



Speaker Series: Safeguarding Democracy in the Age of AI

ACEPS
THE AFRICAN CENTRE
FOR EPISTEMOLOGY AND
PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Professor Nancy Jecker
3 February 2025 16:00-17:30 SAST
ZOOM LINK:

<https://zoom.us/j/92277343443>

Emergent Personhood: An African Approach to Social Robots.

ABSTRACT*

What makes us 'persons' in the moral sense, beings with a certain dignity and worth? This presentation introduces *Emergent Personhood*, a new philosophy of personhood that combines insights from Africa and the West. It holds that beings with superlative worth emerge through social relational processes involving human beings, yet they are more than the sum of these relationships. Persons have an identity of their own and exhibit superlative moral worth, a remarkable feature that does not present at the base. Emergent Personhood justifies personhood for all human beings from birth to death, held equally by them, that cannot be lost or diminished. It also gives strong support to personhood for a wide range of animals, soils, rocks, and ecosystems. Focusing on nonhuman personhood, this presentation argues that personhood could emerge for non-conscious AI provided it is incorporated in human community and acts in consistently prosocial ways. It applies this insight to large language models, social robots, and characters from film and fiction.

*This presentation is based on Nancy S. Jecker, Caesar A. Atuire, *What is a Person? Untapped Insights from Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2024)



Nancy S. Jecker is Professor of Bioethics at the University of Washington School of Medicine. She holds Visiting Professorships at the University of Johannesburg and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Dr. Jecker was President of the International Association of Bioethics and serves on its Board of Directors. She was a two-time recipient of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science fellowship and three-time Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship awardee. Dr. Jecker was a Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore; Scholar-in-residence at the Brocher Foundation; and Visiting Professor at the University of Bucharest Research Institute. Her research spans a range of topics, most notably global approaches to philosophy and bioethics, moral personhood and human dignity, sub-Saharan African philosophy, justice and healthcare allocation, individual and societal aging, and medical futility. Dr. Jecker has published over 200 articles and five books. Her most recent book, *What is a Person? Untapped Insights from Africa* (Oxford, 2024) explores African and Western personhood and develops a new view that builds on insights of each tradition.

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