Comparative Ethical Perspectives on EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) and Ecology

Elvis Imafidon, SOAS University of London

Ethical Concepts in EDI

The Ethics of EDI

- Although the EDI discourse often has political and legal motivations, the fundamental foundation for EDI is ethical.

- EDI ethics consist of the analysis of the normative moral principles or theories of human actions that promote (rather than inhibit) equality, equity, diversity and inclusion.

The Ethics of EDI

- EDI ethics is generally Western-centric in the current framework, drawing heavily on philosophical ethics from the global north. It does not rely on the global traditions of ethics.
  - Virtue ethics – the evaluation of human action as permissible or impermissible based on the character and virtues displayed by a person. E.g. honesty, open-mindedness, courage, etc. (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, etc.)

The Ethics of EDI

- Autonomy-based (right-based) ethics – normative ethical theories that define the permissibility or impermissibility of human action based on the extent to which they promote, individuality, autonomy, rights, and difference (Kant, Nietzsche, existentialist ethics, etc.).

- Justice-based ethics – defining the rightness or wrongness of human actions and the extent to which they promote EDI heavily based on a sense of justice promoted in the global north – fairness, equality, even distribution of resources, etc. (John Rawls, etc.)
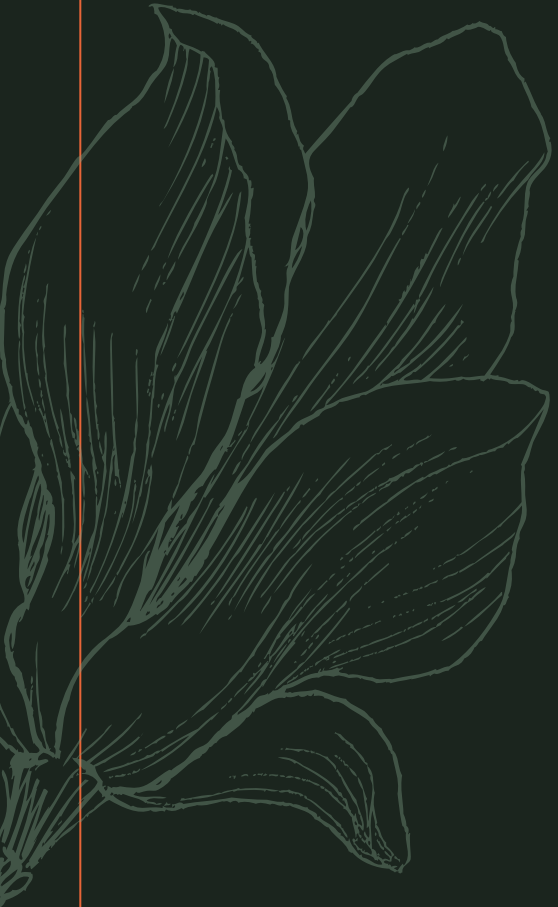
Limits of Western-centric EDI Ethics

Performative contradiction

- It's a performative contradiction to engage in discourses on EDI while relying exclusively on Western ethical theories and frameworks
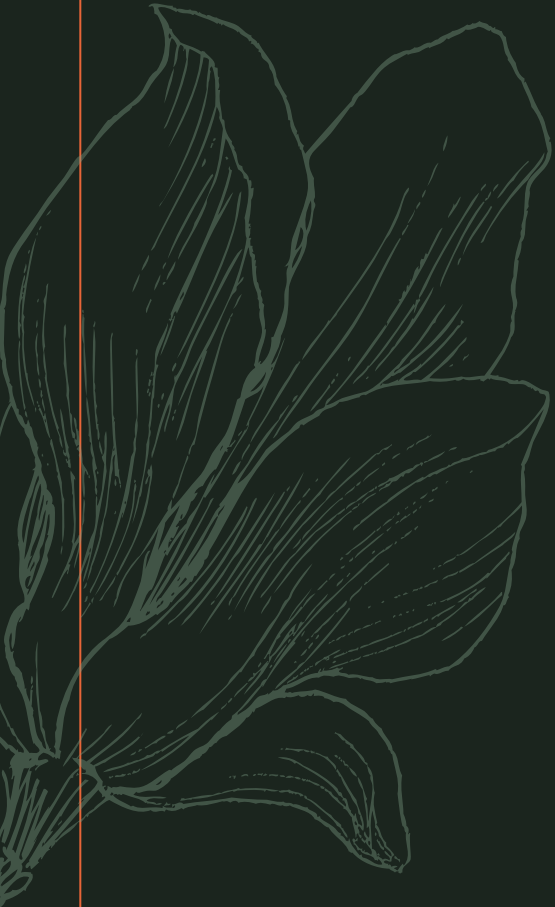
Limits of Western-centric EDI Ethics

Rights-heavy theory

- The ethical framework for EDI in the West heavily emphasises rights, individualism, autonomy, the self, radical difference, a Western sense of existentialism and the like but less on duties, taking responsibility, the limit of freedom, etc.
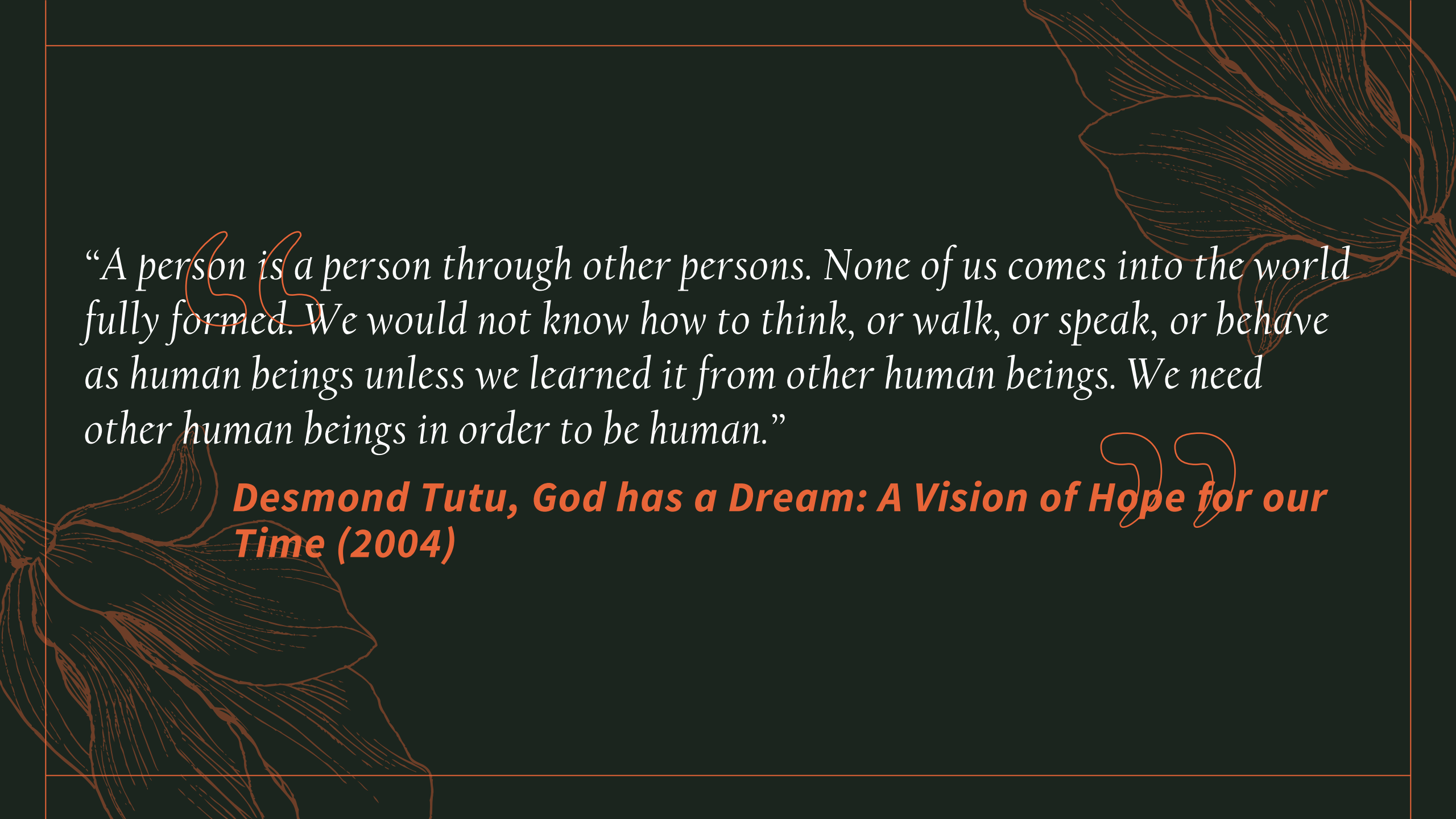
Limits of Western-centric EDI Ethics

Racial Justice and Decoloniality

- Justice and fairness to peoples from historically marginalised groups and taking the indigenously produced knowledges of such peoples seriously is not possible under a Western-centric approach to EDI.

African Ethical Theory

- The theory of morality that is deducible and formulated from the textual and non-textual epistemic repositories in sub-Saharan African traditions

  - Ubuntu (Afro-communitarian philosophy) – Ubuntu as a summative word for a Zulu/Xhosa phrase: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning 'a person is a person through other persons'. Ubuntu represents humanness and humaneness. It emphasizes codependency, solidarity, togetherness, friendliness, relationships, harmony, and communion as essential ingredients for building and sustaining humanity.

"A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human."

Desmond Tutu, God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time (2004)

African Ethical Theory

- The relationality principle - Ubuntu is the recognition that human actions must be geared toward building and sustaining community, togetherness, equilibria societies, and humanity. Actions that do not promote or build community are seen as social ills that must be avoided. An African relational or communitarian moral theory or ethics holds that persons build community by building relationships with others, human and non-human. Actions that build community are morally permissible actions. Actions that cause discord and threaten the community are impermissible because they breed disequilibrium and imbalance, leading to chaos, instability, tensions, and discrimination.

African Ethical Theory

- The transgenerational principle – The community of selves in an African place and the relationality among the beings in that community goes beyond the community of the physically living. It consists of the active past (e.g. ancestors), the active present (the physically living), and the potential future (the future generation of the unborn). Transgenerationality broadens the scope of inclusion, diversifies the community and embeds the idea of equal responsibilities and rights for past, present and future persons in the community.

African Ethical Theory

- Other-regarding duties – Central to sub-Saharan African ethics is an emphasis on duties to others and less emphasis on individual rights and autonomy. The idea is that the community must be sustained first for each individual to have an enabling environment to thrive and pursue individual goals and aspirations. This is because no individual is self-sufficient and needs the survival of others and the environment in the community to be able to exist and survive. Thus, duties done toward the well-being of others and the environment are crucial. The principle of other-regarding duties enriches EDI by ensuring stakeholders take the responsibility to sustain and represent others and the environment seriously.

UBUNTU
I am because we are

African Ethical Concepts for EDI

relationality

ancestors

unborn   togetherness

human

community

past

other-regarding

ubuntu

equilibria-societies

responsibility

duties

afro-communitarianism

transgenerationality

present

humanness

solidarity

future

african-ethics

non-human

Impact on Environmental Ethics

- With climate change and crises as front-burner issues today, African ethics can contribute immensely to the discourse of environmental ethics.

- Bearing in mind the tenets of EDI, there are many lessons we can draw from African relational perspectives of the environment in rethinking our relationship with other beings, human and non-human in the environment.
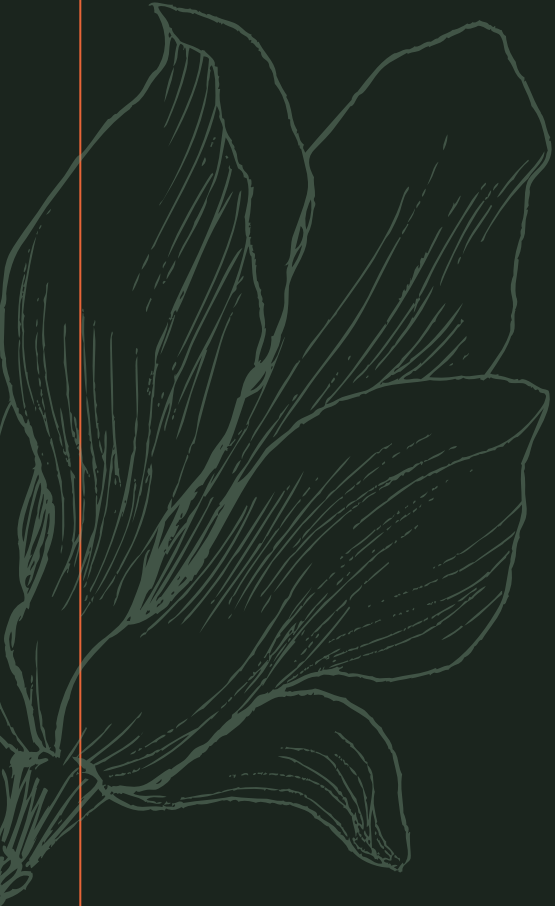
Impact on Environmental Ethics

Relational perspective on ecology

- The idea that all beings, human and non-human are intertwined and interconnected through energies and forces. Healthy relationships, solidarity and care for the well-being of other beings increase rather than diminish life forces.

Impact on Environmental Ethics

Transgenerational hermeneutics of climate change

- Being and existence and our responsibilities to others can only be understood in relation to the past and with the potential future always-at-hand. Ancestorship as the genes from the past, and the unborn generation play crucial roles in understanding our present and in planning for the future.

Impact on Environmental Ethics

Personhood beyond the human

- There is a lot to learn from the dynamism of personhood in African thought – the fact that both human beings and non-human beings can earn personhood based on the extent to which they build and sustain community. Thus, personhood is not only an intrinsic value but also an earned value. E.g., Animals, plants, water bodies, ancestors can all earn personhood.
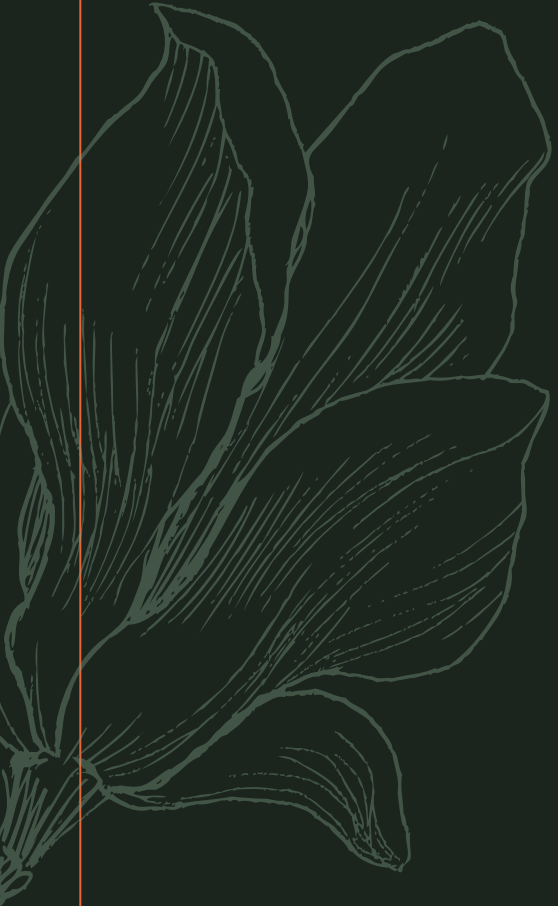
Thank you

Selected for Further Reading

Behrens, K. Toward an African Relational Environmentalism. In Imafidon, E and Bewaji, J.I.A. (Eds.). *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-ethics*. Lexington Books, 2014.

Imafidon, E. Intrinsic versus earned worth in African conception of personhood. In E. Imafidon (Ed.), *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference*. Springer, 2020.

Imafidon, E. Exploring African relational ethic of Ubuntu for inclusion and solidarity in the humanitarian field. *Europe Talks Solidarity*, SALTO-YOUTH, 2022

Imafidon, E and Bewaji, J.I.A. (Eds.). *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-ethics*. Lexington Books, 2014.

Kelbessa, W. The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa. *Diogenes* 53, 2005.

Molefe, M. Critical comments on Afro-communitarianism: The community versus individual. *Filosofia Theoretica Journal of African Philosophy Culture and Religions*, 6(1), 2017.

Ramose, M. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Mond Press.

Tutu, D. *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time*, Africa Image Books 2004.

Tutu, D. *No Future without Forgiveness*. Random House 1994.

Wiredu, K. Death and afterlife in African culture. In K. Wiredu & K. Gyekye (Eds.), *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* (pp. 137–152). The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.