

Social Persons, Social Inequality and Social Death¹

Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe²

Abstract: How might one make sense of the intimate but often assumed connection between social inequality and social death? In this paper, I offer an answer. It develops in stages. First, I set out in some detail an account of person prominent in sub-Saharan African thought systems, specifically the version of it found in the writings of Ifeanyi Menkiti. Second, I show how this account entails both that persons are social entities and that consequently they belong in a social ontology. Third, I suggest a perspective on Orlando Patterson’s notion of social death and then show how Menkiti’s account of persons as psycho-social entities can provide ontological grounding for the phenomenon of social death. Roughly, the overarching claim is that rather than merely disrespect their victims, oppressive forms of social inequality essentially depersonalise them in the sense at issue in Patterson’s social death.

1. Introduction

Although the moral dimensions of the sub-Saharan African idea of *Ubuntu* have been frequently explored, comparably less attention has been paid to the metaphysical view of person it implies. In this paper, I want to make sense of a view of personhood implicit in *Ubuntu*. As far as I can tell, Ifeanyi Menkiti’s account of maximal personhood is the clearest and perhaps most systematic attempt to make the underlying metaphysical view of person explicit. However, he’s been interpreted more often than not as holding the view that to be a person is to be a morally better human being. To be more humane in one’s actions (Ikuenobe 2006 and Molefe 2016). My suspicion, as I shall explain, is that that interpretation is at best incomplete. So, my specific aim is to explain how his maximal view entails that persons are social entities and as such that they belong in a social ontology. Part of this involves explaining why a social ontology is significant. Or, otherwise, why it is part of a general ontology. I take up these issues in the two sections that immediately follow this one.

All those familiar with Orlando Patterson’s analysis of the internal dynamics of slaveholding societies would be aware of the intimate connection he sees between slavery and social death. Many commentators have since taken up the latter notion, focusing extensively on the social losses it entails. However, as I go on to show, there is in addition the dimension of ontological loss implied in social *death*. Hence, my other aim in this paper is to show how Menkiti’s account of person can offer ontological grounding to Patterson’s notion of social death. Part of the view I motivate in the fourth section is that without an account of persons as social entities in a social ontology, the notion of social death is not as compelling as it would otherwise be. More clearly, at the centre of the experience of social death is a psycho-social entity—a person in Menkiti’s sense—whose cessation constitutes an ontologically significant loss.

Ultimately I want to show that because Menkiti’s maximal view of person foregrounds social aspects, it is well placed to account for the intuition that rather than merely disrespect their victims, certain oppressive social practices (which I lump together as social inequality) literally

depersonalise them in the sense at issue in Patterson's social death. Alternatively, they involve for the oppressed literal ways of dying in the social world. In order to establish this overarching claim, I briefly examine and then reject Marya Schechtman's argument that oppression, particularly as manifested in slavery in Antebellum South, did not result in the depersonalization and therefore social death of slaves. Although the focus is on slaves, I believe that the terms of the discussion can be applied to other similar interactions and practices that aim to normalise oppressive unequal social relations.

2. *Ubuntu* and the Making of a Social Person

Most people are familiar with the *Ubuntu* aphorism, *a person is a person because of other persons* (*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, in Zulu) or its variant *I am because we are*. At least, one of the two has been at the centre of important philosophical expositions in the last two decades or more, most notably in the writings of John Mbiti (1970), Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984, 2004a), Mogobe Ramose (1999), and more recently Thaddeus Metz (2007, 2011). They have also been frequently employed outside of philosophy. In this regard, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) has been widely cited, as has been Judge Yvonne Mokgoro (1998). For me, however, the key insight conveyed by these aphorisms springs to life and receives concrete expression in a short story told by South African writer, Zakes Mda, in his book, *Sometimes there is a void: memoirs of an outsider* (2012).

'Khawundenz' umntu, mntak'a Bhut' Solomzi, a grating voice startles me. Make me into a person, son of Solomzi.

I know immediately that the ragged old lady uttering these words is asking me for a favour. It is how words are used by my people. When someone needs help from you she is in fact asking you to make her into a person.

Feigning ignorance, Mda seeks to clarify what precisely he is being asked.

'When you say I must make you a person, grandma, are you not yet a person?' I ask the old lady.

The old lady will have none of it:

'Sukundigezela, the old lady says. Don't ask me a silly question. 'How can I be a person when you have not made me a person?' (Mda 2012, 223–24).

We learn a little later that she is asking for a quart of beer. But that shouldn't distract us at all. Indeed, ignoring, as Mda does, the irony of making someone into a person by sponsoring their quest to get drunk, we can learn a great deal from the interaction. As it turns out, the old lady is doing much more than asking Mda for a quart of beer—she is appealing to a way of thinking, a shared understanding, which Mda understands rather well. As he explains:

We are not people, my grandmother used to instil in us, until somebody makes us into people by being generous towards us. When we are born we are animals. . . . Until someone makes us people by showering us with acts of kindness (Mda 2012, 223–24).

So, there is more than a quart of beer at stake for the old lady. It was also about her *standing* as a *person*. In other words, part of what it means to be a person is to be the object of certain kinds of attitudes and treatment. Specifically, to count as a person, one must be treated by another in kindly and generous ways. But that's not all. Keep in mind that it is not only the old lady who has a stake in the interaction. Mda's *standing* as a *person* rides on it as well.

“Whenever my grandmother discovered such selfishness,” Mda recalls, “she would shout at the culprit, ‘*Awungomtu!*’ You are not a person! Why? Because only those who are generous and compassionate have reached the state of personhood” (Mda 2012, 224). Thus, this was a decisive moment in which Mda had to demonstrate to a fellow-villager that he is a person. Not just a human being. This obviously adds a further layer of significance to the old lady’s request in the eyes of Mda. He had to justify himself as a person in the eyes of the other.

Moreover, all of that makes sense given a shared social and cultural infrastructure without which talk of making one into a person would be unintelligible. By this I mean, a range of background facts, including shared beliefs, tradition, culture, language, norms, institutions, and practices that constrain and illuminate the interaction between Mda and the old lady. This is why the old lady was quick to remind Mda of the silliness of his question. In essence, she was saying given these background facts, her request to be made into a person is not only not irrational but also imperative.

We can infer the following two basic ideas from Mda’s short story. The first is that ordinary social interactions—i.e., ways of seeing, treating and relating to each other—can constitute their participants as persons. The second is that this has the implication that one is not a person merely because one is a human being. When we are born, Mda tells us, we are human animals. We only become persons much later and crucially in virtue of how we treat and are treated by others. Until one enters into the relevant kind of social interaction with others one remains a human being merely.

It seems to me that these two ideas underlie Ifeanyi Menkiti’s conception of person. In what follows, I explain the account in three stages. The first stage consists in what Menkiti characterises as ontological progression. It is his answer to the question of the relationship between a human being and a person. For him, it is not a relation of identity, but of dependence of the latter on the former. Ontological progression captures the novelty involved in the emergence of person from a human being. In some sense, it tracks the developmental trajectory of a normal human being from childhood to adulthood. If all goes well, Menkiti says, what emerges at the end of that process, that is, a person, differs ontologically from a human being.

What we have here then is both a claim that a qualitative difference exists . . . and a claim that some sort of ontological progression exists between infancy and ripening old age. One does not just take on additional features, one also undergoes fundamental changes at the very core of one’s being (Menkiti 1984, 173).

In making the point, Menkiti’s example relates specifically to children. However, given what he goes on to say, he might as well have added those with senile dementia, with severe cognitive impairments, in persistent vegetative state (PVS) etc. to the list of human non-persons. I shall say a bit more going forward about why children especially are not yet persons. Moreover, notice that when Menkiti says persons differ from human beings, he does not mean merely that persons possess one or more higher-order psychological features that human non-persons lack. It is not simply a matter of gradation in psychological powers. Instead, he is alluding to an ontological difference (1984, 174; 2004a, 325). In other words, when putting together an inventory of what exists, we count a person and the human being associated with her separately. They are different kinds of things. They belong to distinct ontological categories.

Moreover, although he does not always make it explicit, one reason for the difference in ontological classification is that their existence and persistence conditions differ. One is social, the other is biological. Whereas a human being comes into existence at some point shortly after conception, a person only begins to exist much later as a unit of social interaction. In addition, Menkiti says that whereas a human being ceases to exist at the end of biological life, personal persistence extends beyond biological death. In fact, Menkiti is explicit that a person only goes

out of existence when the social interactions that support her existence cease to obtain (1984, 174–75). All that means that to identify a human being is not to identify a person. One and the same thing cannot have two different existence and persistence conditions.

One might be tempted to think that since the existence and persistence conditions of persons are not biological, they must be psychological. In fact, some philosophers who distinguish between person and human being claim that the difference is simply down to persons possessing one or more higher-order psychological property essentially. Lynne Baker, for example, defines members of the class of persons as beings that possess a robust first-person perspective essentially. At least, in a robust sense. What sets a person apart from other beings is “a conceptual capacity to conceive of herself as herself from the first-person.” (2015, 79; see also 78–81). Human beings only have a rudimentary first-person perspective.

The second stage in Menkiti’s account involves showing that persons are not reducible to one or more psychological property. Like Baker, Menkiti acknowledges the role of a robust psychological life. Unlike her, he insists that there are no psychological properties that members of the class person have essentially (1984, 171–72). Not only is he anti-essentialist in the sense implied in that statement, he is also quite firm that focusing on this or that psychological capacity is at best taking a narrow perspective or settling for a minimal definition of person. (As we shall see shortly, he goes for a “maximal definition” of person, which foregrounds the social aspects as well.) In addition, his assessment is that psychological properties are not significant in themselves. Their significance lies in the fact that they are relational. By that I mean that they are oriented toward the other or to a larger community.

Consider, for example, the capacity for language which, according to Menkiti, “points us, one and all, everywhere in the world, to a mental commonwealth with others—others whose life histories encompass past, present, and future” (1984, 172). Put differently, the capacity for language requires a community of interlocutors. A shared language entails group belonging and so immediately locates their speakers in a specific and historical human, linguistic and cultural community. The same is true of the capacity for a self-concept, which Menkiti also sees as an important aspect of being a person. It has an immediate relation to others and to a human community. This is so because the acquisition of a self-concept is possible only in the context of a community. As a child learns the language of the group, it is able to develop concepts, first of the other, and then later of self. This is why Menkiti says “it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent, fact of this world” (1984, 171–72). So, to develop a robust consciousness of oneself requires that there are other selves. The capacity is intelligible only relationally.³

The point is that one cannot exhaust the full meaning of what it means to be a person by focussing solely on the possession of these capacities, without explicit reference to the social world in which they find expression and meaning. Considered from this perspective, we might say that psychological properties are necessary, but not sufficient for being a person. We cannot make sense of what it means without reference to an envioning community. That is, a social and cultural infrastructure, including the interactions and practices (sometimes more complex than the one Mda describes) undertaken by those in them.

Before setting out the social aspects of Menkiti’s account, I should address a lingering concern. If a human being with a robust psychology is not a person, what is it? Menkiti does not take up the question directly. However, my reading of him suggests that a psychologically mature human being is a moral agent, but not a person. This means that he can be held morally responsible for his actions. To be a moral agent is to be endowed with a moral personality, which entails that one has the capacity for moral deliberation, moral imagination and that moral emotions are an issue for one (Menkiti 1984, 176–77; 2017, 466–67). All persons are moral agents, but not all moral

agents are persons. To see what makes someone a person, we will have to turn attention to the third stage and examine the social aspects Menkiti emphasises.

By far the most significant aspects of the lives of persons are social. We have already noted that for there to be persons at all, there has to be an enviroing community or a social and cultural infrastructure in place. There are three ways Menkiti takes account of this fact: social incorporation, social participation and social recognition. To be socially incorporated is to be formally integrated as a member of community. This might require going through established rituals of initiation and processes of socialisation. Along the way, individuals are afforded the opportunity to learn the social rules of the community (Menkiti 1984, 172–73; 2004a, 326–28).

Menkiti actually says that without social incorporation, “the description person does not truly apply” (1984, 172; see also 2004a, 328). I should add that I have chosen to analytically distinguish social incorporation, social participation and social recognition for purpose of clarity. In practice, social incorporation involves social participation and social recognition, although I am inclined to distinguish between formal and evaluative sense of incorporation and then to identify social recognition with the evaluative form. We can compare it to the religious practice of baptism. At least, in some Christian denominations, one is not formally recognised as a member of the community until one has been baptised. Similarly, social incorporation is the first sort of interaction or practice relevant for becoming a person. However, one may be socially incorporated, and so understand the conventions, social rules and moral norms of one’s community, but fail to be guided by them.

Hence, in addition, Menkiti underlines social participation. This means that beyond merely going through the process of social incorporation, one takes active part in social life. The focus here is on the individual’s responsiveness to societal expectations and obligations. According to Menkiti, these expectations depend on one’s social position or role (1984, 176). This is why children cannot enter into the sort of interactions that constitute persons. No one can reasonably expect them to bring their behaviour in line with social expectations or moral norms. Indeed, some of these practices, rules and expectations are moral. Menkiti emphasises that practices of attributing praise and blame and holding each other morally accountable are person-type activities. They imply that the concept of person entails carrying out special moral obligations. Something children cannot really take part in (Menkiti 2004a, 325–26). Moreover, unlike some social expectations, moral ones derive from one’s standing as a moral agent, which children are obviously not.

Still, one can take part in social interactions and practices, but fail to be a person. To get that final step, what is required is that one receives social recognition from others or the community. This is what Menkiti has in mind when he proposes that it is the conferring of person-status that ultimately makes the difference for personhood. This is also why he stresses the role of “evidentiary knowledge,” in the person-making process (2004a, 326–27; 1984, 172).⁴ To return to the story with which we began, Mda’s public display of generosity toward a fellow-villager, a way of being that aligns with social and moral expectations, is the crucial piece of evidence needed by the old lady (and other members of community) to recognise Mda as a person, and not merely a human being. It is also the evidence of recognition that the old lady with whom Mda is interacting is a person. In these and other ordinary acts of recognition, individuals engaged in social interactions publicly make each other into persons in the social world.

All that means that the central considerations that go into making persons in the social world are to a significant degree social. Biological and psychological considerations do play a role as well, however it is ultimately through incorporation, participation and crucially recognition that persons are made. But why, you might ask, do these three ways of interacting socially together constitute their participants as persons? The answer can be seen in Menkiti’s appeal to collective acceptance.

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-*status* of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one (1984, 176).

Elsewhere, Menkiti says it is a matter of “cultural fact” that these social interactions have the special authority they have to constitute their participants as persons. He then adds that whether there are persons in the required sense depends on the extent to which the understanding is publicly and widely shared (2004a, 330).

I should clarify here that there is an important difference between social recognition and collective acceptance. Whereas the former is an evaluative judgement about an individual's standing as a person, the latter is an explanation of why the understanding of person has the force it has within a given society.

3. The Ontological Significance of Psycho-Social Persons

Given the above characterisation, it is pretty clear that maximal persons are not biological entities. As we have seen, they differ from human beings, in that their existence and persistence conditions are not biological. They are not strictly speaking psychological entities either, although psychological maturity is important. Such a reductive approach cannot fully account for what it means to be a person in community. Instead, they are constituted out of complex social interactions and practices undertaken by a community of minded beings. As such, my goal in this section is threefold: to clarify that maximal persons are *psycho-social*; to explain why they are *entities*, and not merely psychological properties of a human being; and lastly to show that they are ontologically significant.

To fully understand the first claim, we need to separate its component parts: persons are *psycho-social* and they are *entities*. Something is psycho-social if its existence and persistence depends on it being conceived and treated in a particular way by a cohesive community of robustly minded beings. In other words, it is sustained by mental attitudes and social practices.⁵ As we have seen, Menkiti's view is that we make each other into persons in the context of ordinary social and moral interactions and practices by way of mutual recognition. This typically involves others adopting certain attitudes and undertaking acceptable actions toward oneself and vice versa. And all that takes place within a social and cultural infrastructure. Outside of these interactions there are no persons. To illustrate, a feral child could not be a person. There are no other humans to regard him as such and certainly no robust social and cultural infrastructure to support his personhood. So, if the characterisation of psycho-social is accurate, then maximal persons are psycho-social.⁶

However, not all psycho-social phenomena constitute an entity. Some are merely activities (e.g., a game of chess) or roles (e.g., prime minister). On my view, something is a social entity if it satisfies three distinct, but related criteria.⁷ First, a psycho-social entity depends on physical entities, although, as I explain below, they are not reducible to them. A fictional character in a novel, like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, is a psycho-social entity that fails to meet the present criteria. Its existence depends entirely on the creativity of the author and on established conventions of fiction writing. Unlike fictional characters, there is a dependence, not an identity, relation between each psycho-social person and her human associate. Not only is Menkiti committed to a pluralist materialist universe, comprising physical, mental and social

entities and properties, he is quite firm that that there are persons at all depend on there being human beings (2004b). Moreover, as a result of ontological novelty, and related social interactions and practices, a person subsequently emerges from a human being. In other words, to say that persons are psycho-social is not to say that they are invented like fictional characters.

Second, it must exhibit non-conventional causal features (Khalidi 2015). Money is psycho-social entity on my view. It has causal features. It causes us to behave in particular ways. If I give a €100 to a sales woman at a bookstore for a philosophy textbook, she is obliged to give me the book in exchange. However, the causal features of money are *purely* conventional. In other words, that a piece of paper produced by the national central banks has the status of banknotes, that is, functions as a means of exchange in the Euro area, is simply a matter of agreement. In comparison, the causal features of psycho-social persons do not exist merely by agreement. The connection between being a person and the feature of being responsible to others in the social world is not a matter of conventions. Moreover, we cannot not decide willy-nilly that a child or automaton for that matter can be held responsible, although it can be decided that it is a piece of cloth rather than a piece of paper that has the features of money. Whereas in the one case it is entirely arbitrary, in the former it is not.

Third, a psycho-social entity must causally interact with its environment as an integrated whole, sufficiently distinct from the physical entity to which it is related or from which it emerges. I submit that when we interact with persons we see and treat them as unified wholes sufficiently distinct from a mere human being, e.g., a child or a PVS patient. I appreciate that it is difficult to see this, partly because being human and being person is usually well integrated in normal adults. After all, for most of our lives we are *embodied* persons. However, in cases where the two come apart, it is pretty clear that we relate to persons not only differently, but also as sufficiently distinct and integrated units of interaction. For Menkiti, the paradigmatic case of separation of person and human being is the case of ancestral persons. This is because on his view they are disembodied persons whose continued existence depends entirely on psycho-social features. Leaving aside the controversy that might attend talk of ancestral persons, their case show that we can and do interact with persons as integrated units of interaction sufficiently distinct from the human entity with which they are associated.⁸ By contrast, a statue does not causally interact with its environment as a sufficiently distinct whole. Although the statue of Nelson Mandela can draw tears from the eyes of admirers and rally people behind a cause (e.g., unite South Africans to achieve the dream of a rainbow nation), it does so as *part* of the legend of Mandela, not as a distinct unit of interaction.

In a nutshell, maximal persons are psycho-social entities, in that they are causally efficacious units of social interaction and practices sufficiently distinct from the physical entities on which they depend. Importantly, they differ significantly from putative psycho-social entities like fictional characters, money and statues.

We are now in a position to explain why psycho-social persons are ontologically significant entities, meaning they belong in a general ontology. Which further means that they are ontologically irreducible and ineliminable. We can begin with the former. Something is ontologically irreducible if it is not entailed by physical properties and relations. I read Menkiti as holding the view that psycho-social persons are ontologically irreducible in this sense. They are constituted by features that are not reducible to physical properties and relations. Note that this does not entail immaterialism or supernaturalism. On the contrary, Menkiti holds the view that the universe of our experience evince not only physical, but also psychological and social aspects as well. More to the point, the psychological features that constitute a person are not reducible to physical one.

One irreducible psychological aspects of persons is a first-person perspective. To see this, recall the *ubuntu* saying with which we began. It is usually expressed in the third-person, objective sense viz., *a person is a person because of other persons*. What Menkiti goes on to show, however, is that

in addition to being regarded by others as person, one must also ascribe personhood to oneself. As he puts, citing John Mbiti approvingly, it involves one declaring *I am because we are*. Here's is Menkiti:

Its sense is not that of a person speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, another, but rather an individual, who recognises the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist or a claim regarding the individual's standing as a person (2004a, 324; 1984, 172).

To be a person is to recognise one's standing as a person from a first-person point of view. To put it another way, he is emphasising the *psychological* aspects, in what I have been describing as psycho-social persons.

Seen from this perspective, psycho-social persons are not ontologically reducible in that they are not entailed by physical properties and relations. As Lynne Baker has explained, correctly it seems to me, first-person statements cannot be deduced from third-person ones (Baker 2015, 83). Indeed, the truth expressed in a thought like, *I am because we are* is not captured in a third-person statement like, *a person is a person because of other persons*. As Menkiti explains in the passage above, in the former statement, there is an *internal* dimension, which is notably absent in the latter. To attempt to reduce psycho-social persons to physical entities is to leave out something fundamental namely, self-consciousness, a first-person perspective and other aspects of psycho-social persons that evince the internal dimension. In addition, we might add that psycho-social persons are ontologically irreducible, in that the moral and social aspects that constitute them are not entailed by physical properties and relations. Menkiti is explicit. He characterises the domain of the social as matter-silent, implying that the social is not entailed by physical properties and relations. As I understand him, the reason is that the moral and social relations that constitute person have both a normative and meaning-laden dimension to them. These are notably absent in purely physical properties and relations, which are neither normative nor meaningful.

Given all that, it is easy to see why psycho-social persons are ontologically ineliminable. If they were eliminated from ontology, many psychological phenomena, especially our intentional behaviours would be unintelligible. Moreover, if there were no psycho-social persons, we would also be unable to account for the normative and meaningfulness of social phenomena. In other words, psycho-social persons are indispensable to phenomena like joint commitments, shared norms and moral institutions and practices. Without psycho-social persons, they would be entirely incomprehensible.

Assuming, then, that irreducibility and ineliminability are plausible criteria for including entities in a general ontology, Menkiti's psycho-social persons get a place. They are ontologically significant. As such, his claim that the distinction between person and human being is ontologically laden is made both intelligible and plausible.

4. How to Kill Psycho-Social Persons

We have seen that social incorporation, participation and recognition constitute persons as psycho-social entities in the social world. What we are yet to consider is the flipside: social disincorporation, non-participation and non-recognition can constitute their targets as non-persons in the social world. Nowhere else has this possibility been broached than in Orlando Patterson's (1982) widely discussed comparative analysis of sixty-six slaveholding societies, which popularised the notion of social death.⁹ To my mind, the notion consists in two more basic ideas.

One is what Patterson refers to as secular excommunication. It implies the loss of social connectedness and social identity as a result of being excluded from community. It could be

literal. As when slaves are forced out of their own communities and then resettled into new communities, in which they are unable establish social connections with others on *equal* terms. A useful model is the Trans-Atlantic slavery. According to him, enslaved Africans were alienated natally, culturally and socially. Social death thus implies for them the loss of meaningful ancestral, cultural and social connections. Patterson describes it as an intrusive conception of social death (1982, 39). By contrast, extrusive social death does not entail physical dislocation from one's milieu. The individual is simply reincorporated as an *other* within his own community through an internal process of social differentiation. It is the image of a "fallen insider," he tells us. That is, of one who is not regarded as a full member of her own community and has been expelled from normal and equal social participation (1982, 38, 41).

Whether intrusive or extrusive, excommunication entails exclusion from normal social relations. Moreover, sometimes Patterson talks about alienation and liminality, but both seem to capture more or less the same thought in excommunication, namely being deprived of the claims of community (1982, 44). "The essence of slavery," he writes, "is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular" (1982, 51).

A second idea central to social death is status change. I understand Patterson to be making the additional point that when successful, secular excommunication involves a fundamental alteration, or perhaps distortion, of social status. "The slave, in his social death," he writes, "is already once transformed" (1982, 98). In other words, part of what it means to die socially is to be stripped of equal social status and be assigned a significantly inferior one. It is "the assumption of a new status in the household or economic organization of the master." By this, he means the "social use" to which the slave is put (1982, 52-53). For one, the slave is transformed into a property—a *thing* always at the master's disposal.¹⁰ For another, it implies what Patterson takes to be the second phase of social death, which "involves the paradox of introducing him [i.e., the socially dead] as a *nonbeing*" (1982, 38, my emphasis).

The foregoing observation is crucial. Many commentators tend to explain social death entirely in terms of secular excommunication or what Patterson also calls social alienation, implying merely the loss of social connectedness and identity. For representative examples, see the following: John Mason (2003) and Claudia Card (2003, 73-74), who argues that social death implies meaninglessness in social experience as a result of the loss of vital connections to family and community and to a social and cultural infrastructure. However, these views are unable to explain the sense in which social death makes its sufferers cease to be what they once were. Something I have recently noted Patterson captures in his reference to status change or the transition into nonbeing. The implication is that the meaning of social death is not exhausted by simply taking account of the social losses experienced by some human being. These losses are significant. However, in addition, social death entails ceasing to be what one initially was in the social world. To my mind, it is this aspect of social death that makes it comparable to physical death and gives the notion its powerful appeal. This means that like the latter, social death implies cessation of being (Patterson 1982, 209, 215, 236).

If I am right, then social death entails more than social losses. It is quite possible to lose aspects of a social self, say relationships to specific others and connection to a history and tradition, but still existence as a social being. After all, slaves or the oppressed in general often find new forms of social connections and identity in the new conditions they find themselves. What makes social death particularly bad is that it threatens one's continued social existence in some real way. In other words, it seems to me that to die socially one must cease to exist in some way in the social world. To retain its theoretical appeal, the relevant social losses must be extreme enough to make one into a *nonbeing* in the social world, rather than a being with significant social losses.

Some caution is needed here. The strong requirement that something ceases to exist does not

imply that social death is a condition that can never be negated. On the contrary, Patterson anticipates the possibility of what John Mason has described as social resurrection or as he calls it, “rebirth” (1982, 293). He notes that manumission typically results in the consequent conferral of a new status as non-slave or freed men and women (1982, 218, 229, 240). Yet, I understand Patterson as saying that when social resurrection occurs, it involves status change as well. In other words, the socially dead is again transformed from the condition of nonbeing to being in the social world (1982, 240–61).

To return to the main point, the sting of social death is in its ability to constitute being as nonbeing in the social world. Here is Patterson’s description of what really goes on when social death occurs:

The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized. This process of social negation constitutes the first, essentially external, phase of enslavement. The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing. (Patterson 1982, 38).¹¹

Notice that desocialisation ultimately results in the depersonalization of the victims, which entails further that they cease to be in a new social order. Elsewhere, Patterson says that in this new condition, the slave is rendered unlike other human beings (1982, 5). One way to understand the claim is that they are no longer eligible players in the social interactions that constitute persons. The implication is that they become human nonpersons.

At this point, the connection between Patterson’s social death and Menkiti’s psycho-social person starts becoming clear. Before focusing on it, however, I wish to make one observation. It is that the connection Patterson sees between social death and slavery is too intimate. For him, social death is the essential condition of slavery. Unlike Patterson, however, I think social death has a much wider application. This is because, as I go on to explain, it is closely linked to the experience of self—*of being a person*, and not to a specific form of oppression. As such, it can be seen in many instances of extreme oppression that seek to normalise unequal social relations by means of secular excommunication and status change.

Historical and current examples abound: racism in apartheid South Africa, gender inequality in the workplace and in deeply patriarchal cultures. It is fair to include economic inequality as well. Returning to the short story by Mda, the old lady offers the following reflection when asked by Mda why she is not a yet person although she is old: “The problems of poverty, my child ... they have stripped people like us of all personhood” (2012, 224). And then there is the Rwandan genocide and the genocide of European Jews. In this connection, Claudia Card’s work is insightful. She takes a more expansive view of social death, demonstrating that it is central to genocides. Her argument is that genocidal acts extend beyond homicide and includes social death as a distinct aim. In her words, “genocides that intentionally strip victims of the ability to participate in social activity, prior to their murders, do aim at their social death, not just their physical death” (2003, 76).

The point I wish to highlight is that social death extends beyond the condition of slavery as such. All social interactions and practices that seek to normalise unequal social relations by arbitrarily dividing up the human community, precluding some from full participation, assigning them an inferior identity status and so denying them social recognition have social death as their aim. This is because they follow Patterson’s two phases of desocialisation and depersonalisation and then the subsequent induction as a nonbeing in the social world of their oppressors.

Acknowledging that it has a much wider application, we can now motivate the claim that social death ultimately involves the cessation of a psycho-social person, rather than merely the loss of social connections. The thought is that the conditions that enable social inequality and

oppression not only exclude the possibilities for making each other into persons but also entrench the conditions for depersonalising others. In order to motivate that thought, we should highlight two key overlaps in the ideas of Patterson and Menkiti. More clearly, it seems to me first that what Patterson's characterises as secular excommunication neatly describes the conditions under which Menkiti's social incorporation and participation are absent. Moreover, the second phase of Patterson's social death namely, the introduction of the oppressed as a social nonbeing neatly overlaps with the privation of Menkiti's social recognition.

On Menkiti's picture, secular excommunication entails that victims of oppressive forms of social inequality are neither socially incorporated nor afforded the opportunity for full participation in social life. This does not mean that they are not *part* of the society in which they are oppressed. In some literal ways, they are physically present. But, as we saw earlier, social incorporation means more than mere physical presence in society. It entails a formal induction as a full-fledged member of community. For Menkiti, without social incorporation an individual exists in community merely as a dangler (1984, 172). In other words, mere existence in community is one thing, social incorporation is another. So, the lack of social incorporation may thus be understood in two ways.

First, although physically present, the social dangler lacks ancestral, cultural or social anchoring. Patterson describes it as natal alienation. It happens in cases of intrusive social death, in which one is forced out of one's social milieu. Moreover, and this is the second point, the situation of a social dangler might apply as well to a fallen insider—that is, one who is oppressed in his own community. In this case, there would have been an arbitrary internal partition, resulting in some individuals being accorded an inferior status in a marginal community. In both cases, and for both Patterson and Menkiti, the secular excommunicated or social dangler is deprived of claims of full membership in community. They would have ceased to belong in their own right “to any legitimate social order” (1982, 5). We might say then that the lack of social incorporation is a key aspect of secular excommunication. And, as such, it marks the earliest phases of social death.

There are obvious consequences to social disincorporation. It seems to me that Patterson and Menkiti are united in the thought that social alienation or a lack of incorporation entails social nonparticipation. Again, this does not mean at all that victims of oppression in conditions of social inequality do not participate at all or take part in social activities. Instead, what is at issue is the terms of social participation. For Menkiti, social participation loses its meaning altogether when “the individual's *willingness* to participate in the social game is ignored, with this or that set of rules imposed from a higher place” (2017, 466–67, emphasis as in the original). Patterson agrees. It is precisely the abnormal social relations between the oppressor and oppressed in an unequal society that makes it impossible for the latter to participate fully or normally (1982, 41). We might say then that secular excommunication is effectively achieved in social non-participation. The oppressed is at an advanced phase of social death.

As you might recall, the final phase of Patterson's social death has to do with the status of the oppressed as a social nonbeing in the social world of the oppressor. At this point, the many social deprivations and losses would have accomplished the goal of transforming the oppressed into something else in the eyes of the oppressor—i.e., in an oppressive social order. Menkiti accounts for this final aspect of social death through the notion of social (non)recognition. When oppression in an unequal society involves the failure to recognise the other in their own right or on their own terms, it is not merely social connections that is lost but one's standing as a psycho-social person. Whereas previously he was socially recognised as a person—a psycho-social being or entity, in the social order of his oppressor he is no longer so recognised. On this view, one dies socially when one becomes, to use Lisa Cacho's phrase, “dead-to-others” in those everyday interactions and practices that constitute persons (Cacho 2012, 7, 145).¹² The lack of social recognition is thus the final phase of social death.

All that means that to die socially in Patterson's sense is to cease to be a psycho-social person in Menkiti's sense. More clearly, Menkiti's psycho-social persons fill an important theoretical role. This is because although Patterson's account of social death implies that being becomes nonbeing, it does not specify clearly the nature of what undergoes this deadly social transformation. By turning to Menkiti, we are able to see that social death involves the re-constitution of psycho-social persons into nonpersons in everyday oppressive and unequal social interactions and practices. But it's not only that some psycho-social entity *literally* ceases to be. Because, as we have seen, psycho-social persons are ontologically significant, social death implies an ontological loss. To die socially is not merely to lose social connections to family, community and culture. In addition, there is a numerical reduction in the inventory of things that exist in our world. Moreover, what makes oppressive forms of social inequality especially bad is that they pose an ontological threat to the existence of prospective victims. When accomplished in the social world, they make good of the threat, rendering their victims socially dead. Thus ensuring a deficit in ontology.

5. Conclusion: a Probable Objection and a Reply

Most recently, I have proposed that with Menkiti's notion of psycho-social persons in hand, we can make better sense of what it means to be socially dead in Patterson's deployment of the term. Specifically, ways of seeing, treating and relating to others that makes social incorporation, social participation and social recognition impossible constitute social death for them. It may be countered, however, that the conclusion has been exaggerated. In fact, Marya Schechtman has argued along those lines in the context of her Person Life View, according to which part of what it means to be a person is to be seen and treated as one. Although, like Menkiti, she foregrounds the social aspects of person, she argues that oppressing others in social interactions do not render them nonpersons (2014, 125–31). Instead, she holds the view that oppression is morally disrespectful to the oppressed and undermine their autonomy. There is a need, she notes, to retain the intuitive difference between being disrespected, on the one hand, and not being a person, on the other. The view that oppressed individuals in an unequal society are nonpersons fails to capture that difference.

Further, on her view, even in the most horrible cases of oppression, victims are seen and treated as persons. They are *persons* who are disrespected, deprived of autonomy and denied opportunities for flourishing. Although horrible, these experiences do not make them nonpersons. On the contrary, the measures employed to sustain their oppression actually confirms that they are persons. For example, the strategies adopted by slaveholders to oppress African slaves in Antebellum Southern Society implied that slaves were persons notwithstanding their oppression. They were denied the right to testify in court against whites, make contracts, buy and sell goods, own firearms or possess anti-slavery literature etc.—the kinds of activities only persons could undertake. For Schechtman, this means that the correct description of their situation is that they were persons who were oppressed, rather than nonpersons because of their anomalous social position.¹³

In reply, let me state that I agree with Schechtman about the need to distinguish clearly between our concepts of respect and person. It is quite possible to respect someone who is not a person and to disrespect someone who is person. Even so, I insist that certain forms of social inequality can depersonalize their victims. The challenge for me is to distinguish between those cases in which oppression depersonalises and those in which it does not. We can focus on the question of severity, but I prefer to look at the rationale for oppression in unequal social relations. More clearly, where the rationale for oppression bears on identity questions, we might say that it has depersonalisation and social death as its aim. Part of the reason why the Holocaust was

especially bad is that it was driven by the motive of othering. It was not merely bad treatment of some human beings by others. Instead, Jews were badly treated because of who they are—or what the Nazi regime had made them into.¹⁴ Similarly, Black slaves in Antebellum Southern Society were treated the way they were because they had been racially and socially classified as the *other* by their slaveholders.

Indeed, it is too simplistic to say that because slave codes barred slaves from person-type activities, it can be assumed that slaves were persons. When carefully considered, Schechtman's analysis does not penetrate beyond the surface of the phenomenon of slavery in Antebellum South. It fails to notice that the rationale for slavery was in part driven by the racial science of the time that explicitly deemed slaves to be *inferior* to their masters. It fails to notice that slavery in that society rode on the capitalist economy of the time that rationalised and justified the buying and selling of persons as *things*. In both cases, it is clear that it is not merely that the victims were disrespected or their autonomy undermined. Rather, oppression had implications for their social standing and identity—it precluded their full recognition as persons in the social world. So, even if I agree with Schechtman that there are cases in which treating someone badly does not make them nonpersons, I might still insist that certain kinds of oppressive and unequal social relations have depersonalisation, in the sense at issue in social death, as their aim.

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Notes

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²Dr. Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe is a senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Western Cape and currently Humboldt Fellow at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He has published on the social aspects of self.

³We can also add to list of relational aspects of a person, some of the special moral properties Menkiti mentions. For example, the capacity for moral imagination—the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes—orients one toward others whose interests matter morally. He also refers to the capacity for moral emotions—specifically, guilt and shame, which are intelligible only in relation to others in a context of shared norms (see Menkiti 2017, 466–67).

⁴Relatedly, for a discussion of the role of intragroup recognition in Massai concepts of person, see Gail Presbey (2002). Moreover, the idea brings to Axel Honneth’s *Struggle for Recognition* (1995), although for Menkiti the focus is specifically on recognition as persons.

⁵Here, I am relying on Muhammad Khalidi’s criterion for distinguishing social kinds, which he describes as mental sustenance (Khalidi 2016, 239–44). Although the focus is on mental sustenance, I believe the details of his explanation imply that it is not merely mental attitudes but also particular social practices that sustain social kinds. According to him, “This is where a wedge might be driven between artificial kinds and psycho-social kinds. It may be said that the real difference between the former and the latter is that in the latter case, each particular instance of the kind simply ceases to be an instance of that kind if minds stop conceiving it in that way, or treating it accordingly, or responding to it appropriately” (Khalidi 2016, 240).

⁶Menkiti himself says that his account is an account of social selfhood (Menkiti 1984, 173).

⁷In what follows from here, I draw mainly from works of Khalidi (2015; 2016, 242–44) and Marya Schechtman (2014, 8, 119, 196–97) to make sense of the following three criteria for determining what counts as a psycho-social entity, although Schechtman in particular is not explicitly committed to the view that persons are psycho-social entities distinct from their human associate.

⁸For a discussion of the theoretical challenges involved in the belief in ancestral persons, see Katrin Flikschuh (2016).

⁹For criticisms of the notion of social death, see Vincent Brown (2009, 1233) and Herman Bennett (2006, 142). Some of the concerns have to do with the observation that social death doesn’t exhaust the complex experience of slaves, specifically the resistance and hope that characterise their condition (relatedly, see John Mason, for a discussion of social death and resurrection in relation to slavery in the Cape). Notwithstanding the criticisms by Brown and Bennett, I find the notion intuitively plausible and able to address the issues raised. What I go on to do is expand its application and suggest an ontological grounding for it.

¹⁰See Patterson’s discussion of the specific case of slavery in Roman system—specifically, the ways Roman property law tended to set person in opposition to slave—the thing (1982,31; 28-34, for a longer discussion).

¹¹For a similar view, see Saidiya Hartman, who describes social death as “the process by which lives were destroyed and slaves born” (2007, 6). Elsewhere, she says it consists in “annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, and then resuscitated them for servitude” (2007, 67–68).

¹²In fact, Lisa Cacho also believes that at the centre of the Orlando Patterson’s social death is the contemporary condition of “Ineligibility to personhood” (2012, 7, 145). My attempt, then, may be understood as filling in the details of the notion of personhood that does the required work for social death.

¹³Although her focus is on slavery, Schechtman believes that the point applies more widely to include unequal treatment of women, for example.

¹⁴To put in Slavenka Drakulić’s words: “I understand now that nothing but “otherness” killed Jews, and it began with naming them, by reducing them to the other. Then everything became possible. Even the worst atrocities like concentration camps or the slaughtering of civilians in Croatia or Bosnia (1992, 145). Consider also, Dimas Masolo’s observations about the Rwandan genocide: “In the Rwanda episode, the attackers were reported to refer to their victims as “cockroaches” rather than as other people . . .” and he goes on to describe it as “cockroachization or other forms of reducing others to “beings-less-than-human”” (2009, 54). In both cases, oppression tended to reduce the oppressed to something less than persons.

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