African Ethics, Personhood, and War

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In this article, I look at the African theory that the formation of personhood is relevant to the morality of war. I start by justifying the project of decolonizing the ethics of war. Then I proceed to clarify that some of the African theories that relate to personhood and war should not be taken at face value, but that the concept of personhood does play a role in the morality of war. I then provide examples of how this concept is relevant for jus ad bellum, jus in bello and jus post bellum.

Keywords: African Ethics; Personhood; Just War Theory; *Jus ad Bellum; Jus in Bello; Jus Post Bellum*

Introduction

Some developments have recently emerged that try to globalize the debates in war ethics, using literature on Confucian, Daoist, African, Marxist, Anarchist, Indian, and other philosophical traditions (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Singh 2019). In this article, I am interested in developing one of these attempts at globalizing the debate, that of African war ethics. The African ethics of war can be found in political, literary, and philosophical writings. Originally, the contemporary arguments about the ethics of war were mostly found in the discourses and theories of African revolutionaries, like Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, and Julius Nyerere (Nyerere 1969; Nkrumah 2015; Mandela 1967; Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022). Recent philosophical work has seen several scholars trying to develop an African just war theory (Metz 2019; Badru 2019; Okeja 2019; Akiode 2019; Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022; 2018a; Ugwuanyi 2020; Baker 2016; Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Chimakonam 2022). In broad terms, the arguments defended by these scholars have mostly aimed to tease out the implications of *ubuntu* or concepts related to the ethics of violence. The theory defended in this article does not radically depart from this previous work in the sense that it is also communitarian-driven; but the thesis of this article articulates an African theory of war grounded in a different perspective. Namely, it tries to develop an African ethics of war grounded in the concept of personhood as it is understood in many parts of Africa.

Hence, it is fair to affirm that African just war theory is marked by an anti-colonialist tone and is written from the point of view of the oppressed: it is a philosophy that emerges from below. This article is divided into four sections. In the next section, I explain the need to decolonize just war theory. After that, I

outline a concept of African personhood. In section three, I draw some implications of this African concept of personhood to *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. In the last section, I explain the implications of this concept of African personhood for *jus post bellum*.

Why Decolonize Just War Theory?

A preliminary question raised for the purpose of this paper is why we should decolonize the ethics of war at all? War is horrendous. It involves many situations that challenge the limits of morality (Mcmahan 2011). Indeed, war encompasses various kinds of behaviour that tend to be morally wrong: deliberately inflicting suffering, killing, invading another country's territory, deception, and so forth (Walzer 2006). Most of us have a sense that these are actions to be avoided at all costs, if ever morally allowed. Given the gravity of such practices, they need strong moral justification (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Singh 2019). Reasons to enter a war cannot be trivial: I could not go to war merely because someone stepped on my foot. Entering into war needs a strong justification for it to occur. A strong justification would in turn be one that appeals to a greater number of people and uses more resources and intuitions. Several philosophers, political scientists, and politicians have, throughout time, given different kinds of justifications for the just cause of war. Most of these justifications have come from the Western philosophical views operating within a Christian tradition. For example, the Medieval and Early Modern philosophers Hugo Grotius and Saint Augustine have both written about these topics (Begby, Reichberg, and Syse 2012). Today, the literature is more diverse, but it still mostly comes from Western scholarship (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Singh 2019; Bellamy 2019).

This reference to the history of Western philosophy, however, is not enough for a strong justification. The ethics of war requires more global responses. The more global the argument is, the stronger it becomes. This concern is partly methodological and partly political. Methodologically speaking, the more theories that we compare our views with the more certain we can be that the theory is a good one (Sidgwick 1981; Christopher Simon Wareham 2017; McMahan 2000). A widely-encompassing discussion will allow us to confront our arguments through a broad diversity of views. This is true both for defending an intuitionist ethical methodology and a reflective equilibrium. For intuitionists, to consider the intuitions of non-Westerns may undermine or strengthen their theory: the more people share an intuition, the stronger it becomes, and if other civilizations do not share the same intuition, then there are reasons to believe that the ethical intuition may simply result from cultural bias. The use of reflective equilibrium ought to consider a greater array of theories that may have a good explanatory power for the normative problems they are addressing (Rawls 1999); hence, it is also relevant to consider non-Western along with Western theories to better judge normative questions.

Politically speaking, given that war involves so many agents, hearing a larger number of voices seems reasonable in order to understand the legitimacy of war acts. This is particularly relevant because African war ethics hails from the writings of peoples struggling with oppression and, as such, their voices are important to hear. In addition, if war is simply framed in a Western way, the agents of war are strategically missing something important. Note that the Global South is becoming

much more relevant in international politics. Today, it is not just immoral but also not possible to have a Eurocentric conception of world politics (Agrawal 2023). This means that in considering international politics, the relevant agents must consider how the Global South will position itself. Clearly, the Ukraine-Russia war suggests that the European and American positioning is not all that counts in assessing what to do. Relevant stakeholders must decolonize their approach to war to be able to understand and accommodate 21st-century international relations.

An objection that may arise at this point is that rather than decolonizing the ethics of war, we should simply eliminate war. If war is horrendous, why can't we simply render all these practices morally wrong? After all, if war involves so many wrongs, it seems that we could rule out all wars, for all war is immoral. This pacifist stand, however, fails for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it is not realistic. Wars are a permanent aspect of our existence and appear to be inevitable. I do not necessarily mean this in the sense that we are always in a Thucydides Trap dynamic. What I mean is that we live in a world where war is a constant threat because humans are prone to conflict, and it is inevitable that we will have tensions with others. This is a common view in Western philosophy and is sometimes called political realism. As I argue elsewhere, the African tradition also has elements of moral and political realism, understanding conflict and war as an inevitable aspect of reality (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Chimakonam 2022). This is noticeable in Igbo philosophy, for example, which routinely conceives of good and evil as two aspects of reality simultaneously present in entities: good and evil require each other and fuel each other to exist (Anizoba 2008; Nwonwu 2014; Mbiti 1990). I would go further and contend that often, even in pacifist theologies and philosophies – like that espoused by Desmond Tutu – some elements suggest that the world is characterized by constant tension (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018b). At the end of the day, this idea could be summed up in the way that Carl von Clausewitz perceptibly captured the relevance of war: war is the continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz 1976). Indeed, we are political animals, so, we also undertake politics through war. Taking this on board, to not have an ethics of war is simply to ignore a problem. Morality ought to be driven toward real-life issues and not simply theorize ideal situations.

On the other hand, it seems obvious that wars can sometimes be justified (Walzer 2015; Mcmahan 2011; McFate 2020). There is no doubt that violence is generally not a good option, but to the extent that reality is complex, there may be situations where entering a war may be a lesser evil (the less harmful course of action amongst a number of bad choices). For example, if genocide is about to happen, it seems self-evident that the use of force to prevent it may be morally justified, provided that the use of force does not make it worse. It is the burden of the pacifist to prove otherwise, given the intuition that preventing such evils requires the use of force. Broadly speaking, it is also intuitive that I have a right to self-defense: if someone randomly attacks me on the street, no one will reasonably say I am not entitled to use force to protect myself. Likewise, it would be odd to contend that a country should be passive about serious aggressions by another state and not act in self-defense (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2020a).

African Philosophy and Personhood

The concept of personhood has been rather prominent in twentieth-century applied ethics. Many moral arguments about abortion, euthanasia, and other important topics in applied ethics have used the concept of personhood as the basis for their debates (Blumenthal-Barby 2023). For example, Peter Singer uses the concept of personhood to debate topics such as the morality of infanticide and the treatment of animals (Singer 2015b; 2015a; 2011) Personhood is also relevant in African applied ethics, but it has been understood in a very different way (Molefe 2020). Personhood, in the African context, is not such an intrinsic quality. It is routinely understood as something that is acquired through a complex process of relations with others and the world around us (C. S. Wareham 2020).

Ifeanyi Menkiti is the primary philosopher to have developed this concept (Menkiti 2018; 1984). According to Menkiti, personhood consists of a process whereby one becomes virtuous through positive interaction with others. That is, through the right sort of interaction with others (one that involves solidarity and identification), one becomes a full person. It is only possible to become a person by promoting the right sort of proximity between oneself and others. What we are and what we become is ultimately the result of our relationship with what surrounds us, especially other humans, but also other animals and the environment. As Menkiti has famously pointed out, this is a process that comes about in stages. In broad terms, the older one is, the more likely it is that a person has developed full personhood (Menkiti 2018; Molefe 2020). Indeed, this idea is found in several African proverbs such as 'What an old man can see sitting down, a young man cannot see even if he climbs the highest iroko tree.' As this suggests, personhood is fundamentally about character and often the terms are used in interchangeable ways.

A salient belief in Africa is that societies need individuals with personhood for them to function properly. The main reason for this is that most morality, according to this African ethics, is learned by example. Therefore virtuous individuals play an essential role in the moral progress and learning of their communities (Mbiti 1990; 2015). Elders are often perceived to have a greater responsibility in forming the moral character of society because they are the ones who have often acquired the experience and know-how to make well-judged moral decisions. They are routinely the moral compass of their communities (Gyekye 2011). Moreover, in practice, principles of morality may be too abstract to respond to real-life situations. So, the learning of virtues (i.e., the development of personhood) is critical for society to function (Tan 2014; Bell and Metz 2011). For this reason, only when a society has people with developed personhood, will the society be one that is likely to engage in moral behaviour.

Personhood and War: *Jus ad Bellum* and *Jus in Bello*

The question might arise as to why personhood is relevant to the ethics of war at all. Even in African philosophy, research on this topic is limited. The Nigerian philosopher Badru Ronald Olufemi is perhaps the person who first developed this idea in a more systematic way, and he has contended that war can be justified on grounds of promoting proximity between self and other (Badru 2019). Yet, the formation of personhood or character as a justification for war seems quite counterintuitive. Shall we initiate a war just because we wish to form people's

characters? Certainly, we can find less harmful ways to accomplish this and, even as a last resort measure, such justification appears incoherent. It would seem that we could deal with a bad character reasonably well if that were the cost to avoid a war. As explained above, war exists at the limits of morality and can only be initiated if one has strong reasons to do so; on the face of it, the formation of a person's or society's character seems to be a trivial reason to initiate a war (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2020a).

Likewise, the Angolan novelist, Pepetela – who was also a guerrilla fighter against the Portuguese in the colonial war – has written several novels representing the reality of war. My interpretation of his work is that he considers that war can, indeed, play a role in the formation of character. In my view, Pepetela is not arguing that wars are morally justified on these grounds, instead, he seems to be stating that the sociological experience of war can contribute to character formation. He talks about this process in two of his novels: *Muana Puó* and *Mayombe*. In *Muana Puó*, he tells the story of how a child learned about virtue and became an adult by joining the armed struggle of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in its war against Portuguese colonialism. This experience of war allowed him to develop a political consciousness and a more sophisticated personality (Pepetela 1996).

In his novel *Mayombe*, Pepetela describes several ethnic tensions between the guerillas fighting against Portuguese colonialists. This constant struggle and tension between the different guerrilla fighters mostly occur because they interpret each other's actions as motivated by ethnic concerns. For instance, when the commander decides whether or not to punish a soldier, his decision is interpreted as either a manifestation of ethnic hatred or one of ethnic preferentialism. According to Pepetela, this can be understood as a legacy of Portuguese colonialism, which incentivized ethnic hatred between Angolans as a way to maintain power. In any case, Pepetela explains that, through the experience of war, a sense of unity and collective consciousness has appeared amongst these ethnic groups. Pepetela does not claim that ethnic hatred has disappeared entirely, but it has certainly improved. A key moment where we see this is when the commander Fearless sacrifices his life for one of his comrades who comes from a different – and allegedly inimical – ethnic group. This action has a cathartic effect on the group, who can then see beyond ethnicity. War thus plays a role in transforming the mindset of those who are participating in it from a colonial state of mind to a postcolonial one, and thus ensures a collective consciousness and identity (Pepetela 1996).

That said, I do not take his example as *prima facie* truth. These examples from *Muana Puó* and *Mayombe* do not intend to demonstrate that war is always justified to form a person's character. Neither do they aim to demonstrate that war is a good thing. Nonetheless, the examples can offer a path to a more general principle of war. Perhaps the question of personhood can be understood as *a condition that limits the* legitimacy of resorting to war. Wars can *only be fought* if they do not undermine this important value of developing personhood. This is because a society without individuals who have developed personhood will most likely fall into moral chaos. The formation of personhood requires a peaceful state of affairs. More precisely, for individuals to develop personhood they need to be in social harmony with others and maintain friendships. This encompasses caring about others and acting in such a way. What this entails is that wars can only be initiated if they do not

destroy the possibility of developing personhood. Put differently, wars that undermine the possibility for personhood to flourish are not morally permissible.

In contrast with traditional Western just war theory which, generally speaking, considers that several possible just causes and intentions exist, the African criterion is more restrictive: it requires that a fundamental right intention and just cause are related to the development of personhood in society. Developing personhood cannot be a reason to initiate war, but rather to restrict which wars can be fought. So, in terms of *jus ad bellum*, the African criterion prescribes that only those wars that can lead to reconciliation between opposing parties are morally justifiable. A war that would lead to even more conflict and would make it impossible to reconcile is not morally justified. Likewise, to fight a war in a way that would make reconciliation impossible is also not morally justified. At the Rivonia Trial, Nelson Mandela stated that the violent methods used by the African National Congress against the Apartheid government were ones that would not make relations between different ethnic groups impossible in the future (Mandela 1967). The reason for this implication of reconciliation is that the possibility of relating positively towards others is a necessary condition for the development of personhood. For personhood requires a harmonious relationship with others.

The theory of personhood also adds something to the last resort measure usually defended in traditional Western theory. War should only be used as a last resort, since personhood tends to be developed through positive relations. That is. personhood is normally developed through positive interaction with others, and war is often not the best means to achieve this – hence it should be only used as a last resort. Likewise, it is implied that proportional means must be used in a war situation. After all, virtue is about moderation, and if personhood is about the development of virtue, one needs to act in ways that are caring, which includes taking proportionality into consideration (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018a). Put differently, acts of anger or impulsivity undermine the development of personhood to the extent that they instill vices in the agent that commits them. Finally, legitimate authority does not come from a recognized group of institutions. The theory of personhood does not really recognize any legitimacy at all in institutions. Legitimacy is simply related to the agents being those who have developed personhood. Legitimacy is attributed to those who are virtuous enough to make decisions in a complex setting such as war.

The personhood theory in itself does not affirm anything about a reasonable chance of success. However, the anti-colonial drive of African philosophy suggests that a reasonable chance of success is not an important factor. Anti-colonial movements, when they started, indeed had very little chance of success, given that colonial power was so hegemonic. However, very few – if any – African scholars would argue that anti-colonial acts of war were not morally justified. To date, I have not seen any positive principle regarding chance of success; negatively, however, it is clear that African thinkers tend to believe that the chance of success unduly limits acts of war because it unfairly gives the advantage to the side of the powerful (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2020a).

Regarding *jus in bello*, the general prescription is that war cannot be conducted in a way that precludes the development of personhood. In traditional Western just war theory, two broad principles of discrimination and proportionality govern how war ought to be conducted. The principle of discrimination states that only certain

targets are legitimate in war. Particularly, it prescribes that civilians are not legitimate targets and soldiers are. The principle of proportionality prescribes that offensives must be proportional to the objective desired. The justification for these routinely ranges from the deontological to the utilitarian. The deontological justification goes along the lines that respect for these principles honours harbouring goodwill to all. The consequentialist justification grounding these principles is that they minimize overall suffering (Walzer 2006; 2015; Moseley 2022).

The African personhood viewpoint holds similar views but grounds them on a different justification. Regarding the proportionality principle, similar to what was argued above, the African personhood viewpoint endorses this principle *because* it is the *best way to develop personhood*: proportionality entails moderation which is key for developing good character. The discrimination principle is perhaps flexibly endorsed. Note that many wars in Africa are not conventional in the sense that they are not strictly fought by governmental armies. Instead, they are a bit more chaotic, involving mercenaries, governmental armies and civilians. (McFate 2020). The African personhood perspective implies that legitimate targets are those who have moral responsibility for acts that undermine the development of personhood. This does not exclude civilians from being targets if civilians are involved in immoral acts, such as a defamation campaign of an ethnicity during a war. A person who is involved in racist propaganda, incentivizing and being directly responsible for the genocide of an ethnic group, is a legitimate target, despite not being a soldier.

Personhood and *Jus Post Bellum*

The most promising relevance of the personhood theory to the ethics of war is *jus post bellum.* Even if the reader is not convinced that personhood can be used as a just cause for initiating a war, it is still relevant in a post-war scenario. Western post-war theories tend to recommend two approaches: either to punish (e.g., the Nuremberg Trials) or to forget (e.g., amnesties) wrongdoing (Binsbergen 2002). The model for punishing is simply to inflict proportional pain on those who have committed wrongdoing. The model of forgetting is to leave the past behind without addressing it, so that it fades into memory and ceases being part of the culture. When it ceases as part of the culture, it will mitigate or dissipate tensions (Binsbergen 2002; Murphy 2013). The South African experience, however, points in another direction, the one of reconciliation and forgiveness. A post-war scenario ought to commit to reconciling parties through rehabilitation of both victim and wrongdoer. Ideally, the victims ought to forgive, and the wrongdoers ought to realize and admit the wrongs they have committed. Post-war, in other words, should be driven by the idea of fostering friendship, that is, the kind of proximity that the personhood ideal recommends. This does not merely involve coexisting with grievances, but actually renewing the relationship in a way that results in a genuine reconciliation (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018b; Binsbergen 2002).

The rehabilitation of both the victim and wrongdoer is necessary for reconciliation because the welfare of these two is inextricably connected from this viewpoint. African ontology understands everything to be linked. The West African mythology of the Siamese Crocodile illustrates the case in point. In this story, a crocodile with two heads and a shared stomach is represented; whatever one head eats, will affect the other due to the shared stomach. Humanity is like this too, for

the ontology of the other inevitably influences our own (Gyekye 2011). Thus, it is through the rehabilitation of one that the other can also be rehabilitated. It is only through the act of forgiveness that the victim expunges the cycle of revenge and hatred that ties a person to the wrongdoer. This act of forgiveness consists partly in understanding that wrongdoers are individuals who have lost their humanity. Someone who has lost the capability to feel compassion, love and friendship is a person who has somehow lost what is fundamentally human about themselves (Tutu 2000; 2011). At a fundamental level, this person is cut off from a basic good: that of engaging in positive relationships with others (Ewuoso 2021). Hence, efforts ought to be made to help victims recover their humanity. Underlying this argument is the hope that the wrongdoer can be rehabilitated. However, even if the wrongdoer cannot be rehabilitated, the best course of action is still to forgive. There is no future without forgiveness, for people can easily become stuck in their grievances and unable to relate to others properly. To forgive is to break the chain of hatred and get rid of the emotional dependence on the wrongdoer that is brought about by feelings of bitterness (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018b).

Reconciliation, forgiveness and their corollaries as guiding principles imply a very different post-war attitude. Rather than going through a process of humiliation with a clear binary logic of winner and loser, the alternative I am suggesting here fosters a win-win strategy, where there is an attempt to rehabilitate and build a positive future together (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Lee 2022). This view has the advantage of not inflating existing grievances through a discourse of victory and instead tries to eliminate them by placing a shared future at the centre of discourse. Arguably, twentieth-century Western politics has over-focused on the victory and superiority of the winning side, instead of building common ground for a positive and shared future (Binsbergen 2002; Doxtader 2002). However, I am not ruling out punishment as an option. There is no doubt that punishment is necessary and the right thing to do in some situations. In the case of South Africa, there was a mixture of punishment and reconciliation involved. Thus, the two approaches – punishment and reconciliation – are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

Tutu prescribes sincere truth-telling as part of the post-war healing process (Tutu 2000; 1988; 2011). Truth-telling is important for many reasons. Firstly, the person who committed the wrongs may realize the wrongness of their actions through speaking. Spelling out one's actions forces a person to think about them in a way that not speaking about them does not do. Truth-telling therefore has the therapeutical effect of recognizing one's wrongdoing. This is a necessary step toward asking for forgiveness (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Lee 2022; Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018b). Second, the victim and the victim's families have the right to know the truth. Knowing exactly what happened is necessary for proper mourning. Mourning rituals are of great importance for healing one's emotions (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2020b). Healing these emotions is in turn crucial for forgiving. Third, a level of trust in institutions is enhanced by their ability to find the truth. Truth in institutions is in turn crucial for peaceful relations among citizens so that they rely on the right institution for the pursuit of justice, rather than, say, vigilante justice.

It is important to note at this point how these theories of jus ad bellum, jus in bello and jus post bellum differ from previous African ones. First, previous African communitarian philosophy has largely addressed this from philosophies hailing from other parts of Africa. One study published in the *Journal of Speculative*

Philosophy, for example, looks at the ethics of war in Guinea-Bissau and South Africa from a historical viewpoint (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2018a). Second, the implications of ubuntu and personhood, despite being similar, are not exactly the same. They are similar because they are both communitarian and give primacy to relationships. But the personhood model is less consequentialist and more focused on procedures for the development of personhood. The ubuntu approach focuses more on outcomes but does not consider the importance of the formation of virtue or character as much. Third, these differences sometimes imply different justifications or prescriptions. One clear example of this is that legitimacy to initiate a war in the personhood approach is tied to the character of the agent, whereas this recommendation is absent in the ubuntu approach. Another aspect of post bellum is that the personhood approach defends proportionality grounded not only on the outcomes of disproportionate action, but also on emphasizing the procedures for developing a good character.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I contend that there are moral and political reasons to decolonize war ethics. This article addressed such decolonization and provided an account of African war ethics for *jus ad bellum, jus in bello* and *jus post bellum*. This theory is primarily grounded on the African concept of personhood and prescribes that the ethics of war should be guided by concerns about the development of personhood in society. Any war that undermines the possibility for the development of personhood is an immoral war; a war that is fought in ways that sabotage personhood are not ethical ways to conduct war; and post-bellum processes should replace the models of forgetting and punishing for a model of truth-telling and forgiving.

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