African, Black, and Western Conceptions of Human Dignity

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ABSTRACT

The article highlights the potential that African and Black Philosophy can contribute towards the debates on human dignity. It facilitates a three-way philosophical conversation among the Western, African, and Black conceptions of human dignity. It is motivated by the skepticism in the African and Black approaches to ethics that reject the view that some ontological capacity can ground intrinsic value, or human dignity. The article distinguishes the merit-based (the African and Black Philosophy) from the capacity-based approaches (the Western philosophy) to human dignity. In light of the comparisons among the three theories of human dignity, the article identifies three important lessons for moral-political philosophy. First, the Western conception of human dignity needs to explain and justify grounding of value on a descriptive feature. Secondly, the Black conception of dignity is a version of virtue-based account of it, which places a prime on resistance and struggle against domination. Finally, the capacity-based approach seems to have moral-theoretic advantages in dealing with issues in bioethics, environmental ethics, and political philosophy, which the African and Black conceptions of human dignity seems not to have.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article visits the mercurial concept of human dignity in the light of three traditions of philosophy, namely, African, Black, and Western philosophy. I stipulate the distinction between African and Black philosophy.[1] African philosophy is dominant and operational largely in the continent of Africa. (No doubt there are scholars outside of the continent of Africa working in African philosophy, but these scholars tend to be clear that their questions, themes, and claims emerge in light of Africa in the aftermath of the post-colonial experience). Black philosophy is dominant and operational largely in America and surrounding places like the Caribbean. It makes its point of departure the history and lived experience of black people in the Americas as slaves and the racial injustice against black people.[2] This article is a three-way philosophical conversation among the African, Black, and the dominant Western conceptions of human dignity in the literature. At the heart of this conversation is the question whether the moral worth

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associated with human dignity is a function of merely possessing certain ontological capacities of our nature or of the positive use of these capacities (Molefe and Muade 2023).

African and Black Conceptions of human dignity are merit-based, and tend to account for human dignity in terms of the positive use of capacities. Western conceptions of human dignity tend to account for human dignity strictly in terms of merely possessing the relevant ontological capacity. The primary focus of this article concerns comparing the merit-based approach to human dignity against the capacity-based approach in order to consider their implications for moral and political philosophy. The underlying question is whether we can glean important philosophical insights concerning human dignity by comparing differing approaches to it, particularly if we also consider under-explored renditions of it from Black and African philosophy.

The paper is motivated by the skepticism in African/Black philosophy about the capacity-based approach to human dignity. Some scholars doubt that the mere possession of certain metaphysical/psychological capacities (such as reason, consciousness, memory, and so on) is sufficient for human dignity. Consider the influential African philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti, famous for his contribution to African personhood, commenting on personhood and value theory:

> . . . I think it would be accurate to say that whereas Western conceptions of man go for what might be described as a minimal definition of the person—whoever has soul, or rationality, or will, or memory, is seen as entitled to the description 'person'— the African view reaches instead for what might be described as a maximal definition of the person. (1984, 172)

For another example, consider the comment by Godfrey Tangwa, who has made outstanding contributions to African bioethics, when he avers:

> [T]he morality of an action or procedure is to be determined from the standpoint of the agent rather than that of the patient (the recipient of action) . . . What the attributes of self-consciousness, rationality, and freedom of choice do . . . is load the heavy burden of moral liability, culpability, and responsibility on the shoulders of their possessor. Human persons are not morally *special*, they are morally *liable.* (1996, 124)

Both thinkers reject the view that the mere possession of certain ontological capacities renders human beings morally special, or to possess human dignity. In their interpretation of African ethics, the mere possession of capacities renders human beings morally liable and not morally special, i.e., the possession of capacities engenders both the self-and-other regarding duties to develop and use our capacities positively for the benefit of the community (or humanity) at large.

The skepticism regarding the capacity-based approaches in African and Black philosophy is important for two reasons. First, it can serve as a heuristic opportunity, drawing from African/Black perspectives, to evaluate the plausibility of our deeply held moral view that capacities can ground human dignity. Second, it is important to attend to this skepticism because it threatens the very edifice of the human-rights political and legal infrastructure, which tends to construe human dignity in terms of some metaphysical capacity (Griffin 2008; Hughes 2011). This skepticism challenges us to pause and reflect on whether we should jettison the rights-based political and legal program altogether, or we must conjure meaningful philosophical responses to this skepticism.

The comparative element of this article will allow us to see the differences among the three theories of human dignity, and the two distinct approaches—the merit- and capacity-based— to value theory that characterizes them. I hope that the comparison will also help us to draw

important lessons for moral and political philosophy in relation to the concept of human dignity. It is not, however, the purpose of this article to suggest or even to argue that any of the approaches or theories of human dignity to be considered here are plausible, rather the aim is to use them heuristically to draw important philosophical lessons to enrich the literature on human dignity starting specifically from the skepticism found in African/Black philosophy.[3]

The paper is divided into two sections. The first considers the Western, African, and Black conceptions of human dignity. The second and final section will comparatively draw out three lessons from these three conceptions of human dignity: (a) the challenge posed by the is-ought gap doctrine for the dominant conception of human dignity in the Western tradition; (b) the Black conception of human dignity may be correctly construed as an instance of a virtue-based conception of human dignity; (c) the capacity-based conception has moral theoretical advantages in applied ethics and political theory that the merit-based accounts seem to lack.

2. THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN DIGNITY

Below, I consider theories of human dignity from the Western, African, and Black traditions of philosophy. I begin by giving a sketch of the most influential idea of human dignity in the Western tradition.

Western Concept(ion) of Human Dignity

The concept of human dignity is a controversial one (Waldron 2013). It is an *essentially contested notion*, which means that there is no consensus on its core defining features in the literature (Rodriguez 2015).[4] Generally, the core of the concept of human dignity is the idea of moral worth (Schroeder and Bani-Sadr 2017). Human dignity signifies that there is something morally special about human beings. Jack Donnelly (2015), in the context of explaining the relationship between human dignity and human rights, notes three things about human dignity. First, it denotes moral worth. Second, this moral worth demands recognition. Finally, respect is the most appropriate way to recognize and respond to human dignity.

The moral worth associated with human beings is *intrinsic* to their nature (Sulmasy 2008). That is, the source of this value is human nature (Korsgaard 1983). Human nature is believed to be endowed with a "honourable quality" (Donnelly 2015, 2) or "to attend to human dignity is to attend to the *value* or *significance* that belongs to a human being" (Malpas and Lickiss 2007, 19, emphasis added). The idea is that the ontology of beings is characterized by a value-endowing capacity that explains our intrinsic dignity, which grounds the recognition and respect we owe towards them.

We move from the *concept* of human dignity, the abstract idea of it, to its conception (theory) of it, which involves specifying the ontological feature that grounds our condition of moral worth. The influential secular view of human dignity, associated with Immanuel Kant, from the West ground it on the superior psychological capacities of human nature, autonomy/rationality (Kant 1996; Waldron 2013). It is the mere possession of this feature or endowment of human nature that accounts for human dignity. The mere possession of this capacity, or another posited by other theorists from the West, accounts for our moral specialness, or intrinsic worth.

I turn now to the African conception of human dignity.

African conceptions of dignity

While there is limited discussion of human dignity in in the tradition of African philosophy, my focus will be towards those approaches to it that reject the capacity-based approaches (Molefe 2022). I will consider Polycarp Ikuenobe's theory of human dignity. I do so largely because the theory goes beyond the skepticism expressed by Menkiti and Tangwa; it actually articulates and

defends a conception of human dignity that operates based on the skepticism of basing value on the possession of certain capacities.

Two crucial features characterize Ikuenobe's theory of human dignity. First, it denies that capacities are intrinsically valuable. Second, it explains human dignity entirely in terms of the concept of personhood (a performance/merit-based concept of value). To understand Ikuenobe's view of human dignity, we must familiarize ourselves with the concept of personhood in African philosophy. In my view, Ikuenobe's interpretation operates on the same logic as Menkiti's distinction between the *minimalist* and *maximalist* conception of personhood. The former is Western, and it accounts for value in terms of what Menkiti refers to as "the raw capacities of the isolated individual" such as the "soul, or rationality, or will, or memory" (1984, 172; 2004, 326). The latter is African, and it accounts for value in terms of the agent "becoming a person . . . a truly serious project that stretches beyond the raw capacities of the isolated individual, and it is a project which is laden with the possibility of triumph, but also of failure." On Menkiti's approach to value, there is something inadequate about an approach to it that explains it entirely in terms of certain psychological capacities of our nature. A plausible interpretation of value must locate it on the positive use or development of our capacities.[5]

Ikuenobe takes this distinction to its logical conclusion. Menkiti had merely explained the maximalist conception as a theory of value, but had not explicitly articulated its implications for human dignity. Ikuenobe like Menkiti denies that raw capacities have any value in and of themselves, which implies that he takes an approach to human dignity that is diametrically opposed to the standard Western approach to human dignity that grounds it on certain capacities. Moreover, Ikuenobe invokes a performance or merit-based concept of personhood to account for human dignity. Capacities are necessary for human dignity, but not sufficient for it—"The normative conception of personhood depends on the existence of the requisite descriptive features" (2016, 446). In other words, if personhood is something that we achieve, we achieve it because we have the capacities that we need to develop in the first place. It is the development and positive use of these capacities that secures the acquisition of virtue or the achievement of personhood.

The acquisition of personhood is tantamount to human dignity. Ikuenobe (2016, 446) states that the acquisition of virtue "is a significant basis for morally ascribing or denying personhood or dignity, and then respect by others." Ikuenobe (ibid.) further informs us that "The statement that one 'is not a *person*', or 'has no moral dignity' . . . is a moral ascription based on a normative judgment, which is that one has good character, behaved morally, acted or comported oneself properly, based on accepted values." In both these quotations, Ikuenobe appears to be treating the ideas of personhood and human dignity interchangeably. In the first one, he talks *of morally ascribing personhood or dignity*; and, on the second one, he suggests that being denied personhood is the same as being denied moral dignity. Ikuenobe's (2016, 451) view of dignity insists that "one's capacity . . . alone cannot define personhood or dignity." Instead, he argues *that dignity* "is something earned and deserved based on the active and positive use of one's capacities for moral excellence or superior achievements" (ibid., 460). Thus, the achievement of personhood is the same thing as having human dignity. On this view, human dignity is something that we achieve in relation to cultivating a virtuous disposition.

In short, human dignity is something we can achieve or lose depending on our actions and character disposition. Next, I turn to Black dignity.

Black dignity

I draw the idea of Black dignity from Vincent Lloyd's (2022) new book *Black Dignity: A Struggle against Domination*. The concept of Black dignity emerges in two related contexts. The first context is the black American intellectual heritage (or history) of thinkers and activists such as

Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Ida Wells, among others, who sought to theoretically explain the black condition and the general conditions of social injustice that pervades their sociopolitical existence. The second context is the recent experience of the police brutality, among others, in America, which led to the emergence of the #Black Lives Matter movement. Lloyd interprets both the classical and contemporary struggles against racism in America to be essentially about Black dignity. Lloyd's (2022, 8) interaction with the activists and the ideas associated with this movement leads him to realize that it represents the formation of "a coherent moral political vision." He further observes "the thread running through that vision, orienting it toward struggle, is a commitment to Black dignity" (ibid.).

To understand Black dignity, I believe we have to understand three related and crucial concepts: (a) the distinctive sense of dignity in the Black tradition and the interaction of the ideas of (b) struggle and (c) domination. Black dignity, according to Lloyd, essentially involves the struggle against domination. In other words, for there to be Black dignity, the agent has to be involved in a struggle and the struggle must be specifically directed against domination. To get a sense of Black dignity, Lloyd distinguishes it from two prominent senses of dignity in the literature, particularly in the West.

The first conception of dignity accounts for it as a *status* (Toscano 2011). On this rendition, by merely being human, one has dignity. When one appeals to be treated with dignity, they simply require us to recognize that they are human. On this rendition, being human is necessary and sufficient for human dignity. The second view of human dignity accounts for it in terms of possessing certain internal (intrinsic) capacities or qualities. An account similar to that of Immanuel Kant, which accounts for it in terms of the rational capacity (Rosen 2012).[6]

Lloyd considers these conceptions of human dignity to be unsatisfactory in a world characterized by domination. His dissatisfaction could be informed by the suspicion that the concept of dignity is useless for black (and other peoples) in the world that live under conditions of oppression and domination. Frantz Fanon, in his book *White Skins, Black Masks*, expresses this dissatisfaction towards the concept of human dignity in this fashion—

> I do not carry innocence to the point of believing that appeals to reason or to respect for human dignity can alter reality. For the Negro who works on a sugar plantation in Le Robert, there is only one solution: to fight. (2008, 224)

The claim seems to be that black people must recognize that there is no political power or value in invoking the concept of human dignity; it is a politically, morally and legally hollow concept in the struggle for humanity and freedom in the world. This claim is not just philosophical, it is one that is wired into the lived experience of black people in America and many other places for many years in spite of the prevalence of political and legal infrastructure that is based on human dignity and which purports to promote human rights. The lived experience of black Americans serves as positive evidence that there is something hollow about the dominant concept of human dignity conceived either as a status or intrinsic value.

Notice how Lloyd defines Black dignity in several places. In one place, he defines it as "something you *do*, a practice, a performance, a way of engaging with the world" (2022, 2, emphasis in the original). In another place, he construes dignity to refer to "the practice of living in a world bent on the destruction of Black life" (2022, 3). The content of the actions, practices, or even performance characteristic of Black dignity is *struggle*. That is, only performances of struggle count as instances of Black dignity. We might ask, what it is about the world that morally and politically necessitates the struggle against it? We can glean the answer from the two quotations above, which is, we need to engage the world because it is bent on the destruction of the black life. The world is structured in such a way that it denies the humanity of black people.

Black dignity is a function of responding, via struggle, against the world that dehumanizes black life. To get a clearer picture of the nature of Black dignity, we need to clarify the concepts of *struggle* and the specific nature of the world that necessitates it, which Lloyd describes in terms of *domination*—dignity is a struggle against domination. Let's start with domination. The paradigm form of domination is represented by the institution of slavery, which captures the relationship between the master and the slave. The master dominates the slave in that he has capacity to impose (arbitrarily) his will over the slave. The actual exercise of the will over another does not necessarily capture domination, rather it is the mere capacity to do so that defines its essence. A master could spend all his life being 'nice' to the slave, but that does not mean the relationship is not one of domination precisely because the master still possesses the capacity. Moreover, Lloyd informs us that for a system like that of slavery to function it must be buttressed by ". . . enormous apparatus of ideas, habits, feelings, institutions, and laws that conspire to make one class of people appear less than human" (11).

The master, on her own, is powerless. There are many instances where slaves killed the master but that did not mark the end of slavery. As long as the system remains in place, the son of the master will inherit the capacity to exercise his will over the slave. The point is that we need to understand the master and his power of domination in the context of the system (the enormous apparatus of ideas, habits, feelings, institutions that give it life, power and force) that gives it life. It is the system of domination, which dehumanises that necessitates "the motion" of dignity against it (2022, 19). We may not have slavery (today) in America, but the general conditions of black people (and other kinds of people) reveal that the systems of domination are still present, but in a different form. Lloyd captures the mutating nature of the systems of domination in terms of them being "amorphous but deeply entrenched" (14). He further notes that our world is "full of myriads (of) interlocking systems of domination, some novel, some vestigial" (15). They are interlocking systems of domination because we are not just dealing with racial domination, we also have colonial domination, patriarchy, capitalism, and so on (14). Domination operates at multiple registers that pervade various aspects of our existence on a daily basis. It is the universality of domination that makes the possibility for human dignity to be universal.

The power interlocking systems of domination have at their core, or how we recognize them, is the power they give some individual—in the context of race, a white person, or in the context of patriarchy, a male figure—to impose their will over another (12). The world, as we know it, is characterised by "the ontological condition" of domination, which necessitates the struggle (13). Now that we have a rough sense of the ontological condition of the world, the world that is characterized by interlocking systems of domination that dehumanize, we may proceed to consider the kind of struggle that defines Black dignity.

In Lloyd's conceptualization of Black dignity as a struggle, it is not all practices or performances that instantiate it. To clarify the kind of struggle that captures Black dignity, he distinguishes between *ontic* and *ontological* struggle (10). 'Ontic struggle' refers to specific objects of harm or desire that we may pursue and achieve in the world. We might fight for better housing, free education, safe and clean environments, which may be reasonable causes to pursue. In fact, we may even secure victory in some of these. The ontological struggle, on the other hand, focuses on the general threat and harm encapsulated by domination that characterizes the world. Lloyd (10, emphasis in the original) unequivocally informs us, "Ontic struggle will not get us free; only *ontological* struggle, struggle aimed at domination, struggle against the master, promises us that." True dignity involves being engaged in the ontological struggle against domination.

To close of this account of human dignity, I want to emphasize two points. Dignity is a function of engaging in the ontological struggle against the system of domination. Dignity is *in* the struggle itself and not beyond it. The very process of engaging against domination constitutes it, and not the consequence of it (9). This point by Lloyd is important: "dignity is not the status

achieved; it lives in the process, in the organizing and protesting and plotting and collaborating, whether or not the political goal is obtained" (9). We may not be able to overcome the systems of domination, but Black dignity is in living a life of "friction," i.e., resisting all forces and mechanisms that seek to dehumanize (8). Black dignity is essentially about the struggle for the sake of affirming our humanity in a world that denies it and seeks to obliterate it.

The category 'black' contingently refers to people with black pigmentation because of the history of domination that manifested in the form of slavery. In Lloyd's view, slavery represents the purest form of domination since it best captures the relationship where one individual arbitrarily exercises their will over that of another. He appeals to slavery as the paradigm form of domination, which can help us identify vestigial and novel forms of it. In this sense, the lived experience of black people is a contingent manifestation of domination, whereas the category Black in the concept Black dignity represents the paradigm of domination, and this paradigm goes beyond black people to include other forms of domination like patriarchy or capitalism, and many more.

Next we turn to the lessons we can draw from these three theories of human dignity.

3.   LESSONS FROM THE THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN DIGNITY

Above we considered three theories of human dignity, one capacity-based and another two merit-based. This section considers three lessons that emerge in light of comparing these three theories of human dignity. The first lesson will emerge in light of the point of divergence regarding where ultimately to locate value, in some feature intrinsic to our nature or an extrinsic one related to performance. The second lesson involves identifying the differences between the African and Black dignity, specifically in relation to the question of the (moral) *telos*. The final lesson involves the challenge raised by the Western conception of human dignity for the merit-based accounts of it by suggesting the theoretical advantages of a capacity-based theory of value, which cannot easily be overlooked.

Questions about capacity-based theory of value

The outstanding point of divergence between the African/Black and the Western conceptions of dignity pivots on where to locate human dignity. The African/Black interpretations of human dignity locates it on the extrinsic feature of performance interpreted either as personhood or struggle. The Western account of human dignity locates it on the intrinsic property of human nature, some ontological capacity. On the African view, capacities are, at best, instrumentally valuable, since the moral worth associated with human dignity is a function of the positive of use these metaphysical capacities (meritorious in nature). The Black dignity view also locates value on the performance of struggle against domination. These two approaches offer two differing reasons for why they refuse to locate value on the intrinsic feature of human nature.

On the African conception, though not explicitly stated, the reason seems to run on the important doctrine of the is-ought gap. The is-ought gap recognizes a logical gap between factual premises and evaluative conclusions, and it considers it a fallacy to draw an evaluative conclusion from a factual/descriptive premise (Spielthenner 2017). In light of African thought, Metz (2013) eloquently points out this tendency in much of African ethics, where some scholars of African thought would start with a factual premise and end up with an evaluative conclusion. If there is any truth to the is-ought gap doctrine, as I suppose there is, then Ikuenobe's refusal to locate intrinsic value on certain psychological or metaphysical features of our nature is a serious counter against the influential concept of human dignity in the literature in moral philosophy. It is a valid philosophical counter to the traditional view of human dignity because it could be that we are stuck with a mere dogma rather than a robust ethical insight that satisfies the demands of logic.

The Black conception of dignity also repudiates locating value on certain features of our nature, albeit for a different reason. The reason, in my view, plays itself out when Lloyd criticizes the status view of dignity. The status view of human dignity can be understood historically and in its contemporary (modern) interpretations. Historically, specifically in Rome, the idea of *dignitas* refers to a status that was associated with high rank or station that one occupied in society (Rosen 2012). Those that occupied high positions or rank had this selective property of *dignitas.* The status of *dignitas* involved certain privileges, rights, and duties associated with it. The one that occupied this status was due respect from the commoners and they had access to property and many other privileges in society, which were not open to every human being. Those associated with *dignitas* had to conduct themselves in ways consistent with the standards of their dignity. This kind of status is positional or rank-based, and it is the reserve of the few in a particular sociopolitical context (see Schroeder and Bani-Sadr 2017).

The contemporary interpretation of it involves the democratization of human dignity, where status dignity is now allocated to all human beings. The hierarchy still persists, where dignity is still associated with a high rank except that now all human beings are elevated to that rank above all other aspects of nature (Toscano 2011). The criticism that Lloyd raises against the democratization of the status of dignity is that it operates on the logic where it does not seek to abolish the hierarchical ordering of the world, which operates on the ontology and 'moral' logic of domination. Stated differently, democratized or universal dignity does not seek to abolish slavery, the master-slave relationship; rather, it wants everyone to be a master, hence its insistence on the language of rank and status. It confuses the true sense of dignity for what Lloyd calls "respectability" (49). Respectability operates based on the norms created in light of the ontological order of domination, which aligns some with the masters and others with slaves, where ultimately equal dignity is not possible. Lloyd rejects the modern/contemporary notion of dignity in this fashion:

> Nor does the modern concept of dignity fit, for from the perspective of Black movements not every human being shares in dignity equally. Some people have more and some less. Some people are aligned with masters (even some of the enslaved are aligned with masters), and thus have no dignity at all. Only those aligned with the enslaved struggling against domination have dignity. In a sense, Black dignity inverts the aristocratic hierarchy, elevating the lowliest and demoting the highest. Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur have dignity; Thomas Jefferson, John D. Rockefeller, and the queen of England have none. (16)

The major claim that motivates the rejection of the democratization of the status of dignity is that it is not divorced from the ontological condition of domination. The relations of the master and slave still persist, and our world allocates positions alongside this system of domination. In a sense, we still have people with dignity and many others without it because there is no radical repudiation of the system of domination. Hence, Black dignity disrupts the hollow dignity associated with its democratization in favor of aligning dignity with those in the struggle against domination in the quest to affirm their humanity.

The important lesson that emerges in light of the divergence on where ultimately to locate value, on intrinsic features of our nature or extrinsic associated with conduct, we note the following points: (a) The Western conception of human dignity has the philosophical challenge of explaining and justifying how an ontological feature can be a bearer of intrinsic value. This challenge is a serious one given the consideration of the ethical doctrine of the is-ought gap. (b) A true democratization of the concept of dignity must be radically separated from the ontological condition of domination in all its manifestations and forms. The true nature of dignity must not sanitize the status of those aligned with the master and impose a false sense of dignity by

universalizing it and its norms. True dignity involves a friction against all forms of domination, and their tendency to dehumanize. In a world that claims the universal dignity of all human beings, why do we still have everywhere around us people of color, women, children, the foreigner, homosexuals, the poor still longing and begging for dignity when the idea has been truly democratized to include every human being. It seems we have concealed systems of domination by 'decorating' them with the panoply of the moral language of democracy, dignity, and rights. Black dignity is not given, it is a function of struggle against systems of domination.

Virtue-based theories of value?

On the face of it, it seems the major differences between the African and Black conceptions of human dignity is that the former is teleological and the latter is not. That is, on the African personhood-based view, to have dignity just is to acquire virtue—the agent's moral goal just is the acquisition of virtue. Dignity pivots on the moral goal of achieving virtue, or personhood. But on the Black dignity view, dignity is definable entirely in terms of the very activity and process of struggle without regard to its outcomes. Notice that: "dignity names performance, activity (including the activity of refusal), rather than result . . . dignity is not the status achieved; it lives in the process . . . whether or not the political goal is obtained" (9). Black dignity is just a function of being involved in the struggle against domination without regard to the outcome. In fact, the point is just that Black dignity is in the struggle itself.

A careful evaluation, I suggest, would indicate that the African and Black conceptions of human dignity are much closer to each other in their ethical orientation than it would first appear. I argue that we ought to interpret both of them as instances of virtue-based conceptions of human dignity. I take it that it is obvious that the African view of dignity is a virtue-based one (Molefe 2022). The question now remains about whether we cannot so interpret the Black dignity view. I believe it is a virtue-based conception of human dignity. A 'virtue' refers to a character trait(s) (or dependable) disposition that we develop over time via habituation (Gyekye 2010). It seems that both the African and Black conceptions of dignity require the agent to achieve certain virtues. I say so because one can reasonably draw a distinction between the macro-ethical goal of overcoming domination, which is almost impossible to achieve (at least according to Lloyd); and the micro-ethical duty and goal of successfully struggling against this system on a daily basis. It is reasonable to accept the claim that one who consistently engages in the process of constantly struggling against domination develops certain psycho-social skills of organizing, plotting and so on, and over time they excel in the work of organizing. Moreover, they also develop certain moral dispositions such as endurance, fortitude, resilience, courage, rage, love, joy and so on, which emerge in relation to their continued struggle against domination.

This comment by Lloyd strikes me as suggesting the language of dignity as something we achieve though it may seem like it is negating it—"dignity achieved in struggle, not at the end point but in the very process" (2). There is the grand political goal of abolishing domination, which is a chimera; but there is also a moral goal of daily engaging in the process of struggle where one will develop virtues just from this struggle. The "case of Black athlete, singer, lawyer, and activist Paul Robeson" is a perfect example of black dignity as a virtue-based account of dignity (2022, 2).

That Black dignity evinces as an instance of dignity as virtue is supported by two other considerations. Chapters 2 and 3 of the book, titled *Black rage* and *Black love*, respectively, explain these virtues as central features of Black dignity. One that has Black dignity must have particular emotional dispositions against the systems of domination that pervades our world. They must respond appropriately to the injustices by expressing Black rage. They should also build communities bound by the thread of Black love in the context of the scorching sun of domination. It is these virtues, among many others, born in and out of the struggle against domination that, I

argue, characterize that struggle that captures Black dignity. When we say of some agent that she has Black dignity, we are commending her, in the first instance, for recognizing and responding to domination. Moreover, as she engages in this process of struggle, which itself encapsulates Black dignity, we are also recognizing the skills, competencies and, importantly, virtues (like rage, love, joy, endurance, tolerance, courage) associated with it.

The last consideration that supports a virtue interpretation of the Black dignity view is evinced by Lloyd's disruption of the hierarchy of dignity, where he elevates "Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur" and downgrades "Thomas Jefferson, John D. Rockefeller, and the queen of England." We should admire or respect the former group of people because they have successfully struggled against domination that we can attest by the virtues associated with them that characterize their motions of struggle. The latter group should not be admired or respected because they are aligned with domination and operate within the hollow ethic of respectability. We owe respect to those that manifest virtues associated and emerge because and in the struggle.

Hence, what is distinctive about Black dignity is not that it locates dignity in some kind of activity or performance of struggle. In fact, it does more than just define it in terms of activity of struggle. It seems to require that the agent struggling against domination ought to internalize the competencies, develop certain skills and character dispositions associated with the fight to affirm one's humanity, such as organizing, protesting, love, rage, joy, and so on. Moreover, what is distinctive about this virtue-based account of dignity in the Black tradition, it offers a way to unmask the real character of the systems that dehumanize and steal our true humanity. The profound lesson that seems to emerge from Black dignity is that promoting human rights while not addressing the condition of domination involves participation in concealing the interlocking systems of domination. If human rights are to be meaningful, they must be radically divorced from the ontological conditions of domination.

The advantages of a capacity-based theory of value

The capacity-based approach to human dignity might be associated with the criticism of the is-ought gap, i.e., how can an ontological capacity ground intrinsic value? This section considers the moral-theoretical advantages of the capacity-based approach to value for morality and politics, which the African and Black theories of human dignity ought to take seriously. Racism and patriarchy, as instances of domination, operate on the basis of an ontological system that locates value on arbitrary features of our nature, specifically race and sex. The capacity-based view operates on the axiological supposition that we should identify the relevant and correct ontological feature, and use it as the basis for morality and politics, which could ground a robust moral-political theory. By 'relevant ontological feature' the idea seems to be that the theorist ought to identify a capacity of our nature that seems to be directly connected to morality in a very fundamental way. Take Kant's theory of human dignity for example, it locates value on the human capacity for reason. It seems intuitively appealing to think there is a way in which morality is connected to the ontological feature of reason particularly if choice, deliberation, and volition are important moral goods. In this sense, to ground morality on an ontological feature is important because it helps us to identify important agential features intrinsically connected to morality.

To associate capacities to morality does not explain or justify the ascription of intrinsic value to them, but explains why the selection of certain capacities is important in morality and the lives of moral patients and agents. Bracketing for now the question of justifying the ascription of intrinsic value to ontological capacities, I point us to moral-theoretical advantages of the capacity-based approach to ethics and political philosophy. I suggest that the capacity-based approaches seem to do better than merit-based ones in moral and political philosophy. How might the two approaches fare in relation to bioethical themes and political theory?

The aim here is not to offer a knock-down argument against the performance-based views, or let alone suggest that the capacity-based views is a panacea in all regards to the problems that we consider below. The aim is to make a *prima facie* case for the theoretical advantage of the capacity-based view. To begin our discussion, we consider the case of bioethical debates on abortion. The capacity-based approach offers us a criterion for determining the im/permissibility of abortion on the basis of whether the foetus possesses the relevant ontological features (Hursthouse 2013). If it does have the relevant ontological features then abortion is impermissible; if it does not have them then it is permissible. The moral criterion is the relevant capacity. It is not immediately clear how a performance-based theory of value, similar to the African and Black views of human dignity, can be useful in these debates. In relation to Ikuenobe's theory, the foetus has no record of performance that can be used to assess human dignity. On Lloyd's Black dignity, the foetus cannot engage in the struggle against domination. It is not clear how these two theories might be normatively useful in bioethical debates concerning beginning-of-life issues, among others. The challenge arises precisely because value (or human dignity) on these accounts tracks performance, and in the case where the candidate like a foetus cannot have and has no history of performance, we cannot even begin to ascribe value to it.

The theory could prescribe the community or the mother as the standard of solving such issues—the indirect argument. The question still stands, however, concerning the criterion that will guide the community and mother about what is the morally correct action in relation to whether abortion is im/permissible. The capacity-based approach seems to offer a robust approach that is objective and universal on how to resolve such cases. Notwithstanding the challenge associated with identifying the relevant ontological feature, it does offer an intuitively powerful way to resolve such issues.

Another challenge arises over the question of environmental ethics. To narrow the conversation, we can focus on animal ethics. On the face of it, it seems that performance-based accounts struggle to accommodate animals in the moral community (Molefe 2019). The challenge emerges precisely because value emerges or tracks the agent's conduct. In the context that animals are not moral agents and their actions cannot be associated with virtue, either as personhood or the struggle against domination, it is not obvious how performance-based approaches to value can offer us a robust animal ethics. At best, it seems to me, these theories could offer an indirect defense of animals, where we appeal to certain harms that might arise if human beings are cruel to animals (such as the deterioration of their character since animal cruelty will weaken their character disposition to be good). An indirect defense is hardly satisfactory in terms of offering meaningful protections of animals in their own right. One can always imagine a situation where animals may be harmed in ways that do not negatively affect the agent's character, whether by drinking a pill or using some other advanced technology.

Moreover, a robust animal ethics ought to ground the interests/welfare of animals in their own right rather than on human interests. It is not inconceivable that human and animal interests will diverge in many areas, and, in such instances, animals will be exposed to threats and harms. A robust ethics ought to ground the value of animals on the animals themselves. A capacity-based theory like that of Peter Singer (2009) that grounds intrinsic value of animals in their capacity to suffer, if plausible, offers protections that emerge directly in relation to the animal itself and its interest without regard to human interests, all things being equal. A performance-based theory has no performance-related basis to accord value to animals given that value arises only in contexts of merit. A performance-based approach does not seem to have resources for a robust animal ethics, or to make a meaningful contribution to it.

The final challenge raised by the capacity-based approach to value theory is in political philosophy. A plausible approach should be able to secure at least two important moral-political goods, *protections of individuals* and *the equality of individuals*. That is, it must be able to explain

the state's and citizen's duties not to harm/interfere with the individual (the agent-centred restrictions or constraints) and the requirement to treat its citizens with equality or citizens equally (egalitarianism). On the face of it, the capacity-based approach to value explains our duties not to harm individuals because they possess certain capacities that accounts for their intrinsic worth. This approach also explains our equality on the grounds of merely possessing the ontological capacity, and nothing more (Rosen 2012). The issues are not as promising on the performance-based approach that grounds our value solely on merit because it is a variable property, making it not suitable to secure equality.

On the merit-based view, how do we make sense of the idea that human beings are inviolable? If all we have to account for moral worth is merit, then we are bound to only protect those individuals that are virtuous. How do we secure the equality of all human beings when merit is a variable property that is not suitable to ground political egalitarianism? It seems that African/Black conceptions of dignity still have to develop resources to reflect and respond to pressing bioethical, environmental, and political issues. The concern essentially involves recognizing and respecting individuals before they become or do anything in the world, and a capacity-based approach seems to be a promising approach to secure the inviolability and equality among individuals because it has nothing to do with their agency. Instead, it has everything to do with merely possessing the relevant ontological capacity.

4. CONCLUSION

This article compared three theories of human dignity from the Western, African, and Black traditions of philosophy. The aim of the comparison was to consider the potential challenges and positive contributions we may associate with the capacity-based and the merit-based approaches to human dignity. We noted three important lessons: (a) The Western conception of human dignity needs to clarify how an ontological capacity can bear intrinsic value. (b) It emerged that both the African and Black conception of human dignity can be construed as virtue-based account of human dignity (though they approach the virtues in question differently). (c) The capacity-based account seems to have a moral-theoretical promise in bioethics, environmental ethics and political philosophy, which the African/Black conceptions have to seriously consider.

In future work, it remains to be seen whether the merit-based accounts of human dignity can respond to the serious challenges raised above in relation to bioethics, environmental ethics, and political philosophy. Moreover, the capacity-based view also has the challenge to explain and justify how mere ontology can be associated with intrinsic value.

NOTES

1. I believe there are historical and contextual considerations that motivate this stipulation. The disjuncture between Africa and the black can be traced in light of the Transatlantic slavery, where the majority of black people remained in Africa and others transported to America and other parts of the world. Those left in Africa encountered the problem of slavery through the political package of colonialism and those in America through the institution of slavery. There were racial injustices in both parts of the world, but they were very much different. For example, postindependence African countries internally tended to be constituted by majority black people and racial injustice was not such a big factor, whereas in America blacks have been a minority subjected slavery and the afterlife of slavery has been attended by persistent dehumanizing racial injustice. Even the emergence of the traditions of philosophy in Africa and in America have different histories and motivations. Much of African philosophy was fixated largely on the quest to be included in the family of philosophy, which involved the recognition (by outsiders) that *African* philosophy is truly a philosophy like any other. The other problem involved clarifying the content and scope of what is to count as philosophy, and to a large extent this work never focused on the problem of race (and racism) per se but on social and economic injustices in general. On

the other hand, the question of race has been central in the Black tradition of thought, where all other domains, be it the economy, health, and so on, are interpreted through the lens of racial injustices.

2. My reference to *Black* dignity will be capitalized following the convention of the author whose work I will use to reflect on this view of human dignity, which convention is common among philosophers that identify with Black philosophy.

3. It is not my suggestion that every scholar in African ethics operates on the basis of this skepticism. I am sure that scholars like Wiredu (1992), Gyekye (1992), Ilesanmi (2001), Deng (2004), and Gbadegesun (2013) do not subscribe to this skepticism. Instead, they believe that human beings are morally special.

4. Elsewhere, I provide reasons (that I do not have space to share here) why we should still use this concept in spite of its contested and controversial status in the literature.

5. The latter Menkiti (2018) seems open to the idea of intrinsic value.

6. Above, I indicated that both African and Black conceptions reject the capacity-based approach to human dignity. I only gave examples from African philosophy. Lloyd is a good example of the scepticism or rejection of the capacity-based approach in the Black tradition.

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