

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

## African Philosophy: Rethinking the Ethics of Development and Human Well-being in the Twenty-First Century

Jean Godefroy Bidima and Laura Hengehold, eds. *African Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century: Acts of Transitions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. 280 pp. Bibliography. Index. About the Contributors. \$117.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781538154168.

John Murungi. *African Philosophical Adventures*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. 157 pp. Preface. Bibliography. Index. \$95.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-7936-5298-0.

Bolaji Bateye, Mahmoud Masaeli, Louise Müller, and Angela Roothaan, eds. *Well-Being in African Philosophy: Insights for a Global Ethics of Development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024. 218 pp. Bibliography. Index. About the Editors and Contributors. \$110.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-7936-3078-0.

### Introduction

Towards the end of his book, *African Philosophical Adventures*, John Murungi laments the injurious impact of Western epistemological hegemony on the humanity and well-being of non-Western peoples and societies, especially Africans. He describes the ensuing situation as a crisis about what it means to be called human or to have the *right* to exist as human in the twenty-first century:

Today, human rights are in a state of crisis and this crisis is fundamentally the crisis of being human. ... [The] planetary mode of being has fallen under the tyrannical regime of Euro-Western anthropology. The voice of African anthropology, as is the case with other non-Euro-Western voices of anthropology, remains muted. Africans, particularly, have been reduced to beggars in matters of hermeneutics and understanding of being human. They have been compelled and are even today compelled to look up to Euro-West for assistance in self-understanding. In matters that pertain to self-understanding they look for foreign aid. ... Having been voided of what they [Africans] are and of the ability for self-understanding they are compelled to look outside themselves to make sense of themselves. (142–43)

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And yet, it is easy to see that in Africa (as is the case elsewhere in the world), there are far too many reported cases, past and ongoing, of severe abuses and violations of the human or, for want of a better phrase, violations of “human rights” that urgently require concerted local and global attention to put to an end or ameliorate their consequences. The metaphysical root of this problem is that Africans still struggle to fully understand themselves and their place in the human world. At the same time, many would argue that we cannot fully comprehend what a violation of “human rights” is until we comprehend what a human being is and what our place is among that species. By extension, in the African context, we urgently need to make sense of an African philosophy of human well-being, or the ethics of human flourishing and development, and we can only do this if we successfully agree on a definition of the human and how we identify among humans. In other words, African philosophy and philosophers must first deal with and resolve the conceptual and theoretical problems immanent in the discourse of “the human” in order to begin to estimate how, as a people, we can more effectively tackle the myriad challenges on our way toward fully fulfilling the dictates of human well-being and development, for identity precedes human rights and human well-being.

Unfortunately, disagreement rather than agreement is often the norm in philosophy. Yet, as Murungi and many other African scholars have since realized, Africans must find a way to tell their own stories and develop homegrown remedies for complex existential problems besetting the continent and its inhabitants at home and in the diaspora. In three separate volumes published in the last four years, of which Murungi’s book is one, Rowman & Littlefield hearkens to this challenge, giving some of the leading scholars in the field of African/a philosophy the ink space to tackle the problems Murungi so eloquently articulated. Edited by Jean Godefroy Bidima and Laura Hengehold, *African Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century: Acts of Transitions* (2021) is a collection of eleven essays by established and emerging scholars on the African continent and in the diaspora, most of them translations from French by Laura Hengehold. The fact that the volume brings together French-speaking African philosophers and their English-speaking counterparts (which seldom happens) is already a significant achievement in its own right. *Well-Being in African Philosophy: Insights for a Global Ethics of Development* (2024) is another collection of twelve essays (not counting the Introduction) edited by Bolaji Bateye, Mahmoud Masaeli, Louise Müller and Angela Roothaan. Like the volume first listed, *Well-Being in African Philosophy* brings together contemporary philosophers from diverse backgrounds interested in African philosophy and intercultural philosophy to make a strong case for advancing ethics of human well-being and development from African perspectives. John Murungi’s *African Philosophical Adventures* has six chapters devoted to, as already hinted, raising critical philosophical questions about the human, human development, and human rights in Africa and from African perspectives.

### **African philosophy, decolonization, and communal personhood**

Many African scholars/philosophers from various ideological positions hold that the African conception of human society is communal, which explains why the

African notion of personhood is equally communal rather than individualistic. However, the problematic puzzle is to ascertain what personhood, or “communal personhood,” means and what its nexus is, or should be, within what Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti, relying on a tradition of African philosophical thought carved out by Placide Tempels and J.S. Mbiti, calls the “environing community.” In Menkiti’s opinion, the environing community enjoys both ontological and epistemic primacy over the individual (Menkiti 1984 [1979], 157–68). Going further, Menkiti introduces three notions of personhood: possessing a personal identity consisting of individual attributes (for example, rationality, will, desires, emotions, and mind); possessing a moral status; and the ability to obtain moral excellence. He claims that all three notions of personhood rely on the community for full actualization (cf. Müller in Bateye et al. 2024, 17). The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1997) counters the notion that the community enjoys ontological primacy over the individual for the sufficient reason that, in his opinion, the unquestioned desiderata of individual rights and autonomy are dangerously upended under what he called Menkiti’s radical communitarianism, which Gyekye seeks to replace with moderate communitarianism. The Zimbabwean philosopher Bernard Matolino (2009) sees no essential difference between Gyekye’s and Menkiti’s positions, arguing that Gyekye is unable “to show that radical communitarianism abridges individual rights and oppresses autonomy, whereas moderate communitarianism seeks to protect these individual endowments” (Matolino 2009, 169). In the end, Matolino defends the view that “[t]he centrality of community in the conception of person in African thinking is beyond contest” (2009, 160).

The centrality of community in the African conception of personhood and identity might, at this point, be incontestable given the nature of the scholarship in African philosophical, anthropological, and religious literature. However, what has not been settled is what the complete components and characterization of the *communal person*, her duties and obligations to self and the community, should be. African philosophy has not settled the nature of the nexus between an *individual* communal person and a communitarian society. The scope and limits of the obligation owed by the former to the latter and vice versa are underexplored, especially in an interculturally mixing world. The overriding consideration is to determine consistently the moral worth of the communal person and how this worth should be protected across time and space. These difficulties are reflected in the three Rowman & Littlefield texts given prominence in this piece (see, for example, Bateye et al. 2024, 1–10; the contributions therein by Müller, 13–47; Kahn, 49–66; Mosima, 67–88; and Ihuah, 89–107). Resolving the problem of personhood and identity is especially important when considering human well-being or “human rights.” This is because human well-being is widely considered a fundamental desideratum, and how it is realized in a particular place is, in many ways, fundamentally connected to how personhood is conceived. In Africa’s context, conceiving and/or attaining personhood is particularly fraught and existential. The obstacles, Laura Hengehold saw, are both internal to the people’s cultural beliefs and artificially created by colonialism, neocolonialism, and Western imperialism (Bidima and Hengehold 2021, 1–16). And yet, these are not the only problems.

A conception of personhood, identity, and human well-being must take cognisance of a world that is increasingly a global village such that peoples and cultures are often in constant interaction and flux, hence the need for intercultural philosophy (Bateye, et al. 2024). The paradox that lies in the foregoing is that we live and do philosophy in a world order created by Euro-American imperialism, colonialism, and colonial episteme and paradigms. For example, the complicity of Western powers such as the United States and France in the Rwandan genocide and the direct military support (by supplying weapons to Israel) of the United States for the extreme inhumanity perpetrated in Gaza between October 2023 and January 2025 revealed that the humanizing meanings/imports of decolonization and anti-racism movements have not made a meaningful impact on Western consciousness. Not much has changed in the Euro-Western culture that made Hitlerism/Nazism possible and is currently enabling Trump's vulgar ultra-nationalism. An obdurate and hegemonic culture that operates on manipulative equivocation and double standards, frequently creating winners and losers, citizens and non-citizens, civilized postmodern cities and uncivilized pre-modern jungles, white and black, people and non-people, insiders and outsiders, enfranchised and disenfranchised, straight and gay, and other binaries and hierarchies arising from unequal power relations. An article by British Senior Diplomat Robert Cooper in 2022, reproduced in the UK *Guardian*, helps put Western thinking about its relationship with the non-West in stark perspective. He writes:

The challenge to the postmodern world is to get used to the idea of double standards. Among ourselves, we operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of *states outside the postmodern continent of Europe*, we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era—force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century world of every state for itself. Among ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle. In the prolonged period of peace in Europe, there has been a temptation to neglect our defences, both physical and psychological. This represents one of the great dangers of the postmodern state. (Cooper 2025: para. 21, emphasis added)

Thus, asserting the personhood or humanity of the non-Western subject has, in recent times, assumed an even more philosophically and socially dangerous dimension in a world order that believes *might clearly makes right*, with freedom and justice flowing from the deterrent power of nuclear bombs. Nations and peoples (like South Africa in her failed efforts to bring justice to the people of Gaza and Palestine) must now face up to the harsh reality that they could have no say in world politics or pressing issues of global justice—even as it might directly affect them—if they do not possess nuclear power and are not backed by a great power. Authors and contributors to the three Rowman & Littlefield publications mentioned above seem aware of this system of things—a world where politico-economic calculations and geopolitical alignments are often viewed as more

important than human well-being and humanity in general. Most authors in these volumes, like many contemporary African philosophers, have tried to subvert or place their analyses within this necropolitical global context that, more than ever before, creates “death-worlds” and the “living dead” in vast numbers (Mbembe 2003, 40 and *passim*). In other words, a philosophy of personhood for Africa must, in the first place, take a more acute cognizance of the reality that “[f]or the most part, today, the African body is still subject to non- and anti-African forces” (Murungi 2023, 55). Clearly, the challenges earlier African nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, and Steve Biko encountered in asserting the African personality remain cogent and unresolved.

Amid all this, African philosophy is itself frequently required to prove its worth as philosophy. The more significant worry, as Robert Bernasconi (1997, 188) points out, is that (Eurocentric scholars) often believe that African philosophy owes its very existence to Western philosophy such that the former must constantly strive to resemble the latter or risk becoming inconsequential. John Murungi fears that the requirement for African philosophy to meet Western standards in the face of the overbearing hegemony of Western philosophy forces African philosophy to appear parasitic on Western philosophy. What is more concerning is that the constant requirement to scrutinize and justify African philosophy as an acceptable tradition of philosophy is capable of not only robbing the discipline of identity but that “can easily consume the time that is needed for focusing attention on *African philosophy* and easily turn African philosophy into a footnote of Euro-Western philosophy” (Murungi 2023, 6). In sum, any attempt to overcome “the prevailing [Eurocentric] orthodoxy in philosophical education” will have to contend with “a longstanding way of structuring and delivering philosophical instruction” in the West (Murungi 2023, 3). This is where the intellectual agenda to decolonize the disciplines comes in.

According to Tanella Boni (2021), in her contribution to *African Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century Acts of Transition*, the need to decolonize philosophy and knowledge in general has become even more urgent in the twenty-first century. Apart from the fact that economic and cultural globalization, and other conflicting policies originating in the Western episteme, have continued to hamper the familial and social bonds in Africa and the continent’s overall social and political development, Africans are “relegated to the margins of everything that seems to be making the world by turning around itself” (Boni 2021, 20). Thus, it is easy to understand why “Africa and its forms of knowledge are ‘decolonializing’ in a confrontation with the West” (Boni, in Bidima and Hengehold 2021, 20). In her powerful gendered narration of the complexity of how (neo)-colonialism, racism, and patriarchy combine to further push the Black female subject entirely out of the human court, Boni argues that as an African woman, she faces the double alterity of “négritude” and “womanhood.” This dual marginalization places not only her capacity to know in jeopardy but effectively casts doubt on her very humanity. The Black female’s double jeopardy rules her out as the racialized Other in Western spaces while sequestering her role in the (West) African communal arrangement. Reflecting on this situation, Boni argues that:

It is as if I found myself at the foot of a wall, behind a territorial border that I am trying to cross. The difficulties become even worse when one is a woman. However, although I am conscious of the vulnerability that comes from the “double alterity” of being a woman and an African, I give myself the right to take some distance with respect to my “négritude” and my “womanhood,” since the task that weighs on me is not so much to deconstruct the presuppositions of a dominant or hegemonic form of thought as to propose some pathways in light of the common humanity we have yet to build. (in Bidima and Hengehold 2021, 19)

To be sure, a good chunk of the discourses in contemporary African/a philosophy has been devoted to decolonizing philosophy and countering and deconstructing the dominance of Western philosophy. Or as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (2001, 207) more pointedly contends, “‘African philosophy’, by its very existence, represents a countercolonial perspective and a historical critique of modern western anthropological and philosophical traditions ... a representative voice of counterhegemonic histories of modern philosophy.” Still, however, some would argue that African philosophy is itself in need of decolonization, especially in its curriculum and pedagogy (Etieyibo 2018). This is because, as John Murungi pointed out on several occasions in *African Philosophical Adventures* (2023) African philosophy is constantly at risk of being swallowed up by Western philosophy. Indeed, teaching African philosophy courses in philosophy departments on the continent and in the diaspora often leaves much to be desired. In many cases, course instructors, at first, present Western ideas and scholarship and then merely mention African thought and ideas as addendum to lectures at the tail end of the course. Many publications in African philosophy fare no better. African authors rely on Western scholars, concepts, and categories to frame their research, sometimes citing these Western writers initially before eventually looking for African equivalents or searching for “African elements” to validate or complement Western theories. This happens even in disciplines that refer to African and non-African written texts. Several essays in the three Rowman & Littlefield publications given premium attention in this piece are guilty of this somewhat self-flagellating methodological and conceptual bias. And yet, for African philosophy to stand any chance of successfully carving out a philosophy of personhood and human well-being, it must decolonize and forge a respectable identity, even in the epistemologically charitable space of intercultural philosophy. In many ways, the three volumes by Rowman & Littlefield highlighted in this piece contribute to fulfilling the mandate of carving out a niche for African philosophy and pointing the way for African ethics of development, with a view to serving the ends of human well-being.

### Human well-being, intercultural philosophy, and African ethics of development

Edited by Bolaji Bateye, Mahmoud Masaeli, Louise Müller, and Angela Roothaan, *Well-Being in African Philosophy: Insights for a Global Ethics of Development* (2024) is a compendium of the critical insights and reflections of an established and

emerging crop of African philosophers, both on the African continent and in the diaspora, on the subject of human well-being within “the classical context of personhood and communitarianism [in African philosophy] ... [and] in the broader field of Intercultural Philosophy and Global Ethics for Development” (1). Contributors to this volume are aware that Africa needs to evolve and/or appropriate development visions and programmes that not only help resolve the continent’s current developmental deficits but are also capable of bringing and keeping Africans in equal footing on the global economic space. This calls for the evolution of an inclusive development paradigm “more embedded in the ethos of African cultures” that simultaneously connects all Africans while charting “new ways to deal with strangers, their ethics and the corresponding development programmes” (2). The onerous task for African philosophers is to force a rupture in the current global ethics of development to bring about the inclusion of the Ujamaa/African familyhood philosophy (as in Asiegbu and Dimonye’s chapter in Bateye et al. 2024, 191–211) and other “local communitarian African norms and values (ethic, in Wiredu’s terms) to repair their longstanding and current marginalisation in this field of study” (2). Inclusion can be achieved “by developing new African universal laws out of ethic in the plural, which should then become a part of Global Ethics” (Müller, in Bateye et al. 2024, 29–30). For Wiredu, this involves “using the method of intercultural dialogue,” where “local African ethic in the plural, can pave the way for a more inclusive Global Ethics” of development. This would generate the intermeshing of Africans’ and other non-Westerners’ various ethnic-based ideas of individual and communal rights to create “genuine universal laws” and frameworks of “human rights” (Müller 2024, 30).

The immediate pushback against the possibility of decolonizing, Africanizing or de-Westernizing global ethics would be to point out, as Yusuf K. Serunkuma (2024) does in the context of the international politics of knowledge production, that even if that effort were to be successful, it wouldn’t change much, if anything. In fact, this effort might make things even worse for Africans and the rest of the non-West. This is because:

While these efforts and opportunities are intellectually and practically irresistible to a scholar from the subaltern world—as are to those offering and facilitating them—they are actually counterproductive to a decolonisation project. The positive energy they generate obscures the histories and power dynamics that govern so-called global spaces and audiences of knowledge production. Problematically presented as benign and benevolent spaces for participation in the “global knowledge commonwealth,” from which mutual understanding grows, and racism and exploitation could be ended, global spaces/audiences, rather grow out, and are core parts of the revolving doors and constantly mutating infrastructures of colonialist hegemony and control. (Serunkuma 2024, 1)

If inclusion and intercultural dialogue do not necessarily solve the problem of Western epistemic/cultural hegemony and imperialism, what can Africans and the rest of the non-West hope for in the field of global ethics of development?



The interculturally minded trio of Wiredu, Gyekye, and Appiah would argue that intercultural dialogue will, at the very least, open a soul-searching conversation among humans, allowing everyone, in Gyekye's view, to work toward improving our relationship with others by critically evaluating "one another's cultural values alongside objective standards based on human values" (Gyekye 2004, cited in Müller's chapter, 31). This is because human well-being depends on people's positive relationships with others as members of a local homogeneous community, an international community, or the global community (33).


The key objective for the African proponents of intercultural philosophy as a route to global ethics of development is to introduce the African sense of relationality into the discourse. For Chidozie Chukwuokolo, this involves deploying the tools of interculturality in critically evaluating traditional and modern Igbo/African cultural values "to broaden the understanding of human well-being" (in Bateye et al. 2024, 111). His overall agenda "is that there should be an intent towards the complementary approach of harmonising the traditional and modern (Western) approaches to social ethics and human well-being in Igbo society" (130). But this sounds as though Chukwuokolo, Gyekye, and others who wish to make Africans and other subaltern peoples a part of global ethics are simply going in circles. The unavoidable question is: why do Africans always need to harmonize their cultural values with those of the West, while the West hardly cares about or acts upon what Africans think and believe? The tricky question for Gyekye is: what are objective human values? Who determines these values? And where do they come from? It looks too much as if invoking "objective human values," "global ethics," and "intercultural philosophy" with capital I and P, as is the case in the volume being reviewed, indirectly validates Western philosophy and its cultural, linguistic, and conceptual resources. If that is the case, then, we have come around to reinscribe Western hegemony. Nonetheless, this situation needs to change, and urgently.

Even if the non-West does not live in one geopolitical world with the domineering West, everyone must live under the same atmosphere and, therefore, suffer from the vagaries of climate change and the attendant existential threats to our planet. A just world must be one in which we are alive to keep humanity from self-destructing under the weight of our collective, if unequal, contributions to the problem of climate change. Pursuing climate justice or any serious attempt to stem the tide of climate-related disasters globally would require all hands to be on deck, taking every approach to safeguard the environment. Writing under the title "African Pre-colonial Accomplishments in Political, Social and Economic Well-Being," Andrew Akampurira, in his contribution to Bateye et al.'s book, explained how global ethics of the environment can rise beyond the Western Anthropocene approach to benefit from the African relational and holistic relationship with the environment, which upholds biocentrism and ecocentrism and confers moral status and the right of existence upto all planetary beings including plants, animals and rocks (216–17; cf. Bidima, 105–33, and Kodjo-Grandvaux, 135–50, in Bidima and Hengehold 2021). Akampurira's views are endorsed by many African scholars writing on the environment and how to protect it (see, for example, Senghor 1995; Ramose 1999; Kanu 2024; Ikuenobe 2014; Kelbessa 2005; Metz 2017; and Tangwa 2004).



## Conclusion

Authors, editors, and contributors to the three books reviewed in this piece have made original contributions to African philosophy and its pursuit of identity, recognition, and the well-being of the continent's inhabitants while staying well within existing traditions in the discipline. They raise anew and proffer telling solutions to fundamental questions in African philosophy about personhood and identity, decolonization and interculturality, the individual and community nexus, ethics and human well-being, and so on. A central question raised again and again throughout by contributors in these volumes is what it means to be human. What emerges is that “[i]n their dialogue with various philosophical antihumanisms ... none of the philosophers ... [in these collections] presume to hold or to give any historical group the rights to a conclusive definition of the human (Bidima and Hengehold 2021, 9). What has to be said is that the three volumes are not only much-needed additions to the burgeoning literature in African philosophy. These volumes also set the tone for how to engage with both the internal and external dimensions of the continent's multifarious challenges in the twenty-first century.

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