implications, data privacy and collaborating with other organisations on how best to tackle the challenges to produce responsible AI.

As I mentioned previously, the only way AGI can manifest in reality is if the public comes to accept this technology and its risks, which in turn 'will depend […] on public engagement with the development of AI technologies, openness about how they operate, and […] widely accessible mechanisms of regulation and redress' (Floridi L. e., 2018, pp. 694-5). For AGI to gain momentum and be fully realised in society, AGI must be neither underused, overused, nor misused, for the opportunities it presents foster human flourishing and dignity (Floridi L. e., 2018). This is where the purpose behind AGI can be found, in what it offers society. Below, I will explore the four opportunities that AGI offers individuals in society as well as the risks that arise with AGI technology.

Firstly, AGI can promote self-fulfilment in individuals by enabling them to achieve their goals and aspirations. Using AGI will free up time usually spent on mundane tasks, creating more opportunities for 'cultural, intellectual and social pursuits'. More AI could simply mean more human life is spent more wisely, for example, by providing extra time each day for self-improvement through education and skills, as well as for creativity and self-expression. However, the potential danger lies in the overuse of AGI, which might lead to a loss of autonomy. A common concern about over reliance on this technology is that we become dependent on it, allowing it to do everything for us, and in doing so, risk losing our agency and losing sight of who we are, since 'jobs are often intimately linked to personal identity, self-esteem, and social […] standing' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 692).

Secondly, an increase in AGI would enhance human agency, not diminish it. Automating mundane tasks not only frees up human time for meaningful pursuits but can also assist us in making better decisions, offering insight and recommendations that are personalised to who we are, enabling us to 'do more, better, and faster, thanks to the support provided by [AGI]' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 692). However, to improve human agency requires responsibility on the part of AGI. Conversely, a lack of responsibility could occur in instances such as the 'black box' paradox where 'AI systems […] are seen as being beyond human understanding, and hence control' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 692). Not being able to monitor the decision-making process of these systems suggests a lack of control, where '[delegating] important tasks and […] all decisions to autonomous systems' could be detrimental (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 693). It is this overuse of AGI that perpetuates mistrust in AI technologies, as the lack of transparency

and accountability on the part of AGI could ultimately infringe on privacy and even human rights, leading to a loss of dignity.

Thirdly, as AGI becomes more prevalent in society, we will be better equipped to address larger challenges that impact human communities, such as climate change or national debt. AGI has the potential to significantly transform communities by approaching old problems from new perspectives that have not been previously considered, uncovering insights that can drive innovation and progress. Conversely, delegating most of our tasks to AGI could lead to potential harms such as worsening existing inequalities and 'preventing or redressing errors or harms that arise'. In other words, misusing AGI could result in humans being 'out of the loop' in making important decisions where some form of human oversight might be necessary.

Finally, more AGIs in societies can help coordinate global issues, as 'global problems increasingly have high levels of coordination complexity' (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 693). In simple terms, AGI has the potential to manage this complexity through 'societal cohesion and collaboration', where information and data from different regions are uploaded to create solutions that benefit everyone. However, the unpredictable nature of AGI could lead to harmful outcomes that ultimately 'erode human self-determination' by subtly altering human behaviour and diminishing our autonomy (Floridi L. e., 2018, p. 694). The more we adapt to the changes brought by AGI, the more our over reliance on this technology may reduce the way we think and express ourselves, thus compromising our autonomy and control. Although challenges associated with AGI, like with any other technology, do exist, I believe that the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Nevertheless, for AGI to become a reality, certain factors are necessary for its development.

Necessary Factors for the Implementation of AGI

Luciano Floridi and other members of the AI4People organisation have produced a significant document entitled *How to Design AI for Social Good*, which I will explore. This paper highlights the necessary factors that should be included in the design and implementation of AGI to mitigate risks and bring positive benefits to society. Although Floridi et al discuss seven varying factors, I will only explore three: falsifiability and incremental deployment, receiver-contextualised intervention, and receiver-contextualised explanation and transparent purposes.

Let's start with the factors of falsifiability and incremental deployment. For AGI to gain societal acceptance, it must be trustworthy, for 'trustworthiness is essential for technology in

general' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1775). Trust depends on upholding the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, since AGI aims to benefit everyone and avoid causing harm. Trust can only be achieved if AGIs are continuously tested and validated against disputed predictions, as 'falsifiability [...] improve[s] the trustworthiness of technological applications [...] and AI4SG applications in particular' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1776). When an AGI system is falsifiable, it remains predictable and safe because, even if it does not always produce the desired outcome, it can be empirically tested and improved over time. Therefore, 'for an AI4SG system to be trustworthy, its safety should be falsifiable' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1776). Admittedly, AI4SG cannot be tested in all contexts, making 'complete certainty is out of reach' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1776). However, AGIs are intended to be released gradually, as 'unintended hazardous effects may only reveal themselves after testing' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1776). This approach allows AGIs to be introduced progressively, enabling developers to monitor progress and identify issues early. Rigorous formal testing and simulations in secure environments, along with incremental deployment, help minimise the risk of unforeseen adverse effects in real-world settings.

The next factor, receiver-contextualised intervention, involves tailoring strategies to the needs and circumstances of the user or 'receiver'. This approach requires AGI to consider cultural, social, and environmental factors of its target audience and adapt accordingly, based on information about users' capacities, preferences, and goals (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1780). Designing AGI with awareness of social, cultural, and environmental contexts improves accuracy and fairness. Biased data can reinforce inequalities, thereby 'breaching the principle of justice' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1786). Conversely, datasets missing key 'contextual nuances' limit AGI's moral decision-making abilities and diminish impartiality (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1787). AI4SG designers need to exclude variables unrelated to 'inclusivity, safety, or other ethical imperatives' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1788). Contextualised interventions foster active engagement and help build trust, as the 'software intervenes in users' life [...] in ways that respect their autonomy' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1779). They also ensure that AGI addresses the specific circumstances within communities, meaning that AI4SG developers must consider users within their 'decision-making systems' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1780).

The final factor, receiver-contextualised explanation and transparent purposes, stresses the importance of AGI being able to explain its decision-making process and be transparent about its inner workings. 'The explanation for an intervention should be contextualised in order to be adequate and protect the autonomy of the receiver' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1781). Transparency

regarding AGI's objectives fosters trust, understanding, and informed consent, thereby safeguarding user autonomy. In simple terms, AGI should clearly communicate its goals, purpose, and how it intends to achieve them (Floridi L. e., 2021).

Ultimately, incorporating these factors into the development and application of AGI will better align with the principles of AI4SG, ensuring ethical considerations remain central. While Floridi et al. do not specify whether a hierarchy exists among these factors, I believe that the underlying bioethical principles will dictate their relative importance. For example, in African societies, acceptance of AGI as persons would require prioritising receiver-contextualised explanations and transparent purposes over human-friendly semanticisation. 'Transparency [...] of the system is [...] crucial' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1783) for building trust and acceptance within African communities. Although semanticisation plays a vital role in understanding AGI, it has little relevance to African notions of personhood. Today, AI is already making an impact in sectors such as medicine, sustainability, and employment, incorporating some of these principles. Healthcare depends on the factors of falsifiability and incremental deployment, along with receiver-contextualised explanations and transparent purposes. Sustainability, meanwhile, utilises the factors of falsifiability and safeguards against manipulation. These examples demonstrate how AGI holds the potential to benefit society meaningfully.

Practical Manifestations of AI in Medicine, Sustainability and Job Creation

Following, I will demonstrate how AI has made revolutionary leaps in the fields of medicine, sustainability and job creation. Medical technology enables patients' easy access to healthcare through mobile phones and smart wear that informs them of their health levels. Mobile applications like Kardia and Apple Health have made it easier for patients to monitor atrial fibrillation, a cardiovascular irregularity that causes a rapid heartbeat which could result in blood clots in the heart, a stroke or heart failure amongst other conditions. Kardia acts as a portable EKG machine with immediate access to cardiologists on the go. Similarly, Apple Watch 4 provides patients with a mobile ECG that detects atrial fibrillation and sends a diagnosis directly to their health practitioner from their watch (Briganti, 2020). With respect to endocrinology, IBM Watson has partnered with Medtronic to create Sugar.IQ, a mobile application that continuously monitors blood glucose levels to 'optimize their blood glucose control and reduce stigma' surrounding diabetes (Briganti, 2020, p. 2). Finally, concerning neurology, a wristband called EpiMonitor is a seizure alerting and epilepsy monitoring system that can 'detect generalized epilepsy seizures and report to a mobile application' which locates

the patient and alerts not only their healthcare practitioner but friends and family as well (Briganti, 2020, p. 3). According to the World Health Organization (2021, p. 4), AI has currently improved 'pattern recognition […] in radiology and medical imaging' and continues to be evaluated for radiological, non-radiological and immunotherapy operations. As it stands, AI is said to be 'equivalent to human medical judgment in specific domains and applications in specific contexts' (Organization, 2021), meaning that AI already possesses some of the capabilities that human medical practitioners have regarding certain medical procedures. In time, as AI continues to diagnose and predict illnesses and diseases, it could also be used as a means of preventing lifestyle diseases or even predicting illnesses before they take place (Organization, 2021). Once AGI moves beyond being merely hypothetical, the advantages of AI will only accumulate beyond what it is today as 'there is no area of medicine that will be spared from AI's impact' (Totty, 2019).

Similarly, sustainability efforts have been led by drone technology. In South Africa, drone technology like unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) is being used to 'bolster green initiatives in the fields of renewable energy, nature conservation, air quality and agriculture' (Geomatics, 2024). UAVs are fitted with thermal imaging cameras that survey expansive farmlands for signs of disruption, ranging from the inspection of solar panels and wind turbines to tracking illegal poachers, monitoring forests for fires and observing changes in air quality and greenhouse gas emissions (Geomatics, 2024). UAVs assist with mapping water sources like rivers and lakes, providing aerial surveillance of the landscapes and reducing the carbon footprint of farmers by 'lowering the amount of fertilizer that's released into the air' (Geomatics, 2024). Drone technology is cost-effective, efficient and can access 'inaccessible land' that humans may not be able to travel to (Geomatics, 2024).

Furthermore, with more time on human hands thanks to the automation of mundane tasks, this allows humans 'freedom to innovate, and to create a strong gig economy' (Graham D. , 2025, p. 11). Some fear that AGI will increase job inequality and result in job losses however, Graham (2025, p. 11) contends that 'AI unlocks human potential that has been stymied by social circumstances, bringing more people into the formal economy, creating new jobs'. New jobs, particularly centred around AI development, implementation and maintenance, will be sought after, such as 'data scientists, roboticists, machine-learning specialists, cybersecurity experts and other highly skilled workers' (Totty, 2019). The very nature of jobs will change, and we will need to 'reimagine the structure of society and the economy' (Graham D. , 2025, p. 11). AGI, being an 'all-pervasive, general-purpose technology' will become a constant companion

to humans, helping us attain greater knowledge and better skills (Totty, 2019). Michael Totty claims that 'not only will [AGI] create the need for many new jobs and new types of jobs, but it will also transform existing jobs in ways that make them easier, safer and more productive. This suggests that AGI will create entirely new industries, enhance productivity through automation to expand businesses and transform skills through personalised training programs.

Artificial General Intelligence is a frontier technology that we have no practical experience of. Still, it offers immense potential to reshape and transform societies and redefine the boundaries of human achievement. Its promise lies in confronting global challenges efficiently and creatively as well as practically revolutionising industries like medicine and sustainability. AGI offers a fresh set of eyes to old problems, utilising innovative strategies to solve complex issues that humans have not yet considered. At the same time, AGI is rife with risks that require careful consideration. Loss of autonomy, death of creativity and lack of transparency are some of the substantial challenges that AGI could present. For AGI to manifest in reality, it needs to align itself with human values like justice, autonomy, explicability, beneficence and nonmaleficence. Even though AGI is riddled with obstacles and problems, I believe that the opportunities that AGI present far outweigh its downsides. An inclusive ethical framework is necessary for AGI to achieve its potential while simultaneously mitigating its risks. Developing human-centred AGI has the potential to create better societies where this innovative technology is used to promote solidarity, moral relations and ethical growth of communities.

African Conceptions of Personhood

Morality in Africa varies drastically from the moral paradigm found in contemporary Western communities. Because 'the reality of the communal worlds take precedence over the reality of individual life histories' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172), African ethics places a great deal of weight on relational concepts like preference of the community above the individual, in contrast to most Western discourse that is primarily concerned with essentialist concepts of individualism and autonomy. Many have attempted to define what personhood is in the African context, from the likes of Mbiti (1969) and Menkiti (1984) to Gyekye (2002) and Matolino (2011), to name a few. Despite the sizeable literature produced in this arena, African philosophers remain conflicted about what personhood in African thought is.

Kevin Behrens defines personhood as being 'an attribute that distinguishes human persons from other beings' (Behrens, 2011, p. 106), an innate quality that separates the human animal from other animals in nature. Ademola Fayemi (2018, p. 53) states that personhood is the

'qualitative status, attributes, and capabilities of being a person', characteristics that require recognition and acknowledgement from other human beings. The notion of personhood remains synonymous with the term 'community', which consists of 'an existing system of social relationships' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 31) that form the fabric of African societies. Personhood consists of a range of characteristics that identify people as moral agents that are capable of self-awareness, and worthy of dignity, rights and responsibilities. For the purposes of this paper, I present some contextual background into theories offered across the continent, as surmised by Kaphagawani (2005). However, I do not delve into opposing views of these propositions, as I am merely stating existing theories. I explore Menkiti's conception of personhood, a maximally defined conception that was one of the initial theories offered as an explanation for African personhood. Additionally, I include opposing views of Menkiti offered by Gyekye and Matolino, with a rebuttal by Polycarp Ikuenobe and Motsamai Molefe. So, let's begin this inquiry by considering the various conceptions of a person presented across the African continent.

African Conceptions of Personhood Across the Continent

Although Didier Kaphagawani presents a concise compilation of the various renditions of personhood from across the African continent, what is evidently at the core of African personhood is the notion that the community plays a significant role in the development of the moral character of its members, as 'it is the nature of a human being to lead a communal life of one form or another' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 337). What is evident is that there exists 'a philosophical affinity and kinship among the people of Africa' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 28) that ties personhood to community. While there remains discourse on the intricacies of these conceptions, there is consensus on the fundamentals.

Firstly, a person is comprised of a physical element, 'the flesh, bones, and blood of which humans are made at the material level' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 333). In Akan thought, the body is known as *nipadua* or *honam,* while in Yoruba thought, this is known as the *ara* and *okan*. Although the *okan* is the 'physical organ responsible for the circulation of blood' in the body, it is also responsible for our 'emotional and psychic reactions' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 334), meaning it is both physical and immaterial in nature. Wiredu states that the *nipadua*/*honam* is usually associated with the mother who acts as 'the basis of lineage, or […] clan identity' (Wiredu, 2004b, p. 367). Oftentimes, this aspect of a person is rarely debated

against because it is sufficient for a being to have a physical body that tethers them to this worldly plane.

Secondly, it is argued that a life-giving entity exists within a person, which the Yoruba term the *emi*. Placide Tempels claims it to be the 'viral force' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 335) that brings about action in human beings. This force is what animates all beings. This force is called the *okra* in Akan thought, arguably a quasi-physical 'entity that somehow inhabits the body' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 333), or a rendition of a soul. In Yoruba thought, it has an 'immaterial and independent existence' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 334) that gives rise to life. Tempels argues that force is 'inseparable from the definition of being' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 333), an energy that is intertwined with existence. He claims that this force is both the essence and necessary attribute of being (Kahaka, 2022). It is this energy that gives humans higher ontological status, making people 'supreme […] among all created beings' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 30). Force is what grants human beings 'intelligence and will' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 30). In other words, it is this spiritual energy that permits people to have the capacity to think, reason, and make decisions. This force implies that human intellectual capacities are not merely biological from the brain but also spiritual and ontological.

Finally, personality is the third component that contributes to being. In Yoruba thought, this is known as the *ori*, a vital element whose role is to determine the personality of the individual and is 'the bearer of the person's destiny' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 334). Also known as the *sunsum* in Akan thought, this 'personality principle' (Wiredu, 2004b, p. 367) is said to be an 'immaterial, divine and immoral' entity that can 'perish at death' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 333) and can leave the body during sleep. Thought to be the bedrock of man's character, Wiredu claims that although this attribute is inherited from both parents, it is the father who has a greater influence on the child's personality, for the 'immanent characteristic' (Wiredu, 2004b, p. 367) of the child is ascribed to the father.

What is remarkable about conceptions found across the African continent are the distinctions between the metaphysical and communitarian conceptions of personhood. While some concentrate on the individual elements that make up a person - such as body, soul and personality, others concentrate on the processual ontological progression necessary to attain personhood. Although this is evident from papers like Kapagawani's *African Conceptions of a Person,* most of these conceptions blend into each other, forming a concoction that is shared across the continent.

The force thesis offered by Tempels argues that there is 'an intimate ontological relationship' among beings that bonds them together (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 337). He claims that force is 'the nature of being' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 29), the necessary element for being and existence. He says that 'nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 30), implying that there is an interconnectedness of all forces in the universe. Every action by a force, whether physical, spiritual or otherwise, has an impact on other forces, and so, nothing exists in isolation, for 'the Bantu cannot be a lone-being' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 31).

Additionally, the communitarian view theorised by John Mbiti, is another conception of personhood. Similarly, this theory argues that every individual 'owes [their] existence to other people' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 337), people being the greater community. According to this view, morality is embedded in both the community and its cultural beliefs, meaning the notion of personhood is built on the pillars of culture and religion (Dolamo, 2013). It is the community that grants personhood status, as it is a quality that is achieved after one has completed the necessary cultural rituals and customs. Personhood in Africa is also rooted in spirituality and religion, for personhood prioritises all communal relationships and that includes relations both from the past and the future, as 'personhood is a connection in a sequence of forebears and progeny' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 32). This implies that personhood is a characteristic that transcends both time and space. Although I address these topics further in the ensuing sections of this paper, I want to indicate that Menkiti's extended-self argument favours the idea that individuals are spiritually linked to their ancestors and descendants, even though he claims that there is no ontological progression after death.

Finally, although the shadow thesis theorised by Alexis Kagame is not commonly utilised, I have included it in this paper to set the scene for the beliefs surrounding personhood in Africa. He claims that a person is 'both a complete animal and a being endowed with intelligence' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 339). While animality is in connection to human beings retaining their connection to the natural world and physical existence, what distinguishes humans is the possession of intelligence and 'heart' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 339). Workineh Kelbessa (2013, p. 65) claims that 'the difference between human life and other forms of life is that the former is higher than the latter in the structure of the cosmos', with Menkiti (2005, p. 328) elaborating that there exists a 'raw seniority' where humans are placed above other things in nature. Intelligence permits humans to reflect on information gathered by their senses by comparing new knowledge to old knowledge and using this newly acquired knowledge to create something

new (Kaphagawani, 2005). Kagame claims that heart refers to 'the personality of an individual human being' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 339), it is the essence of a person that distinguishes one person from another. The heart is the rationality necessary to interpret this intelligence and influx of information as 'it harmonizes the operations and acquisitions of intelligence' (Kaphagawani, 2005, p. 339). Although there are issues with this theory as it 'is not commonly considered a credible view of African personhood' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 28), it does solve the problem of personal identity, for the personality of an individual distinguishes one person from the other.

Ultimately, the continent offers varying renditions of what personhood is and which elements of a person should be focused on. Still, it doesn't end here. Having said this, I argue that Menkiti's conception remains the closest hypothesis to what I believe an indigenous traditional African personhood looked like in ancient Africa, mainly because his conception mirrors the precedence of African values stemming from the past. The Akan conception of persons and Mbiti's communalism thesis produce the basis for Menkiti's notion of persons, which emphasises the necessity for social integration through ritualistic customs that are chosen by the community, especially its elders. Forming an ideal traditional African vision of personhood begins with the necessary elements of persons from Akan thought, in addition to an existence centred around the community. This is the foundation on which Menkiti begins his exploration, claiming that personhood is an acquired characteristic of which individuals should aim.

Menkiti's Conception of Communitarianism and Personhood

In *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, Ifeanyi Menkiti explores the indigenous African philosophical understanding of personhood and weighs it against the individualistic perspective of the West. Although he contrasts his rendition of communitarianism against a generic conception of Western personhood, I will only engage with his traditional African conception.

Menkiti supports the communalism thesis of a person which stipulates that personhood in Africa emphasises social relationships and interconnectedness (Kahaka, 2022). He asserts that the accurate conception of a person found in African traditional thought prioritises society above individual persons, for 'in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 174). This signifies that the community's values, customs and practices play a fundamental role in the development and recognition of an individual's identity. Masolo (2010, p. 139) supports this perspective by expressing that people cannot

accomplish their full potential ‘outside [of] their relations with others’. Menkiti (1984, p. 173) begins his argument by establishing that ‘man is defined by reference to the environing community’, implying that an individual’s identity is closely entwined with the community's values. In African thought, man cannot exist alone without a community, for an individual's identity is produced from the social norms generated by the community. For Menkiti (2005), collective unity is the attribute that makes African communities unique. Known as ‘the economy of affection’ (Masolo D. A., 2004, p. 494), it represents the reciprocal nature that exists in the community where one is obligated to do for others as others would do for one, for the common good. Nevertheless, he reasons that there would be no need to achieve personhood in the absence of the community, for personhood is a socially constructed notion that permits individuals to become moral agents. Advocating for Mbiti’s view that there exists a special connection between the individual and their community, Menkiti insists that African personhood goes beyond merely the metaphysical, incorporating ontological and epistemic elements. Prioritising the community's needs above those of the individual permits access to what it means to be African ontologically. An individual's identity is intertwined with the community's identity, as ‘an individual’s image will depend […] upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself’ (Hallen, 2015, p. 3). Gaining personhood status means ‘being morally obligated to other persons and to the community’ (Hallen, 2015, p. 3). This implies that one’s actions are intended to promote the well-being of the community and that one has ethical obligations to society that extend beyond one’s self-interest.

Ultimately, personhood provides us with a sense of belonging by linking us not only physiologically to our community but also linguistically to certain groups of people, ‘to a mental commonwealth with others whose life histories encompass the past, present, and future’ (Menkiti, 1984, p. 174). Masolo (2010, p. 155) continues to say that the ‘mind would not be possible without communication’, denoting that communication plays a vital role in the development and functioning of the mind. Not only does communication allow us to share thoughts and knowledge, but it is also the medium through which cultural norms and traditions are maintained over generations. Thus, personhood is not an attribute bestowed at birth but rather a prestige obtained through active engagement in communal enterprises, ‘an ideal towards which one strives’ (Behrens, 2011, p. 110). Menkiti explains that personhood in African traditional thought is an acquired characteristic achieved through the accomplishment of certain duties owed to the community, an attribute that an individual earns rather than one that is freely given by the community (Matolino, 2011). This requires ‘a process of

incorporation' (Menkiti, 1984: p. 174), involving an individual performing indisputable cultural and ritualistic practices to be fully accepted into the community. Masolo (2004, p. 492) claims that the 'moral education and the acquisition of the values which sustain the social order are part of initiation rituals in most African societies', emphasising that cultural practices are not only ceremonial but act as educational tools that shape the individual's moral character to preserve values significant to the community. It is also a quality that an individual could fail to obtain if they don't get assimilated into the community, resulting in the individual becoming a 'mere dangler' to which the title of person does not refer (Menkiti, 1984, p. 174). The processual nature of personhood necessitates that time be given toward acquiring excellencies or virtues that contribute to the development of ethical maturity, a process determined by the community which 'plays a vital role as catalyst and as prescriber of norms' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 175). It is the community that sets the social rules and standards that each member must abide by, and by fulfilling these standards, one moves closer to attaining personhood. Full personhood is directly proportional to the realization of one's responsibilities to the community, meaning that personhood can solely be accomplished through the completion of rituals of incorporation as well as the necessity to become familiar with communal social norms.

As mentioned previously, personhood is a processual quality not assigned at birth, implying 'the older an individual gets, the more of a person he becomes' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 175). In other words, the necessity of time means that there is an ontological progression from being a newborn or a child with no moral functions to becoming an adult with the capacity for moral function, 'for married to the notion of person is the notion of moral arrival' (Menkiti, 2005: p. 326). The thinking is that with age comes maturity and wisdom, the necessary excellencies needed for personhood, claiming that 'morality and maturation […] are so intimately bound up' (Menkiti, 2005: p. 325). As individuals age, they obtain wisdom and accumulate virtues essential to their moral maturity, indicating that time provides a qualitative distinction between infants and older persons, for 'age nurtures wisdom' (Masolo, 2010, p. 154). The process of ageing not only warrants the acquisition of new characteristics but ontologically changes the person for the better.

For Menkiti, there exists a hierarchy between children and older people. Linguistically, he argues that personhood can be shown through the use of personal pronouns. Persons are entitled to personalized references like he/him and she/her because of their moral capabilities and maturity, unlike children and newborns who do not exhibit this capacity as yet, for they lack

moral perception (Menkiti, 2005). Children are therefore exposed to the depersonalised pronoun 'it', suggesting that they are not truly persons. Menkiti (2005, p. 327) contends that although we don't always refer to children using 'it', we have the choice to refer to them as 'it' because 'there is a flexibility in the way we refer to the child', unlike with older persons who have already acquired their personhood. He disputes that there is a language distinction, as well as 'ontological significance', between children and older persons (Menkiti, 1984, p. 176). For instance, Menkiti uses the example of the death of a child in comparison to the death of an older person. The death of a child is not as elegant or ritualised as that of the older person, highlighting the ontological difference between child and adult. The depersonalised pronoun of 'ít' is not only utilised for children and newborns, but also for those he depicts as the 'nameless dead' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 177) which I will return to. Menkiti states that as children age, they acquire the capacity for moral maturity and are incorporated into society through completing their obligations to their communities. As time passes, they ontologically progress from adult to old age to death, where they become the *living dead*.

During this stage, 'the dead still retain their personhood,' according to Menkiti (1984, p. 176), for when the living continue to remember the names of the dead, it preserves their personhood and personal identities. However, as time persists, previous generations forget the personal names of their ancestors, converting the living dead into what Menkiti deems the *nameless dead*. These entities lose their personal identity and consequently revert to the depersonalised reference of 'it'. He asserts that there can be no ontological progression after death because of the absence of incorporation, signifying that the *nameless dead* remain as 'its', mere entities that 'cannot be designated as something else' (Menkiti, 2005: p. 328). So, once the personal names of ancestors are forgotten by the living, the *nameless dead* become entities that are no longer incorporated into the community and thus lose their personhood. Menkiti claims that not being morally incorporated into society at the beginning and the end of life signifies a metaphysical symmetry to existence (Menkiti, 2005). There is a parallel contrast regarding the differences between the *living dead* and the *nameless dead*. In terms of seniority, the *nameless dead* are placed higher than the *living dead* as they have been in the spiritual world longer than the *living dead*. Yet, the *living dead* are ranked higher in terms of seniority concerning moral function since they continue to be members of the living community because they still recall their personal identities.

Finally, the concept of justice in the African context is centred around the ideals of balance and harmony within the community, and not individual rights. One of the categories of the common

good extends to include justice (Gyekye K. , 2011). The development of personhood is strongly reliant on the participation of the community in the duties owed to it by its members that aim at the common good, beckoning the ontological progression necessary for justice. Menkiti (1984, p. 176) claims that there exists an 'ethical requirement of respect for persons', where persons 'are owed the duties of justice'. In other words, having respect for individuals who have attained personhood and thus have inherent value permits them to be treated justly and fairly by other persons. Hence, the concept of justice is only reserved for persons, as the possession of the capacity for moral maturity guarantees that one deserves and receives the duties of justice. Thus, a person is entitled to justice because they are a moral agent who deserves respect. He states that justice is accomplished through the maintenance of harmony in society, making it necessary for all members of the community to contribute to the collective welfare positively. However, not all African philosophers agree with Menkiti's communitarianism perspective.

Gyekye's Rendition of Menkiti's Conception

Although Menkiti's case for a communitarian view of person appears strong prima facie, modernists like Kwame Gyekye and Bernard Matolino contend against his conventional African standpoint, whose perspectives I will explore in this section. They argue that Menkiti is mistaken in prioritising the community over the individual. Gyekye's (2002) *Person and Community in African Thought* opposes the conventional utilitarian perspective of personhood offered by Menkiti, opting for a moderate communitarianism that emphasises the needs of the community while also prioritising the moral agency of the individual.

The notion of radical communitarianism that Menkiti allegedly supports is what is in question for Gyekye. He scrutinises the relationship between persons and community in African philosophy by reasoning that personhood should not solely be centred around the community but instead should strike a balance between autonomy and communal existence. He points out that socio-ethical thought in African philosophy, thought as being 'the defining characteristics of those cultures' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 297), are seriously fused with communitarianism, denoting that morality is dependent on the values and principles taught in African societies. Gyekye (2002, p. 298) maintains that a theory of communitarianism that is 'wholly constituted by social relationships' is an extreme proposal that he cannot endorse, as the needs of the community always come before an individual's agency. Personhood is not merely 'modern socialism' (Gyekye K. , 1997, p. 299) as Menkiti grasps it, but rather a harmonious relationship

between communitarianism and individualism. This is because the African social order is dualistic, accommodating individualism in communal societies, acknowledging that communal beings possess autonomy and moral agency. Gyekye (2002, p. 299) disputes the idea that a community consists of individuals 'who consider themselves primarily as members of the group'. He claims that Menkiti's perspective implies that there is an interdependence in the community that masks the fact that individuals exist as autonomous beings outside of one another. Instead, he asserts that the community is made up of autonomous individuals who come together based on the common interests and values that they share, for 'community [is] a mere association of individual persons whose interests and ends are contingently congruent' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 299).

In Menkiti's analysis, 'moral virtue is held as intrinsic to the conception of a person' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 303), suggesting that only those who have attained personhood are capable of being moral agents. This implies that only specific individuals in society are moral agents, however this statement only accounts for those who are 'morally capable in actuality' and not those who are 'morally capable in potentiality' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 304). Menkiti's account does not consider children as being moral agents and yet, Gyekye asserts that children have the potential to become moral agents, for they eventually grow into their moral capabilities.

Menkiti refers to most Western conceptions of persons making one feature of an individual the essential characteristic that defines a person, whereas he states that it is the community which defines the African person. Gyekye stresses that Menkiti (1984, p. 174) too has made the same mistake of defining personhood based on 'some isolated static quality', being 'the environing community'. Gyekye acknowledges that when one is born, one automatically enters into human society which, particularly in Africa, is strictly community-centred and encompasses certain implications. Communitarian existence indicates that being born into a certain human culture is not a choice that one decides on, as 'community life is not optional for any individual person' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 300). Being born into a certain human culture also suggests that an individual is automatically considered 'a cultural being', further inferring that an individual cannot exist in isolation outside of society (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 300). This implies that individuals are relational creatures who are 'naturally orientated toward other persons' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 300), making social relations a necessary component of communitarian existence. For Gyekye, these implications equate to a person not being self-sufficient since they continue to owe their identity to their community and its members. Consequently, this reasoning emphasises the hierarchy that exists between the community and persons, for priority is always

placed on the cultural community (Gyekye, 2002). Even though Gyekye (2002, p. 301) concedes that 'a person is by nature a social being', he maintains that an individual can simultaneously be other things. He argues that individuals possess interests, desires and attributes like rationality, virtue and choice that exist outside of the community because 'it is not the community that creates these attributes; it [only] discovers and nurtures them' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 305). Thus, he asserts that 'personhood can only be partly, never completely, defined by one's membership of the community' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 306). Gyekye discards Menkiti's premise that personhood requires a process of incorporation that an individual can fail to obtain. Personhood is not a quality that an individual can fail to attain because the only quality that an individual can strive for is social status. He states that social status is measured by an individual's sense of accountability, what they can achieve, and whether they can accomplish certain social norms.

He states that personhood is not an accrued title that is acquired over time, but rather a label based on simply being born. The thinking is that 'one is a person because of what one is, not because of what one has acquired' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 303), meaning that an individual cannot acquire what it means to be a person because they already possess the capacity to self-actualise. Simply being born into human society means that one is granted immediate personhood based on the premise that one is already born of persons, as an individual cannot be granted personhood unassisted (Menkiti, 2005). Unlike Menkiti, Gyekye does not deny the personhood of newborns and children. Menkiti asserts that personhood is not granted to children and newborns because the depersonalised pronoun 'it' can be used when referring to a child. He reasons that children are more dispensable than older persons because there exists a difference in ontological status between children and older persons. Gyekye contends that 'children and newborns are of course not inanimate objects' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 302), awarding them personhood based on them simply being people. He states that Menkiti's use of 'it' appears nonsensical as the word 'it' belongs to a non-African language which will have 'serious implications for African thought' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 302). He also questions Menkiti's argument of the absence of ritualised grief when referring to children, maintaining that the death and burial rituals performed for an adult are not observed when it comes to a child (Menkiti, 1984). Gyekye proclaims that the lack of ritualized grief for children is a consequence of cultural superstitions concerning infertility and re-creation in many African cultures. Ritualized grief should not be dependent on the personhood of the individual but should be concerned with the individual's contribution to the community, their achievements

and the respect they had for their fellow members as ‘a human person is a person whatever his/her age or social status’ (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 303). Gyekye asserts that ontological progression and ontological differences do not exist, declaring that this is misguided thinking on Menkiti’s part.

A Rebuttal to Gyekye

Although Gyekye argues that Menkiti presents a radical communitarianism theory that undermines the autonomy and rights of individuals in African communities, Ikuenobe (2018, p. 84) reasons that ‘Gyekye’s interpretation is uncharitable’.

Firstly, Gyekye claims that Menkiti’s hyperfocus on the community and its influence on the common good takes away from individuals' agency beyond the community. Ikuenobe asserts that Gyekye misinterprets Menkiti’s social-moral thesis as being a metaphysical thesis. Gyekye argues that ‘a reasonable conception of personhood should be purely metaphysical’ (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 82), one that allows personhood to be an inherent quality that exists independently of social and cultural contexts. However, this is not necessarily the case in African thought. As mentioned throughout this chapter, society lies at the centre of the African moral framework, where it is the community that shapes the moral landscape of individuals. In other words, Menkiti’s view utilises a maximal definition of personhood that incorporates the metaphysical, ontological, social, and moral (Ikuenobe, 2018). Maximal personhood is a never-ending process where the objective is to strive for the pinnacle of virtue and ‘humaneness’ (Behrens, 2011, p. 110). And so, Ikuenobe claims that Gyekye is mistaken to assume personhood is solely a metaphysical thesis.

Secondly, Gyekye contends that ‘it is problematic’ to ‘[make] one’s rights and autonomy subservient to the common good’ (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 82). Although Gyekye may be correct in saying this, Ikuenobe contends that that ‘modern socialism’ (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 29) is not as radical as Gyekye claims. Ikuenobe argues that Gyekye himself ‘accepts that the community provides the […] material conditions for choices’, meaning that the community does not take away an individual’s rights or agency, for ‘autonomy must be a fundamental feature of personhood’ (Ikuenobe, 2018, pp. 82-83). The community enhances one’s experience of autonomy by improving the well-being of society and all its members.

Finally, Gyekye argues that Menkiti places great significance on the relationship between moral progression and ageing. Menkiti claims that with age comes wisdom and positive moral

progression. However, Gyekye contends that 'the difficulty is in considering elderly people as necessarily moral' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 83). Similarly, although Gyekye is correct in saying this, age is a necessary but not sufficient factor for morally progressing as an individual. Gyekye speaks about the potentiality that children possess in becoming moral beings, and 'the processual nature of acquiring moral personhood' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 84). He states that 'the fullness of time' is needed, for 'God created every individual [to be] good' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 84), signifying that time and ageing are necessary for gaining moral personhood.

Matolino's Rendition of Menkiti's View

In the next section, I explore Matolino's argument tackling the argument against the depersonalised pronoun 'it' used for newborns and children as well as the misuse of linguistics. More of the focus of Matolino's (2011) inquiry is on Menkiti's use of the pronoun 'it' as justification for his ontological progression claim.

As was previously mentioned, Menkiti (1984, p. 173) alleges that there exists an ontological progression as one ages, seeing as 'the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes'. He insists that the older a person gets, the more virtues and wisdom they acquire because ageing means that there has been more time to experience life and gain wisdom from those experiences. This further endorses the view that there is 'a qualitative difference […] between old and young' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 173). Menkiti (1984, p. 173) explains that most languages have a 'natural tendency' to refer to children and newborns as 'its', unlike when referring to older persons. Matolino (2011, p. 35) opposes this claim by contending that the pronoun 'it' 'does not carry any moral significance'. Yet, Menkiti reasons that while speaking of children, there is the option to use either a personalised or depersonalised pronoun which is not the case for older persons. He argues that there is 'a flexibility of referential designation […] in regard to the earliest stages of human life' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 174). Menkiti claims that there are phases to life – from childhood when one is not morally active - to youth when one gets incorporated into society through cultural practices - to adulthood when one marries and procreates, and lastly to old age and the afterlife. He states that ontological progression occurs throughout these stages where the older an individual gets the greater of a person they become.

Menkiti goes on to say that once a person dies and becomes an ancestor, they become the *living dead*. The *living dead* are beings that retain their personhood for a time because 'personhood does not dissipate with death' (Matolino, 2011, p. 27). He claims that newly departed spirits keep their personal pronouns because they continue to live in the memories of their loved ones,

preserving their personal identity. However, Matolino says there comes a time when the *living dead* transition into the *nameless dead*, spirits who have been forgotten, shifting them into nonexistence. Menkiti (1984, p. 174) professes that 'the termination of personal existence' indicates that the *nameless dead* return to being entities, 'becoming once again mere its'. He claims there is a symmetry in life between the beginning stage of existence and the concluding stage after death where an 'it' becomes an 'it' once more, 'going out of the world the same way the journey first began' (Menkiti, 2005, p. 327), for children and forgotten ancestors are not or no longer active moral members of society.

As both Gyekye and Matolino have mentioned in their papers respectively, Menkiti makes use of the English language to articulate a conception of African personhood using 'the idiom that has dominated Western thought' (Amato, 2018, p. 36). Menkiti's use of a non-African language to justify an African conception of personhood leads to a contradiction that is 'at best, paradoxical and, at worst, fundamentally at odds with itself' (Amato, 2018, p. 36). Gyekye suggests that Menkiti's depersonalised pronoun 'it' would have been more effective had he examined how 'it' functions in other African languages and whether it holds the same function it does in English. Similarly, Matolino (2011, p. 28) proposes that Menkiti's argument would have been more convincing had he provided a word in Igbo that serves the same function of 'it' that demonstrates 'the ontological difference between the young and old'. He continues to contend that Menkiti's use of 'it' does not accomplish what he hopes to achieve grammatically speaking. Even in English, the pronoun 'it' does not hold any moral or ontological significance, as 'it' is often used as a substitution for the child's name which 'does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that babies are not persons' (Matolino, 2011, p. 28). Menkiti does not consider the grammatical rules used in the English language. He claims that 'it' signifies an ontological difference between persons and non-persons however, 'grammatical rules do not necessarily equate to ontological claims' (Matolino, 2011, p. 29). If anything, the pronoun 'it' refers to an object and not a subject, as Gyekye previously stated. For the personal pronoun 'it' to make sense, it must be used 'in certain contexts in certain ways' (Matolino, 2011, p. 29), insinuating that it needs to be used in support of something else, such as the sentence *it is a beautiful day*. The personal pronoun 'it' is not solely used when referring to children, it can also be used to replace the name of anybody, even 'to refer to grown men and women' (Matolino, 2011, p. 29). The function of 'it' in English is to refer to persons or things as it lets us know what the topic of discussion is. The pronoun 'it' signifying a depersonalised existence is also questionable.

Menkiti claims that children and the *nameless dead* have an absence of incorporation, meaning that they do not contribute morally to the community and so are not worthy of personhood. Regarding children, he reasons that newborns and young children lack moral perception and are not considered persons yet because of this deficiency in moral function (Menkiti, 1984). Concerning the *nameless dead*, Menkiti explains that there is no ontological progression after death and so, once loved ones forget the personal identity of their ancestors, the *nameless dead* become entities that are no longer a part of the community. Matolino contends that Menkiti does not differentiate between these 'its' and does not offer how these two entities differ, as one can become a moral agent while the other has already attained personhood but is isolated from their community. Regardless, even though Matolino suggests that there needs to be a difference between the ontological differences between children and ancestors, Menkiti reiterates that both children and the *nameless dead* do not contribute to the moral collectiveness of society.

Circling back to ancestors, Menkiti maintains that the *living dead* transition into the *nameless dead* once they have lost their personhood and existence due to the loss of their personal identity and their isolation from the community, making them 'its' once more. However, Matolino insists that the *nameless dead* do not automatically lose their existence as persons because their descendants have forgotten their names. Even Menkiti (2005, p. 327) himself has admitted that personhood attained in life 'does not abruptly go out of existence at the stage of physical death'. So, it stands that removing the moral status of the dead 'is a gross violation of the African understanding of the status of the departed' (Matolino, 2011, p. 31). In African thought, ancestors continue to play a role in the lives of the living even if they are no longer incorporated in the community, reiterated by the fact that 'physical death does not spell the end of life' (Matolino, 2011: p. 32). So, instead of ancestors transitioning into a state of nonexistence as mere entities, they simply assume 'a new spiritual existence that is […] a continuation of the success of personhood' (Matolino, 2011: p. 31). Personhood is not something that can be lost, especially in African thought, where the only thing lost is one's humanity as one moves 'from humanness to a spiritual realm' (Matolino, 2011: p. 32). Menkiti does not elaborate further on this point apart from stating that once ancestors are forgotten by their living progeny, they no longer play a role in the moral maintenance of their communities. In conclusion, Matolino has proven that the personal pronoun 'it' is nothing more than a grammatical resultant that does not carry any ontological significance in the discussion on personhood.

A Response to Matolino

According to Ikuenobe, Matolino is not as uncharitable as Gyekye in his interpretation. Matolino admits that the claims in favour of radical communitarianism cannot be verified empirically as false however, he does argue that Menkiti's communitarianism diminishes African philosophy and culture (Ikuenobe, 2018) which Ikuenobe does not agree with.

Firstly, Matolino reasons that Menkiti's view of 'seeing communitarianism as the essence of African traditions and philosophy is reductionist' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 85), suggesting that his theory reduces everything African to being merely communitarianism, which is simply inaccurate. He argues that Menkiti portrays his communitarianism as the 'true explanation of African life' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 85), implying that communitarianism is the only feature that maintains African authenticity. Ikuenobe contends that Menkiti's conception 'is […] meant to be a factually true description of all African cultures', arguing that at no point in Menkiti's argument did he claim that his conception was 'the one and only authentic […] view found in African traditions' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 88). This is demonstrated at the beginning of Menkiti's argument when he clearly states that he aims to 'articulate a *certain* conception of the person found in African traditional thought' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 171).

Secondly, for the moral elements of an individual to manifest, that requires a processual nature and epistemic growth in which obligations are fulfilled (Ikuenobe, 2018). Both Gyekye and Matolino claim that Menkiti priorities the community above the individual, 'impos[ing] undue communal burdens […] that fail to recognise individual rights and autonomy' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 99). Although this is somewhat accurate, Menkiti merely focuses on community-derived norms, not individual-derived norms. Ikuenobe (2018, p. 99) insists that Menkiti's conception should be comprehended as 'having a foundation in a hybrid duty-and-utility based ethics […] predicated on human agency'. The hybrid ethics combines duty-based ethics with utility-based ethics that maximises the community's overall well-being while emphasising the responsibilities owed to the community by individuals. This ethical framework ensures that individuals actively shape their personhood through their choices and actions toward the common good (Ikuenobe, 2018).

Finally, Matolino asserts that the use of 'it' when referring to nonpersons is problematic because 'it' 'does not carry any moral quality' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 87). He says there is no ontological difference between children and adults but merely 'differences in times and stages in the life continuum of moral growth' (Ikuenobe, 2018, p. 87). Although Matolino makes a

valid point concerning Menkiti using a non-African language to justify African personhood, Molefe claims his interpretation remains uncharitable. Molefe (2017, 107) argues that if personhood is a 'moral acquisition' meant to be achieved, then Matolino should have been more charitable in merely stating that Menkiti is mistaken about category. Matolino's argument seems to revolve around the ontological progression that Menkiti refers to however, to Molefe, it seems that Menkiti is merely mistaken about the category of progression. Molefe insists that Menkiti should have said that personhood requires 'a process of incorporation as a moral progression' (Molefe, The Function of "it" in Ifeanyi Menkiti's Normative Account of Personhood: A Response to Bernard Matolino, 2017, p. 107) instead of an ontological progression. Ultimately, Molefe (2017, p. 107) himself admits that much 'still needs to be done' in the ways of the moral status of the young and the processual nature of personhood. Although some people ridicule Menkiti's theory, I contend that it serves as a conceptual toolkit that guides the way towards an indigenous conception of African personhood, one which is significant for the integration of AGI into African societies and African thought.

Can AGI be called an African Person?

Can it be said that AGI has the potential to achieve African personhood? Is its maximal definition inclusive of AI forms? How can these contrasting concepts become compatible? These are relevant questions in the quest for Africa's place in this innovative age. However, according to the literature, it does not seem likely that AGI can attain Menkiti's maximally defined conception of African personhood, which I will elaborate on. I touch on the minimal approach that Western philosophy has adopted, illustrating the context behind the programming of AGI. Then, I relate each of Menkiti's premises against the capabilities of AGI and determine whether AGI executes them adequately. Then, I consider a way that both AGI and maximal conceptions of African personhood can adapt better to one another for these concepts to be compatible. I begin with pondering the idea of AGI incorporating context-based renditions of African spiritualities into its framework. Then, I debate how African philosophy should consider varying other life force approaches. I wish to illustrate that even though AGI and maximal conceptions of African personhood are opposing notions, they can coexist. Although, admittedly, I do not know specifically what that would look like.

Maximal and Minimal Approaches, Western Philosophy and its Influence on AGI

Off the bat, I claim that AGI is currently not attuned enough to synchronize with Menkiti's maximal conception of African personhood. This is because personhood in the African context is oftentimes maximal or character-based, whilst AGI embodies more minimal or property-based approaches.

Maximal personhood, known as the virtue conception, is the cultivation of moral excellence and virtues that an individual ceaselessly attempts to attain. Maximal conceptions are concerned with the character of a person as a moral agent, one who carries the bulk of the 'moral obligations, responsibilities and duties' owed to the community (Behrens, 2011, p. 112). Personhood is intertwined with the cultivation of excellencies and virtues, as well as the moral duties individuals have toward their communities, for 'moral excellence is constitutive of personhood' (Molefe, 2019, p. 50). The moral character of individuals in the community is shaped by communal norms and values that come to maturity when performing initiation rituals. These rituals illustrate the ceremonial and educational significance behind the excellencies gained. It is an acquirement that results from active participation in the community as well as the development of ethical behaviour that the community teaches its members. Consequently, 'personhood is something at which individuals could fail' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 173). In other words, not successfully completing these rituals could result in individuals becoming 'mere danglers' in their communities, where they are seen as nonpersons (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172). Considering that 'being a person is derivate of participating in a community' (Jecker, 2024, p. 4), moral maturity is determined by the community, for they are the 'catalyst and […] prescriber of norms' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172). Ultimately, it is the elders of the community who decide if one is worthy of being called a person.

Inversely, minimal or the moral status conception of personhood is concerned with the status of moral patients despite attaining personhood status. In other words, minimal personhood demands respect and dignity for all human beings, regardless of whether they are full or lesser persons in society. Western conceptions of personhood tend to be binary, existing in extremes as an 'all-or-nothing designation' (Jecker, 2024, p. 5) that differentiates full persons from non-persons. Full persons are said to have 'innate qualities [that are] independent of their conduct or performance' (Jecker, 2024, p. 2). It is these innate qualities that give certain people 'special status' above others (Behrens, 2011, p. 107). Western conceptions of personhood are also

concerned with the intrinsic qualities that make individuals persons, characteristics like 'self-consciousness, reason, self-motivated activity and the capacity for language' (Jecker, 2024, p. 4). It focuses on the metaphysical and ontological aspects that separate human beings from other animals. This conception utilises a universalist approach insofar as every person is acknowledged by their intrinsic value and the rights that one is born having. It declares that moral consideration should be given to those who are persons and not to those who aren't, implying that there is a duality that exists between full persons and lesser persons (Behrens, 2011).

Western philosophy consists of various conceptions of personhood. Persons are oftentimes defined as 'entities who are self-conscious, rational, free to choose, and in possession of a sense of moral concern' (Tangwa, 2000, p. 40). Aristotle claims that 'a human being […] is a rational being' (More, 1996, p. 110), suggesting that rationality is the main characteristic that separates humans from other animals. He continues to say that man is a social animal, implying that humans are social creatures who cannot live in isolation from social communities. Immanuel Kant expands on this idea by highlighting the fact that people are autonomous beings 'uninfluenced by outside sources' (Jecker, 2024, p. 4) and have the capacity to freely choose which moral laws to abide by, constituting the rational will. The ability to behave following moral laws established by universal ethical principles is emphasised by this independent character, speaking to the core of Kantian ethics. Through practical reason, the rational will upholds people's intrinsic value and human dignity.

Found at the core of the conception of moral status is the protection of individual rights. As a result, some Western ethical theories can be said to overemphasise 'the object of morality […] to the neglect of the subject' (Tangwa, 2000, p. 40). This implies that moral responsibility exists as an abstract external characteristic that focuses on the patient and not the agent, particularly normative ethics. However, Kantian and Aristotelian ethics dispute this stance as this morality is more concerned with the agent, for it is the agent's autonomy, rational will and intentions that deem individuals as persons. For some Western conceptions, morality is not based on personal accountability upheld by an individual's character; rather, it is centred on the patient instead of the agent's moral or immoral actions. Yet, Aristotelian ethics is all about the virtuous progression of character. Still, Godfrey Tangwa (2000, p. 40) continues to say that this skewed conception of morality significantly influenced the thinking behind acts of 'colonization, enslavement and exploitation with quiet consciences' as people of colour were perceived as nonpersons.

Secondly, Western personhood is also a characteristic that does not need to be earned, for 'individuals […] simply have [personhood] or don't' (Jecker, 2024, p. 5). Personhood is a quality that is bestowed at birth for simply being born and is not a characteristic that is gained over time. Third, personhood is 'a binary, all or none designation', suggesting that there are no degrees of moral status (Jecker, 2024, p. 5) and everyone is morally equal. However, moral status is concerned with the capacity to acquire certain criteria, like possessing 'consciousness, self-awareness, rationality [and] the capacity to feel pleasure and pain', that allows individuals to become full persons (Jecker, 2024, p. 4). Fourth, Western conceptions of personhood tend to remain static over a lifetime. Once an individual has attained personhood, it cannot be renounced unless the individual loses the characteristics necessary for personhood, making them nonpersons once more (Jecker, 2024). Finally, personhood is a 'foundational' aspect that is fundamental to individuals, for it lays the groundwork for all communal and social aspects (Jecker, 2024, p. 5). From birth, people are viewed as autonomous beings who possess rights and intrinsic value independently of social context and relationships. Western conceptions of personhood also regard 'community as derivative' insofar as community comes secondary to the individual as 'a community emerges […] with the congregation of individual persons' (Gyekye K. , 2002, p. 300). The historical context behind this is complex; for context on how AGI has been programmed, I will briefly illustrate the thinking behind it that derives from Western philosophy, and the influence of Enlightenment thinkers.

Most Western philosophy, to date, has been significantly influenced by the Enlightenment period. Before the Enlightenment era, the Western world was dominated by religion and theology, particularly Christianity stemming from the Roman empire. The Enlightenment, known as the Age of Reason, arose as the result of the Industrial Revolution and Protestant Reformation, which 'diminished the traditional power of the Christian Church in everyday life' (Cartwright, 2024), and the humanist movement. It was a time of significant scientific discovery led by 'the pursuit of reason' (More, 1996, p. 110). The ability to reason has been seen, during this period, as a 'tool' to further extend human knowledge and overall happiness (Cartwright, 2024). Enlightenment thinking was applied to various sectors, from psychology and ethics to politics and society. To date, Western thinking has dictated 'the essence of the universe' by 'hanging fundamentally on the concept of reason' (More, 1996, p. 112). In Western philosophy, the ideals of reason and rationality are interwoven with identity and personhood. Furthermore, because morality in the West was riddled with Enlightenment thinking, individuals who did not fit the mould of white heterosexual male were considered

nonpersons. Thinking that influenced the minimal approach not only distracted attention from the actions and behaviour of the agent but also legitimised 'Western imperialism, colonialism, domination, exploitation, and monopoly commerce' (Tangwa, 2000, p. 40) as a result. Furthermore, More (1996) reasons that this perspective on personhood has continued to perpetuate racism and the denial of African philosophy. It was Aristotle who stated that man is a rational animal however, the idea of a rational being merely refers to 'male, rational male, of Greek [European] descent' (More, 1996, p. 112). And so, non-white people around the world have been perceived as 'irrational', 'magical', and 'congenitally inferior to whites' (More, 1996, p. 113). This thinking has permeated the 'collective consciousness of Western philosophers' and the ethics behind most Western innovations. It is this minimal thinking that has been incorporated into AGI software and its ethical framework, making it difficult for AGI to contextualise African societies and remain unbiased toward indigenous communities.

Menkiti's Personhood and AGI

Since AGI remains significantly influenced by Western approaches to personhood, it seems evident that AGI cannot attain maximal conceptions of personhood, and I shall illustrate why that is. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Menkiti's maximal conception of personhood consists of four premises, which AGI simply does not accomplish.

Firstly, Menkiti (1984) defines man and persons in 'reference to the environing community'. Found at the core of African ethics lies the communal life, where 'one's rootedness in a given community', filled with values and customs, aids in the formation of personal identity (Masaka, 2018, p. 3). In the African context, the concept of personhood is closely intertwined with the notion of communitarianism, which emphasises the significance of community and its interconnectedness. Masolo (2004, p. 494) states that communitarianism is 'a principle for guiding the practice of everyday life in ways that aim at creating a humane world', so personhood is merely a product of this communitarianism. Thus, attaining personhood requires being morally obligated to others and the greater community by performing prosocial acts that benefit all, known as 'the economy of affection' (Masolo D. A., 2004, p. 494). The common good, the bedrock of personhood, directs one's actions to promote the community's well-being as 'being a person hinges on fulfilling these duties or at least having the capacity to do so' (Jecker, 2024, p. 6). Personhood stresses duty over rights, demonstrating that 'African philosophy encourages seeing oneself as part of a group with associated responsibilities' and fulfilling one's obligations to others and society (Jecker, 2024, p. 6). AI4SG, whilst being a

technology intended to benefit all and the surrounding environment (Floridi L. e., 2018), is ultimately dependent on the intentions of its developer, who may not care about the common good and could warp its abilities for their malicious ends. However, according to Kenneth Walsh (2021), although AI is rapidly developing and progressing, this is unlikely to occur.

Why? Well, that depends on the type of autonomy programmed into the AGI, as 'AI agents are not fully autonomous' (Walsh K. M., 2021, p. 42). He continues to claim that AI is autonomous to a certain extent, implying that it is within the power of developers to decide to what extent that is. There exist four types of AI autonomy that determine 'what aspects […] of the AI system is programmed […] by the human vs what aspects […] the computer system can choose on its own' (Walsh K. M., 2021, p. 42), which I will briefly touch on. Firstly, data autonomy refers to the system independently accessing, processing and managing data without constant human intervention. It is responsible for analysing the necessary data used for decision-making and learning in AI systems. Whilst this type of autonomy handles large datasets that ensure data privacy and adapt to new data sources dynamically, misusing this autonomy can lead to security breaches and biased outcomes.

Secondly, model autonomy relates to systems that can update and refine their models based on new data or changing circumstances, permitting the system to remain accurate and relevant. Even though the system can automatically improve its performance by adapting to new environments without retraining, challenges like creating black box situations make transparency and trust difficult to achieve.

Third, decision autonomy allows AI to make its own decisions based on analysis and its objectives. These systems can predict outcomes and decide on the best course of action independently, like autonomous vehicles. Yet, there are ethical challenges that demand accountability if such systems fail.

Finally, objective autonomy is a higher autonomous level as these systems can modify and redefine their objectives depending on changing circumstances. These systems adapt their purpose to align with changing external circumstances or societal needs; however, this raises philosophical and ethical challenges regarding accountability, human control and aligning with human values. That being said, if correctly programmed, AGIs can prioritise the needs of the community to foster human flourishing. The bioethics found at the centre of AGI technology, particularly beneficence and nonmaleficence, ensure that AGIs remain morally obligated to the

greater community by striving for the common good and promoting well-being by not causing harm to humans. Therefore, AGI achieves one of the four premises presented by Menkiti.

Additionally, Menkiti argues that personhood is an acquired characteristic that is obtained after one has completed certain duties owed to the community. He claims that '[personhood] is not given simply because one is born of human seed' but rather is earned 'only after a process of incorporation' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172) has been completed. The necessity to complete certain rituals and customs to attain personhood is what permits us to metamorphosise 'into one that has moral attributes necessary to be fully incorporated into the community' (Masaka, 2018, p. 4). Prima facie, it seems that AGI would be capable of attaining personhood based on personhood being an acquired characteristic, as this technology possesses the capacity to achieve a perfectionist moral theory (Molefe, 2019). The manifestations of AGI are numerous and extensive. The physical task of performing rituals and practices may not be a challenge for AGIs as this technology could range from human enhancement producing humanoids and robotic persons to transhumanism and digital immortality. Regardless of how AGI manifests in reality, it possesses the physical means to perform some necessary cultural practices and rituals to achieve personhood, but not all.

What remains open-ended is whether AGI can assimilate a moral education. The attainment of moral excellence requires more than simply accumulating data about communal norms and values. Personhood requires intentionality, whereby one's mental states are "directed toward" an object, have a content they refer to; intentional mental states are about, represent, or stand for things, properties, or states of affairs, which need not be occurrent. Thus, we speak about the 'intentional inexistence' of things that do not exist outside the mind (Segal, 2009, 2). Intentionality allows us to form subjective notions of something that is not real, based on situations that have formed those contexts. (For instance, when I think of centaurs, what comes to mind are half-man half-horse beings that live in forests and are good at archery. Why? Because I have watched all the Harry Potter movies to know that that must be what they look like, even though they do not exist in reality.) Additionally, being a moral agent implies that to be moral, one needs to be able to decide between certain circumstances and situations. Being a morally good person requires choice and the free will to make either right or wrong choices. As it stands, we wouldn't know if AGI possess these elements, making it almost impossible for AGI to be considered persons in the African context.

Secondly, as I mentioned, AI4SG is programmed to do good for individuals, societies and surrounding environments (Floridi L. e., 2018). So, accomplishing certain duties owed to the community as a means to attain personhood is something AGI is meant to execute. However, AGI incorporating the moral values and customs from the community into its framework differs drastically from the physical aspects of performing certain rituals. It remains to be seen whether AGI can achieve 'the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172). The full complement of excellencies not only cultivates moral character towards others but in oneself as well (Ibanga, 2024). However, achieving the full complement of excellencies may be a greater obstacle than we anticipate. It is this that could be a reason that AGI does not obtain personhood.

Using the core principles of bioethics, it seems likely that AGI can incorporate beneficence, nonmaleficence and autonomy into its framework, but the notion of justice and Floridi's explicability premise creates a challenge. Due to skewed perceptions of African thought brought about by colonisation, imperialism and racism, it is possible that 'data […] is not sufficiently diverse [enough]' (Antebi, 2021, p. 105), resulting in biases and discrimination which violate the principle of justice. Similarly, 'equal access to the benefits of AI technologies' may not be possible as most of the African continent does not have access to high-quality technology, data availability and energy needed to utilize these resources, further violating the principle of justice. Whilst the explicability principle is meant to bring the other four principles together, what lies at the core of this principle is 'the need to understand and hold to account the decision-making processes of AI' (Floridi L. &., 2019, p. 8). Challenges such as the black box issue make understanding complex AI systems more difficult. For African communities to accept AGIs as persons, AGIs need to be worthy of their trust and accountable for their actions, meaning the community should know how these AGIs work and who is responsible for their function. If the community is not informed of the decision-making processes behind AGI, it would be justified to deny AGI personhood status on these grounds. Finally, even if AGI could acquire some of the virtues necessary for personhood, it would not be 'the full complement of excellencies' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 172). Although virtues like truthfulness and justice can be taught and demonstrated to AGI in theory, virtues like temperance, vitality and wit may be completely out of reach for AGI. So, even though AGI could fulfil its duties and actively participate in the community, AGI does not possess the necessary virtues that will allow African people to build trust in this technology.

Thirdly, Menkiti claims that there exists an ontological progression over a lifetime, for the notion of personhood is fused to the notion of moral arrival (Menkiti, 2005). He asserts that 'the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes' (Menkiti, 1984, p. 173), suggests that moral maturity requires a longer life experience as well as actively participating in the community, leading to the gaining of wisdom. His argument states that time is what distinguishes infants from older persons, nonpersons from full persons. There is an ontological significance between children and older persons that he argues is represented by the linguistic use of *it*. Ageing also allows one to gain new traits and more virtues, changing a person for the better as 'gradual sociogenic development' is necessary to attain personhood (Masolo D. , 2010, p. 156). For Menkiti, maturity and wisdom are the major virtues that are needed for personhood. Eventually, it is actively contributing to the community, a prolonged life experience and the progression of virtuous behaviour that allows access to full personhood status. Considering how significant ageing is for Menkiti, it begs the question of how AGI ages and matures morally beyond its current state. Although AGIs cannot biologically age, they are capable of maturing in terms of adapting and evolving over time through data, software and hardware updates. Evidently, there would not be any AGI to speak of without data, which remains 'the cornerstone of developing high-quality AI' (Antebi, 2021, p. 99). As knowledge changes and progresses and so too does data as it continues to expand by adding new domains of knowledge and expanding contextual awareness to better adapt to everchanging societies. In a sense, this allows data to mature by continuously integrating real-world data that is accurate and relevant. In turn, this allows the filtering out of outdated or biased data, preventing misinformation and ensuring reliability. However, in regions like Africa and the Global South where data availability can be minimal, it becomes difficult to accurately represent African people. Considering that the reliability of AGI is dependent on the representativeness of training data, this implies that without accurate, contextual data, biases can be introduced into AGI systems, perpetuating discriminatory acts and thinking. Similarly, software can allow AGIs to mature through regular updates that improve data processing and enhance features that refine performance and functionality. Updating software also prevents the misuse of data and cybersecurity threats, further fortifying systems against predators. Additionally, regularly modernising AGI hardware enhances performance to process large amounts of data, perform more complex tasks and increase storage capacity for easier data retrieval. Yet, improving software and hardware involves 'tremendous computing and processing capabilities' that demand further energy resources, which most African countries cannot steadily maintain in the long term. Ultimately, AGI may be capable of maturing in terms of incorporating new data,

software and hardware; however, it does not follow that this results in the accumulation of wisdom and moral maturity. AGIs not being able to ontologically progress implies that AGI is incapable of moral growth, a necessary element of personhood. Additionally, the moral maturity that AGIs display could be a 'mere simulation' (Wareham, 2021, p. 133) to seem as if it is a being capable of ethical growth.

Finally, Menkiti argues that there is a spiritual element to maximal personhood. Most philosophers, African and otherwise, 'unequivocally agree that the traditional belief system of the African people is an integral part of African philosophy' (Oyeshile, 2008, p. 61). Group solidarity can be found at the core, for it is '[the] key [or] defining feature of African traditional societies' (Menkiti, 2005, p. 324), signifying how communally orientated African people are. Tempels claims that there exists an ontological interconnectedness amongst all beings (Kaphagawani, 2005). Known as the force thesis, it states that 'a person is a vital force […] closely connected with other forces both in the animal and inanimate world' (Kahaka, 2022, p. 29), implying that one's force influences everything around it. What differentiates a person's vital force, or *muntu*, from animal or inanimate forces is that it consists of 'intelligence and will', which allows persons to rationalise and be autonomous beings (Kahaka, 2022, p. 30). Considering that all forces in the universe are interconnected, this implies that personhood is a characteristic transcending time and space, connecting the past with the future through the ancestors and their offspring. This is supported by Menkiti's extended-self hypothesis, reasoning that individuals are spiritually tied to their ancestors and descendants, for there exists an 'umbilical linkage to biological generations going before' (Menkiti, 2005, p. 324). Masolo (2010, p. 156) continues to say that 'all beings exist in nearly the same plane' for 'God and ancestors alike are thought of as existing and acting in time and in space'. In other words, even though humans are unable to perceive ancestors and the 'magical' (More, 1996, p. 113), they remain present in our reality. It also suggests that a spiritual connection requires a relationship with God as this aligns one's morality with their faith and divine purpose. That is why appeasing the ancestors through ritualistic practices remains a cultural norm, allowing persons to remain connected to their forefathers and 'the belief that the favors asked of [the ancestors] will be granted' (Masolo D. , 2010, p. 156). However, this is still unclear in the case of AGIs and their spiritual ties to their forebears. The question remains as to whether it is even possible for AGI. Conceptually, it seems that AGI may be connected to its predecessors as AI is fundamentally the evolution of existing technologies brought together to create something new. Even though AGI is produced from past AI systems, it is not clear if a spiritual connection

exists between prior systems and AGIs. Hence, AGI's lack of spiritual linkage to predecessors and no relations with the divine implies that AGI cannot attain maximal conceptions of African personhood. Whilst AGI seems capable of prioritising the community over individuals by prioritising the well-being of society and acquiring certain moral qualities from ritualistic and cultural practices, it may fail to ontologically progress past its present state, as time does not affect AGI, and there seems to be no spiritual linkage between AGI and its ancestors, descendants or the Divine. Despite not being able to attain personhood outright, is this the end of the road for AGI?

Light at the End of the Tunnel?: A Solution to AGI and Menkiti's Conception

Having journeyed through the intricacies surrounding conceptions of African personhood and the illustriousness that is AI and AGI, these concepts seem to exist worlds apart. That being said, I argue that this need not be the case. I am of the view that introducing AI entities into society as equal persons would be deeply transformative in most aspects of life: socially, ethically, legally, and philosophically. So, I suggest that a way for AGI to attain a maximal conception of African personhood would require both AGI and African philosophy to adapt to one another. On the one hand, AGI would need to incorporate communitarian ethics into its frameworks and perceive itself as contributing to cultural continuity. On the other hand, African philosophy needs to redefine personhood to include non-human entities and reinterpret the spiritual dimension in Menkiti's conception.

AGI would need to incorporate communitarian ethics into its framework. Communitarian ethics would emphasise the relational and community-oriented aspects of existence. Morphing non-human entities into the African moral fabric will require AGI to engage in meaningful relationships, perhaps employing functional consciousness as a possible way to program this dynamic interaction into AGIs. This step would not only add to AGI's moral contribution but would prove AGI's willingness to want to become accepted in African communities through acts of solidarity. Presently, a person is recognised as 'a being that is capable of being both the subject and object' (Fayemi, 2018, p. 60) in social relationships, insinuating that personhood is bestowed upon those who identify and show solidarity with others (Metz, 2012). This would also reinforce the moral act of prioritising the welfare of the community and its members, further promoting harmony and collective flourishing. Functional consciousness may be the key to achieving a form of empathy and responsibility needed to attain maximal conceptions of personhood. Similarly, because of the use of functional consciousness, African philosophy

would have to embrace the notion of incorporating non-biological community membership where personhood is no longer based on biological origins or spiritual linkage to ancestors and the Divine. Reinterpreting the spiritual dimension of personhood may permit AGI to participate actively as persons. AGI can still contribute meaningfully to communities even if it lacks a spiritual dimension and biological life. Instead of these non-human entities having to subjectively experience a spiritual link to God and the ancestors, AGI could merely facilitate spiritual practices by aiding in rituals like or preserving cultural heritage. For instance, AGIs could be responsible for the circumcision necessary during Ulwaluko (initiation) ceremonies where Xhosa boys symbolically become men. Utilizing AGI technology for this ritual would improve accuracy and reduce injuries and deaths. Extending on the idea of AGI being a facilitator, AGI could also contribute to legacy creation. Since AGI uses significant amounts of data in the form of graphic processing units (GPUs), this will provide ample storage space for all the knowledge and histories collected from across the continent as a way of legacy creation. Instead of simply depending on the collective memory of the community as a means of connecting to the ancestors, AGIs will have the capacity and the resources to collect the necessary data and store it for future generations, enhancing the accuracy of that knowledge as memory tends to be unreliable. For instance, AGIs will be able to store oral histories or philosophical theories, preserving the shared identity of African communities. Correspondingly, a collaborative effort needs to be established between the developers of AGIs, leaders of communities and heads of states as well as policymakers and regulators. As I mentioned, the only way AGI can be accepted into African societies is if the community trusts the technology, for 'trust is a key issue that will drive or restrict advances in AI' (Hunter, 2018, p. 7). Not only trust in AGIs but trust in those who create and develop the technology as 'trust is a basic principle for interpersonal interactions and social operation' (Huang, 2023, p. 809). Ultimately, without trust, there can be no acceptance of AGI. Communitarian ethics in its framework would require 'sufficient contextual understanding' (Kim, 2023, p. 26) of various regions in Africa, as 'technology should not be imagined as a solution on its own, outside of the context of its application' (Tomasev, 2020, p. 2). The data utilised must be non-discriminatory, unbiased and should include information that 'supports inclusivity, safety [and] other ethical imperatives' (Floridi L. e., 2021, p. 1788).

Conclusion

In exploring the dynamics between artificial general intelligence and Menkiti's maximal conception of personhood, it becomes evident that the maximal approach to personhood

remains uniquely human and essentially unobtainable to artificial intelligence. Moral maturity, communal integration and spiritual transcendence remain at the core of Menkiti's conception, qualities that are difficult for AGI to embody despite its technological sophistication. While AGI is capable of simulating certain aspects like communal participation and prioritising African societies, it does not possess the intrinsic relational and spiritual elements that would result in the community bestowing personhood upon AGIs. Despite AI4SGs goal to produce AI that meaningfully contributes to communities and their environments, this alone is not enough reason for AGI to be considered as persons in African societies. It seems that the only way AGI can attain maximal conceptions of African personhood is for both AI ethics and African philosophy to adapt in such a way as to become compatible. AI ethics would need to incorporate a communitarian ethics framework, which requires collaboration amongst AI developers, heads of state and policymakers. AGI will also need to contribute to cultural continuity by collecting and storing indigenous knowledge and histories for future generations, supplying African descendants with the knowledge and resources to preserve communal identities. Simultaneously, African philosophy will need to redefine personhood in a way that includes non-human entities, for AGI positively contributes to the community despite its moral shortcomings. African philosophy will also need to reinterpret the spiritual element of personhood, focusing less on the subjective experience necessary but rather on how AGI can positively facilitate spiritual practices, making it safer for those involved. By exploring whether AGI can attain maximal conceptions of African personhood, this Report can contribute to broader efforts surrounding the necessity for context-specific AI ethics and the inclusion of Africa in the broader AI debate.

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