

Ancestral Existence and the Mind's Afterlife

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I. The very idea of ancestral existence

In *Menkiti's Moral Man*, O. A. Oyowe modestly presents his account of ancestral existence as an interpretive analysis of Ifeanyi Menkiti's views. I think, however, that the defense of ancestral existence which Oyowe offers amounts to his own, independent position: whilst he draws on Menkiti, he ends up developing a sophisticated ontological-cum-justificatory framework that accommodates ancestral existence within social ontology but further incorporates social ontology as a constitutive part of natural ontology. More specifically, Oyowe holds that ancestors exist as mind-dependent 'soft persons' within social ontology; however, mind itself is an emergent 'hard' or natural kind that results from complex evolutionary material, chemical and biological processes. Ancestors as a soft, social kind are artefacts of mind as a hard, natural kind.

The basis for this complex two-level ontology is Menkiti's stated commitment to an 'extended' form of materialism – a commitment, which Menkiti repeatedly affirms but fails fully to elaborate and defend.¹ Oyowe construes extended materialism to include the mind-dependent entities of social ontology alongside the mind-independent entities of natural ontology. 'Extended materialism' is then the ontology of the human universe that we get once we incorporate social ontology within natural ontology in the manner just sketched. In turn, Oyowe's account of ancestral existence draws on Menkiti's controversial views about the communal basis of personhood. As is well known, Menkiti distinguishes between 'human being' and 'person': the former refers to biological species membership whilst the latter is a normative, status-conferring concept. Although Menkiti believes that only human beings can become persons, he denies that any human being is *ipso facto* a person. Instead, human beings *become* persons in the course of an on-going process of social induction into communal norms and responsibilities. For Oyowe, Menkiti's conceptual distinction between 'human being' and 'person' implies an ontological divide: humans are natural kinds, persons are social kinds. A successfully socialized individual then consists of two entities at once – a natural human being and a social person. By extension, Oyowe treats an ancestor as a

¹ But see Menkiti (2004).

biologically deceased human being whose continuing post-mortem status as a person is secured through the community's collective intentions to that end. Just as the assignment of personhood to living individuals is a function of the community's collective intentions, so the community's collective intentions secure an ancestor's social existence beyond the individual's biological death.

My own understanding of what Menkiti describes as 'extended materialism' differs from that of Oyowe. On my view, extended materialism holds that, if ancestors and other non-material beings exist, they do so non-materially and mind-independently within an otherwise material world. This materialism is 'extended' in that it accepts the material world as the basis for all that exists but nonetheless allows for the possible existence of non-material entities within that world. The justification for these non-material existence claims is that some events or phenomena that manifest in the material world would not be explicable absent the possibility of non-material causation. Although we cannot generally perceive non-material beings by means of our senses, we can infer their possible existence from the causal impact which their actions have on the material world – a kind of impact that is not itself explicable in terms of material causality.²

I also have a different understanding of Menkiti's account of personhood. Where Oyowe diagnoses the existence of two entities – the biological human being and the social person – I take Menkiti to commit to only one entity, namely a human being as a natural (biological) kind that uniquely has the capacity to develop into a person provided he or she receives the necessary social induction to that end. On my understanding of Menkiti's notion of 'ontological progression', a socially nurtured human being gradually *becomes* a person, developing innate capacities for personhood through necessary communal induction. Personhood is then a socially mediated ontological modification of the human being rather than an ontologically distinct kind. A philosophically close analog would be Aristotle's acorn which, under the right environmental conditions, has the capacity to develop into an oak tree – or, indeed, Aristotle's human being, who given the right ethical training has the capacity to become a eudaimon. On this account, an individual is minimally

² For example, we can causally explain *that* the lion killed the hunter; however, we cannot explain, with reference to the same kind of causality, *why* the lion killed the hunter: for this resort to another, agential causality is required – perhaps the witch brought it about that the lion killed the hunter. Cf Menkiti (2004), Oluwole (1978), Appiah (1993).

a person who is just beginning to take on certain social responsibilities but whose physical needs and dependencies are still such as to outweigh her personhood capacities – the pre-school child, say – whilst an individual is maximally a person whose personhood survives her biological death: an ancestor.

In sum, Oyowe and I are both interested in defending the possible existence of non-material ancestors within the confines of the material world. We are both inspired by Menkiti's account of personhood and related defense of 'extended materialism'. However, we have different views about how a Menkiti-inspired defense of ancestral existence might go. Whilst Oyowe appeals to social ontology as distinct from (albeit growing out of) natural ontology, I myself prefer an account that treats non-material entities as ontologically possible natural kinds. In what follows, I shall not be concerned with which of our respective positions offers a more plausible reading of Menkiti. Whilst I will draw on Menkiti as a common reference point, I am primarily concerned with the dispute between Oyowe and myself regarding the ontological status of ancestors as either social or natural kinds, soft or hard persons. I shall begin with a more in-depth discussion of Oyowe's socio-ontological approach and what I think wrong with it; I shall then propose an alternative approach that draws no distinction between social and natural ontology and that instead conceives of ancestral personhood as falling within the domain of natural ontology: here, drawing on the problem of consciousness, I shall sketch and defend pan-psychic and quasi-material alternatives to the still dominant physicalist paradigm. Finally, I shall ask how, according to pan-psychic and quasi-materialist ontologies one might conceive of the imminent survival of a human person's non-embodied mentalistic features within the parameters of the natural world. I should make it clear that the latter sections of this paper remain rather exploratory, requiring further much more fine-grained analysis – however, I shall postpone fine grainedness for a later occasion. I shall conclude the present contribution with a more personal note as to why I do not think it irrational to commit to belief in ancestral personhood of the kind here sketched.

II. Ancestors as social kinds: four worries

One of the stumbling blocks to my accepting Oyowe's approach to ancestral existence is his understanding of the idea of a 'social ontology'. I take the objective of ontology in general to be the determination of the basic building blocks of the world, or universe. Thus conceived,

ontology is concerned with that which must exist as the ground or basis of the possible existence of everything else. Insofar as one can speak of social ontology as a distinctive domain of ontological inquiry, I would expect that domain to be concerned with determining the basic building blocks of any possible social world: language and communication, say, recognition of others, including other minds, the possibility of collective will formation, the possibility of institutional agency of some form. These and similar processes and phenomena I take to be among the necessary conditions of possible human sociality. Oyowe's account of social ontology does include some of these conditions of sociality – following John Searle, he focuses on three elements: on collective intentionality, on what he calls status-functions, and on common rule following. However, Oyowe additionally draws on Lynne Rudder-Baker's 'metaphysics of the everyday' to include within social ontology such contingently existing social objects as money, towers, village assemblies, and so on.³ For Oyowe, the existence of these latter objects is a function of a community's social intentions to that effect. Take money: on the one hand, there is the metal coin, say, or the cowry shell, or the piece of paper. Viewed as such, these are simply instances of natural kinds, reducible to their essential material or physical elements. What turns a cowry shell or a small piece of metal into 'money' is its social designation as such. Money would not be money if we did not collectively intend for the piece of metal to function as such, and if we did not adjust numerous of our practices and forms of interaction accordingly. Moreover, the fact that we can collectively intend for a piece of metal to become money means that in so doing we bring about a new object or entity. In designating a piece of metal as 'money' we bring it about that there now exist two objects where previously there was only one: there is now the hard entity in the form of a piece of metal, but there is also the soft entity called 'money'. The existence of the first is mind-independent, that of the second is mind-dependent. And whilst one might initially assume the former to be a necessary condition of the latter – one might assume that a physical object is required to represent a social object – this need not (always) be so. Mind-dependent objects can exist completely independently of any form of physical representation. Bitcoin might be a case in point: bitcoin is a digital form of money without any physical token to represent it. Likewise, the existence of a school, say, or a church does

³ Cf Rudder-Baker (2007).

not in fact depend on any building that physically represents them. One can hold a school class under a tree, and it would still qualify as 'school' merely in virtue of our collective intentions and practices. Nor is 'being at school' whilst sitting under a tree any less 'real' than is being in school inside a designated school building.

Insofar as Oyowe construes social kinds like money and schools as products of collective intentionality and constitutive rule following, his extension of social ontology from necessary building blocks of sociality to a wide array of socially constructed kinds seems innocuous; it is simply a way of showing how the basic elements (collective intentionality etc) yield the generation of secondary ontological objects (churches and towers). At the same time, the extension introduces considerable contingency into a field of inquiry that purportedly restricts itself to the essentials. Whilst it may be plausible to say that the many everyday objects which we take for granted exist in virtue of our collective intentions and practices, it is not clear to me why all or any of these contingently created social objects should be assigned ontological status. Trees exist in virtue of certain natural (physical-chemical-biological) processes, but they are not usually assigned ontological status for that reason. From an ontological point of view, trees exist contingently, just as money exists contingently.

One might think this restriction of ontology to what exists necessarily outdated or dogmatic or both.⁴ But at least part of the point is presumably to secure a level of generality of which one might say that it applies to the universe as a whole and, so far as social ontology goes, to all (human) societies in general. Insofar as general or universal validity is the name of the game, the inclusion of contingently created, 'second-order' social objects, entities and practices seems to me to undermine that goal. Money does not exist necessarily, nor do towers, schools. Nor, on Oyowe's account, do ancestors exist necessarily: rather, they do exist in some societies but not in others. Thus, a person might move from society A, in which ancestors exist, to society B, in which they don't exist. Acceptance of ancestral existence is then rational in one context but irrational in the other. This, then, is my first worry concerning Oyowe's socio-ontological account of ancestral existence: in embracing a very wide understanding of what the field comprises, he tends to blur the distinction between necessary and contingent existence.

⁴ Cf Rudder-Baker (2007).

My second worry is closely related and concerns Oyowe's distinction between mind-independent and mind-dependent existence. Oyowe claims that mind-dependent existence is no less real than mind-independent existence. I find this difficult to countenance; however, a clarification is in order here.⁵ The distinction, in general, between mind-independent and mind-dependent existence is not new – in Western philosophy, it has traditionally divided the realists from the idealists. Within that tradition, I am with the (Kantian) idealists, for whom everything we can know about the world exists mind-dependently – so-called natural and social kinds alike. Given my Kantian sympathies, my problem is not with the idea of mind-dependent existence in general. What I find troubling is rather Oyowe's endorsement of both kinds of existence claims within one general ontological framework. Insofar as the existence conditions of mind-dependent objects differ from those of mind-independent objects we now have competing criteria for determining what is 'real'. Oyowe's position is that that which exists socially, hence mind-dependently is no less real (for us) than that which exists naturally, hence mind-independently (i.e., absolutely). But I am not so sure. I am not so sure even by Oyowe's own account that mind-dependent existence isn't on a lower rung compared to mind-independent existence. Recall Oyowe's claim that mind is the product of natural evolution: 'Mind probably emerges from the complex interactions of basic elements in the physical, biological, and chemical domain.' Moreover, Oyowe goes on to say, 'social reality depends on there being minds – that is, beings with intentions, attitudes, beliefs, and interests.' (172) But if so, then the existence of social reality depends on the existence of natural reality even if the former is not necessarily reducible to the latter. Natural reality appears more fundamental than social reality; Oyowe seems to me to subscribe to some form of emergentism with regard to the latter. Of course, it depends on what one means by something's being 'no less real'. Perhaps the two sorts of reality – mind-independent and mind-dependent – are not really comparable. Perhaps they simply exist side by side. Mind-independent natural kinds are material; mind-dependent social kinds are intentional. Perhaps Oyowe is correct in saying that for us – human beings and persons – the objects of social reality are no less real than are those of the natural environment: for beings like us, schools are real even if not in the same way in which trees

⁵ I believe this lack of clarification has misled Oyowe in his critical response to my previous work on the idea of ancestral existence. See Oyowe 2021, chp. 5; compare Flikschuh (2016).

are real. But why then speak of the ‘soft’ objects of social reality as against the ‘hard’ objects of natural reality? The terminology strongly suggests a lesser degree of reality as regards the former. Whilst I think that a general account of mind-dependent reality – a Kantian account, say – can assert that mind-dependent reality is as real as reality gets for beings like us, it seems to me that Oyowe’s cleaving to a mind-independent reality in addition to a mind-dependent reality makes it very hard to avoid assigning a greater degree of reality to mind-independent objects over mind-dependent ones.

My third worry concerning Oyowe’s resort to social ontology alongside natural ontology is that it leaves everything about the latter unchanged. On Oyowe’s account, our understanding of the natural world remains entirely unaffected by ancestors’ social existence. This is a highly deflationary account – deflationary in the sense that it provides no challenge to dominant philosophical-cum-scientific conceptions of a thoroughly material or indeed physicalist universe. Of course, one might regard this as a strength of Oyowe’s account: in confining ancestral existence to the domain of social ontology, Oyowe reconciles it with commitment to a materialist or physicalist conception of the universe in general. But if, following Menkiti, he does want to take seriously the common sense of the ordinary villager, then I am not persuaded. As I understand Menkiti, the common sense of the villager accepts the possibility of ancestral agency within the causally determined structure of the material universe; at any rate, the villager explains events and phenomena that cannot be accounted for in terms of material causality with reference to the possibility of causally efficacious non-material agency.⁶ The thought here is not that we collectively decide to treat a particular phenomenon or event *as if* it were an instance of ancestral agency; to the contrary, the thought is that the phenomenon in question *is* or at any rate *may be* evidence of ancestral agency. The debate in modern African philosophy concerning the idea of witches – another type of non-material agent – bears this out. The debate is not about whether or not a given community can collectively intend for witches to exist – of course it can! The debate is about whether or not there is any veracity in the claim that witches and / or other non-material agents exist. The wider significance of that debate concerns the question as to whether an exclusively material or physicalist ontology can meet its own aspiration to offer a complete explanation of everything there is: if it were to

⁶ Cf. Menkiti (2004) and Menkiti (2006).

turn out that forms of non-material life and agency (might) exist naturally, then our current state of scientific knowledge of the universe would be incomplete.⁷ Oyowe's account of ancestors as a social kind by-passes this challenge to dominant physicalist conceptions of the universe.

Finally, and fourthly, I find Oyowe's socio-ontological approach excessively descriptive, or third-personal. Social ontology explains how a given community creates social objects: it works back from established communal practices – libation pouring, say – to the necessary social conditions that must obtain for that practice to be meaningfully possible. According to Oyowe, these conditions include collective intentionality, status-conferral, and constitutive rule following. By means of this analysis, when we observe members of a given community pour libations, we can account for the existence of the practice with reference to those criteria. But would a participating member of the community account for her pouring of libations by way of explaining that, through this practice, the community intends for ancestors to exist? This seems to me unlikely. It seems to me that someone who believes ancestors to exist does not believe it on grounds of her community's intentions to that end. A person who is a member of a monetized community might well say that she believes that money exists because her community intends for it to exist. But I do not think belief in ancestral existence has this kind of structure; I do not think that someone who believes in ancestral existence believes that it is essentially up to her community whether or not ancestors exist. Such a person does not believe ancestors to exist because she engages in the relevant social practices; she engages in those practices because she believes ancestors to exist.⁸

The above may seem like a rather disparate set of comments and reservations. Let me try to summarize them into one overall concern. My worry is that Oyowe's socio-ontological approach gets the nature of belief in ancestral existence wrong when he characterizes the latter as a contingently existing social kind. Those who believe ancestors to exist typically cite as evidence the empirical effects in the natural world of assumed non-material agency. This implies that those who believe ancestors to exist have a conception of the *natural* world as including material and non-material being alike. This poses a challenge

⁷ On the debate over witches and other non-material beings, see especially Oluwole (1978), Bodunrin (1978), Mosley (2004), Ajei (2013).

⁸ For similar worries regarding Oyowe's account, see also ---

to dominant materialist or physicalist ontologies of what there is essentially. And that renders claims of ancestral existence of general ontological (or metaphysical) interest.

III. Ontological reasons for belief in ancestral existence

I have just invoked *belief* in ancestral existence. This falls short of proving ancestral existence. However, I am not so much interested in asking whether ancestors exist as asking whether belief in ancestral existence might be rationally justified. Here, there is in fact a deeper congruence between Oyowe's approach and mine than might appear from the above discussion. Clearly, Oyowe is mindful of the fact that belief in ancestral existence is culturally specific. His socio-ontological approach allows for the social existence of ancestors in some social contexts whilst also allowing for their non-existence in other social contexts. I am similarly cognizant of the fact that the idea would be ruled out of court in many societies outside the African continent (though it appears in fact to be rather more widespread than Western thinkers, in particular, often assume⁹). Moreover, I agree with Oyowe that whilst some social contexts are hospitable to belief in ancestral existence, others render upholding such a belief virtually impossible. It does not follow from this that ancestral existence is a social construction; an alternative would be to say that the truth or falsity of belief in ancestral existence is disputed cross-culturally. Moreover, the dispute is difficult to settle empirically. Empirical evidence relies on what is available to our senses, yet ancestors' non-materiality escapes direct sensory perception. Again, however, lack of direct empirical evidence does not settle the case against ancestral existence: atoms are not directly accessible to sensory perception, yet no one who accepts the findings of physics in this regard doubts their existence. Indeed, a standard 'Western' response would be to deny the possibility of ancestral existence not on empirical grounds but rather on logical-cum-ontological grounds. The prevalence of reductive physicalism in Western scientific and philosophical thought renders non-physical existence within the confines of the natural world a logical impossibility from within that framework. Again, this does not in itself settle the matter; after all, reductive physicalism could turn out to be mistaken in its view about what there is essentially.

⁹ When we discuss the idea of ancestral existence in my course on modern African philosophy, Chinese, Japanese and South American students typically struggle far less with the idea than do students from European cultural contexts.

In his 'Physical and Metaphysical Understanding', Menkiti engages in a defense of what he calls African common-sense metaphysics, which he contrasts with the perceived aloofness of Western metaphysics from ordinary human experience. More specifically, Menkiti claims that traditional African metaphysics begins from ordinary experience (by contrast, for Menkiti, the sceptical tradition within modern Western philosophy is suspicious of the gullibility of ordinary experience). Ordinary experience cannot gainsay the existence of a physical world: 'physicalism cannot be seriously questioned'.¹⁰ The basic African metaphysical disposition is thus a form of physicalism or materialism (I shall follow Menkiti in treating the two terms as equivalent here). Yet nor can ordinary experience deny the existence of apparently nonphysical phenomena within the physical (material) world. The African villager has ordinary experience of non-material agency within the constraints of the material world. Insofar as traditional African metaphysics is guided by ordinary experience, and insofar as ordinary experience comprises experience of both a physical world and of non-material agency within it, we cannot proceed metaphysically simply by declaring the latter type of experience logically impossible. Nor will it help to invent a qualitatively different realm of reality – a supersensible or transcendent realm. Instead, both types of experiences – experiences of the world as physical and experiences of non-material causality or agency within that world – have *prima facie* plausibility as such and should be accounted for on the same plane. Quasi-materialism thus posits a physical (material) world which nonetheless accommodates within it the possibility of non-material agency.

At first glance quasi-materialism as outlined by Menkiti appears to violate the strictures of current scientific understanding. For the latter, it is imperative that all phenomena be of the same basic kind and thus be capable of acting and interacting within the same causal nexus. If, by contrast, we were to admit the possibility of non-material agency / causality within an otherwise materially defined causal nexus, we would undermine the unity of scientific explanation.¹¹ Menkiti's response to the problem of dual causality is differentiated but also ambivalent. On the one hand he decries as dogmatic any principled denial of possible non-material agency within the constraints of the material

¹⁰ Menkiti (2004), at 116.

¹¹ For a defense of this view, see Boghossian (2006). For a spirited critique of the 'unity of scientific explanation' thesis, see Dupre (1993).

world. On the other hand, he concedes that what initially appear to constitute instances of non-material agency may yet turn out to be fully explicable in material terms. The first response holds open the possibility of a kind of immanent (i.e., non-transcendent) dual causality; the second response holds open the possibility of reducing apparently non-material causality to a material explanation after all. The ambivalence consists in the difference between saying either that science as ordinarily conceived cannot in principle account for non-material agency and saying that we have not as yet developed a full enough understanding of the phenomena to be able to account for them in scientific terms. In short, one can either read Menkiti as denying that science is able even in principle to offer a complete explanation of all phenomena in the world, or we can read him as saying that some objects of human experience are not *as yet* capable of a full scientific (i.e., physicalist) explanation.¹² Either way, however, Menkiti's position is that given our *current* state of scientific knowledge we cannot rule out of court the possibility of non-material agency.

Is quasi-materialism as conceived by Menkiti outlandish? I don't think it is – certainly not if we keep in mind his stricture that metaphysical inquiry should track ordinary experience.¹³ Nor is ordinary experience of non-material agency confined to the universe of the traditional African villager. To the contrary, the problem of free will in Western metaphysics is a classic example of ordinary experience of non-material agency within the confines of a largely material universe.¹⁴ Western philosophy has dealt with the problem of free will in either of the two ways described by Menkiti: either by declaring the experience transcendent and thus 'other-worldly', or by reducing it to an epi-phenomenal experience that is in fact fully reducible to its physical base. However, free will is not the only or even the most significant ordinary experience of non-material being. Thomas Nagel has recently argued that reductive physicalism is unable to account for the fact of our consciousness:

Consciousness is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science. The existence of consciousness seems to imply that the physical description of the universe, in spite of its richness and

¹² Cf Menkiti (2004) at 117, 'The choice is not between magic and chance but between understood physical things and physical things not yet understood.'

¹³ On this point, see also Oluwole (1978).

¹⁴ Kant, for one, took the possibility of non-material – free – agencu within the confines of the material world extremely seriously. Cf. Kant (1781/5), 'Transcendental Dialectic'.

explanatory power, is only part of the truth, and that the natural order is far less austere than it would be if physics and chemistry accounted for everything. If we take this problem seriously, and follow out its implications, it threatens to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture.¹⁵

Compare Menkiti's claim that,

Give up the belief in physical bodies and it becomes a weird world whose contours defy articulation. Give up the belief that persons have consciousness and think thoughts, that they are something beyond the sum of the chemical events in their bodies and it becomes, also, a world equally weird.¹⁶

Nagel and Menkiti agree that physicalism is incapable of accounting for the mind as a natural phenomenon: the reductionist equation of the mind with brain functions fails to capture subjectivity and reflexivity as constitutive features of mindedness. Nagel nonetheless concedes that it is 'difficult to imagine viable alternatives' to the dominant scientific framework. He may be right. In the present context, the point is simply to suggest that the idea of ancestral existence as a form of world-imminent non-material being and agency is not as outlandish as it may appear to be at first sight. The problem of free will and the much more all-encompassing problem of consciousness are sufficiently similar in kind to warrant our speaking of a possible class of non-material forms of being that manifest within the material world. And whilst it may be possible to think of free will as a psychological or social kind – as a kind of belief and practice that structures some social worlds and not others – the fact of consciousness cannot be explained in similar terms: we are not conscious because we collectively intent for this to be the case. To the contrary, we cannot help but be conscious, nor of being conscious of our consciousness. And yet, as Nagel emphasizes, the fact of consciousness is unlike other natural kinds in that it appears to be peculiarly unamenable to a materialist explanation.

¹⁵ Nagel (2012), at 35.

¹⁶ Menkiti (2004), at 120.

If ancestors conceived as a non-material natural kind are not as unique or as outlandish as they may initially appear to be, then quasi-materialism in general may not be as unique or outlandish a metaphysical position as it may until recently have appeared to be. Nagel's critique of reductive physicalism has been accompanied by the more general rise within Western metaphysics of pan-psychism, according to which the basic elements of the universe include non-material, or mentalistic elements as well as physical ones. As Nagel observes, pan-psychism may be a re-statement of the basic problem more than a solution to it: the challenge lies not just in positing non-material elements in addition to material ones but in accounting for how the combination may be possible. Besides, if pan-psychism were indeed to compel us to amend our tendency towards reductive physicalism, its impact on our conception of the universe would be radically transformative, not merely additive. Still, whilst even only ten years ago reductive physicalism may have seemed unassailable and quasi-materialism a fringe position, this is no longer the case.

None of this is to deny that the question of ancestral existence remains highly specific. Even if we can identify some reasonably close analogues – such as free will – and even if we can place quasi-materialism alongside pan-psychism as an ontological position that is anti-reductivist yet not anti-science, ancestorship remains a distinctive problem. Ancestral existence is not about the possibility of there being mentalistic building blocks of the universe in general, nor is it to do with particular mentalistic features or capacities of otherwise physically embodied human beings. Instead, ancestral existence concerns the possible continued existence of human persons following their death as members of the biological species: it concerns the possibility of continued mental existence beyond the demise of physical life. Even so, we might be able to identify a link of sorts between the more general problem of consciousness and the much more particular problem of ancestral existence.

Recall: Menkiti insists that only human beings are capable of personhood; dogs, cats, and elephants are not. It is similarly widely assumed that only persons are capable of reflexive consciousness. While cats, dogs and elephants may be conscious, they are not conscious of being cats, dogs and elephants. Or so at least we tend to assume. More specifically, we tend to assume that dogs and cats are not conscious of being conscious; they lack reflexive consciousness. There is then a widely assumed species-specific connection between being human, being a person, and having reflexive consciousness. If

consciousness in turn is irreducible to the physical elements of being human, and if, following Menkiti, we rule out transcendent metaphysics as falling outside the order of ordinary experience, the question arises: what can we reasonably believe may happen to consciousness upon the material demise of the human person? Might it be possible for consciousness – as qualitatively different from the material elements of human being – to survive biological death? Otherwise put: might belief in ancestral existence equate to belief in the this-worldly post-mortem persistence of a person's consciousness?

IV. Ancestors and mental afterlife

I have suggested a possible relation between belief in irreducible consciousness and belief in this-worldly ancestral existence. More specifically, I have suggested that one who commits to a non-reductive physicalism – quasi-materialism, say, or to some form of pan-psychism – may face the question as to what happens to consciousness upon the cessation of a human person's material life. If mind and body are co-constituent, mutually irreducible elements of being human, then even if these elements interact over the span of a human person's life, there is no *prima facie* reason for believing that consciousness will cease at the exact point at which material life ceases. Of course, it may do, but it is conceivable that consciousness continues to persist, at least for some time, independently of the body of the deceased. This suggestion raises all the usual questions about the relation between body and mind, most of which I shall here set aside.¹⁷ We saw that, according to Oyowe, a human person is the conjunction of two ontologically distinct entities: soft personhood and hard species being. This eases the problem of post-mortem existence; in effect only one of the two entities passes away, the other survives independently of the former and does so, in effect, in the 'collective mind' of the community. The drawback of Oyowe's position is that it not only commits us to mind-dependent and mind-independent realities simultaneously but that we must also throughout our embodied lives think of ourselves as constituted of two separate entities at once. Against this, a unified view of the human person strikes me as more in line with ordinary experience: we do not in fact think of ourselves as made up of two distinct entities at once; ontologically, the human being who becomes a person thereby undergoes

¹⁷ In the Western tradition, the mind-body problem and related questions about personal identity go back to at least Descartes. For more recent explorations see especially Parfit, Velleman

ontological modification, yet like Aristotle's acorn remains identical with herself. Still, on the assumption that the human person is a unified if complex whole comprised of co-original physical and mental features, the question is pressing as to how one of those two features may survive the other.

Minimally, it seems, what survives is not the whole human person, given that the material features have fallen away. This is unproblematic, I think, at least insofar as it coheres with the view of ancestors as ontologically modified because non-embodied human persons. The question nonetheless remains as to how it may be possible for one of the co-constitutive elements of the human person to abide in the absence of the other. How can consciousness persist once the body has fallen away? I want at this point return to Menkiti's notion of ontological progression but further add his related comments on 'maximal personhood'. Whilst 'ontological progression' refers to the modification of the human being into a person, 'maximal personhood' refers to the process of moral maturation as a constitutive feature of personhood itself. We begin life as non-persons but with the capacity to become persons; ideally, we end life not only as 'maximal persons'. What, then, is 'maximal' personhood? It turns out that maximal personhood is non-embodied personhood.

Recall that, on my reading of Menkiti's account, as we undergo the process of socialization, as we take on social roles and obligations and acquire corresponding entitlements, our capacity for personhood is activated: we incrementally develop from being non-persons to minimal personhood – the small pre-school child, say – and then towards mature personhood, undergoing further modifications throughout puberty and early adulthood. As we mature physically and morally, we grow in our status as persons. Maximal personhood is a state of moral wisdom which Menkiti associates with elders but especially with ancestors. Interestingly, he thereby links the process of moral maturation with a simultaneous process of gradual physical decline. The intuitive thought is simple: the more experienced a person is the more morally mature she ought to become. Yet there is also the further, less immediately obvious but nonetheless suggestive thought that a human person's moral being gradually supersedes her physical being. The first thought is normative; the second has an ontological feel to it; it is the thought of the qualitatively different aspects of being human – the physical and the mental – as prevailing at different stages in a person's life. Over the span of a human person's life, the balance between physical and mental constituents subtly shifts from one to the other. At one end of life – the

beginning – the physical provides the basis from which the mental launches itself. On a pan-psychist or quasi-material ontology this should not be confused with the sort of emergentism according to which the mental is a development out of the physical – a view which Oyowe subscribes to with regard to the mind. Rather, the physical constituents of a human person form the bedrock of the possible development of mental capacities that are nonetheless non-reductively innate. And whilst those physical features that provide the launching pad for the mentalistic ones are initially dominant, at a certain stage in a human person's life – the mature adult stage – the two hold each other in balance. There will also, however, come a point at which the physical declines even as the mental continues to grow: this is the point at which the mental 'overtakes' the physical. At this point, the human person passes from biological life to ancestral life as a state of non-embodied being that will also at some point decline and gradually fade away into the state of 'nameless death'.

V. Concluding notes: the possible reality of ancestral existence

I am aware that the above-sketch of a possible pan-psychist or quasi-material account of ancestral personhood is no more than that: a sketch that requires much more filling-in and fine-grained analysis than I am here able to provide. My chief objective for now has been to work through some of the reservations I have with regard to Oyowe's socio-ontological account of ancestral existence. In the end, I find Oyowe's approach too concessive – the approach leaves the dominant conception of natural ontology wholly untouched, and this strikes me as at odds with attempts in contemporary African philosophy to challenge that dominance, albeit primarily through discussions on the idea of witches. As already noted above, one might take the view that dominant reductionist conceptions of natural ontology *should* go unchallenged on the grounds that they most likely track 'reality as it is'. As a Kantian, I frankly have no idea about 'reality as it is' – but Thomas Nagel's point, that reductive physicalism cannot account for consciousness, and that this is no small omission, strike me as extremely well considered. In this paper, I have piggy-backed on Nagel's discussion of the ineliminable place of reflexive consciousness in the human universe: I have suggested a possible extension of conscious embodied existence to conscious non-embodied existence; the latter would be imminent albeit also finite ancestral existence. The question is: is this even worth further investigation? Otherwise put, does the idea possess

even only *prima facie* plausibility? Instead of offering a general comment, I shall end with a more personal note.

I have been attracted to the idea of ancestral existence for some time – largely for moral reasons and because of the sense of connectedness which the idea fosters between the dead, the living, and the yet to be born. However, I have also for a long time doubted that I could actually believe ancestral existence to be real.¹⁸ Paradoxically, therefore, I have found the idea morally appealing but ontologically implausible. Now I am no longer so sure. I think there may be a sense in which our ancestors are with us – at any rate, there is a sense in which belief in their real (non-socially constructed) existence is responsive to a real possibility to that effect. The belief requires one to abandon a reductively physicalist ontology, but as Nagel has shown, that may in any case be required if we do want to account for consciousness. Independently of this, and among various philosophical approaches to our relationship with the dead with which I am familiar, the ancestral account stands out for me as the most attractive and, perhaps, as the most plausible metaphysically.¹⁹ This is because the account neither reduces ancestral existence to a figment of our psychology ('the dead live on in our memory of them'), nor does it banish their existence to some unreachable transcendent domain ('our souls live forever'). Instead, belief in ancestral existence holds that the biologically dead remain with us for a while, even though they slowly fade away into nameless death.

I have found that this belief best coheres with my present relationship with my father, who passed away about 15 years ago. He and I never had an especially easy relationship whilst he was alive; in retrospect, I think this is largely because we were too similar along a number of dimensions. Our relationship eased soon after his death. In some ways this is because his death enabled me to see the entire person – his life as complete and our stormy relationship as just one element within it. But I have also found that my father lives on inside me. I do not experience this as merely my memory of him. To the contrary, there are times when I feel his non-embodied but actual presence (and this is actually a kind of sensory perception). I feel this especially during summer, when my skin readily tans at the slightest opportunity – just as his used to do. I also feel him through my

¹⁸ Cf. Flikschuh (2016).

¹⁹ For interesting non-transcendent approaches to a possible afterlife, see Johnston (2012); also Scheffler (2013).

need for physical exercise, which was equally strong in him. When my skin turns brown I think of him as inside me biologically: he manifests through my skin. When I go running, he sometimes runs along inside of me. He isn't always present: he comes and goes, no doubt visiting other family members on occasion. But he is around, and I do occasionally feel his presence.

One might say that this is all a figment of my imagination. Psychologically, I need to feel that I have a good relationship with my father, now that he is dead. Perhaps. But my point is this: I could not believe that my father is still around if I also believed my belief to that effect to be no more than an expression of psychological need on my part. If I were to accept my apparent belief in my father's real presence as nothing more than an expression of psychological need, then I would cease to believe that he really is present. But I do believe him to be present, so I must believe that some form of imminent non-embodied human existence is possible. This may yet turn out to be a false belief, but I do not think it an implausible belief on the face of it.

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