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A RELATIONAL
MORAL THEORY

*African Ethics in and beyond
the Continent*

THADDEUS METZ

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Preface

Although this book is about ethical theory of a sort that is intended to be of interest to a philosopher working in any major tradition, it owes much to my having come to live in an African country and becoming acquainted with indigenous sub-Saharan worldviews and ways of life. It unnerves me to think that I would have remained ignorant of them and not been in a position to compose this book had I stayed in the United States, which was my likely path in life. I might not have found my intellectual home, or at least one of them, had I not wandered away from where I grew up.

It was upon first moving to South Africa in 1999, and especially upon starting to lecture there in 2004, that I began to study African ethics, the characteristic mores, and the philosophical interpretations of them that have been prominent amongst black peoples south of the Sahara desert and that did not come largely from, say, Europe or the Middle East (which have, of course, had important influences on the African continent). Lecturing to students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, it seemed not merely apt, but also morally essential, to teach them something from the local intellectual tradition. So, I intensively read and spoke to philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, and sociologists about indigenous, pre-colonial, or 'traditional' Africa, and considered what sub-Saharan cultures could contribute to contemporary debates amongst those studying moral philosophy anywhere in the world.

At first I wanted to see what a theory of right action grounded on African norms would look like in comparison to 'modern' Western ones such as the principles of utility and of respect for autonomy. In the African philosophical literature I did encounter theoretical statements of morality, which I quote in this book, but they were usually intended to be descriptive, i.e., to represent the ways that many sub-Saharan peoples have thought about right and wrong behaviour. I, however, have been interested in articulating a prescriptive theory, a principle with a sub-Saharan pedigree

that promises to account comprehensively for how one morally ought to act. In addition, I have sought an African normative ethical theory that is backed by strong credentials relative to competing accounts, and, moreover, that would be prima facie attractive to philosophers working both in and beyond the African tradition. In 2007 I deemed one particular interpretation of the African tradition, which treats harmonious or communal relationship as an end, to be the most promising in these respects. Since then, I have developed that relational approach in a variety of ways, and argued that it plausibly captures a variety of moral intuitions shared by many ethicists around the world. Needless to say, it did not take long for me to come to believe my own theory; I soon found it more philosophically compelling than the Western principles that had previously governed my thinking about right and wrong.

As an American white guy who still does not know an indigenous African language well, some elements have likely been ‘lost in translation’. However, my aim has not been to recount the intricate details of a sub-Saharan people’s moral beliefs and practices, let alone a group of them. My project has not involved representing indigenous African morality; instead, I have drawn on salient aspects of it, at least as interpreted by contemporary African philosophers, to *construct* a moral theory that should be taken seriously by those in a variety of global philosophical traditions. I have sought to create and defend a principle of right action informed by facets of culture recurrent amongst a wide array of sub-Saharan peoples, or at least by the philosophical expressions of them in the post-independence era, ranging from the Zulu and Xhosa peoples in South Africa to the Basotho in Lesotho to the Shona in Zimbabwe to the Batswana in Botswana to the Nso’ in Cameroon to the Gikuyu and the Luo in Kenya to the Oromo and Maasai in Ethiopia to the Acoli in Uganda to the Chewa in Malawi to the Dinka in Sudan to the Baluba in the Congo to the Bemba in Zambia to the Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, and Hausa in Nigeria to the Akan in Ghana. Although I have studied the cultures of these and still other African peoples, I remain an outsider. My hope is that African readers will appreciate my attempt to grapple with their philosophies and cultures for a specific purpose: developing a normative ethical theory that a multicultural audience of moral philosophers, professional ethicists, and related scholars would find compelling and, in particular, would appreciate as giving utilitarianism, Kantianism, and similar Western theories a run for their money in applied

contexts. Another hope is that, when African readers critically engage with this book, they will use their superior knowledge of indigenous languages and cultures to contribute to global thought about the nature of right and wrong.

In this book I argue that a number of indigenous sub-Saharan philosophers have fastened onto relational facets of moral thought that many other traditions around the world, particularly those in Anglo-America, Europe, and Australasia, have insufficiently understood and appreciated. Most people know that Africa is a continent rich in minerals, and, indeed, that it has been cruelly coerced and exploited for them for centuries. However, relatively few scholars beyond Africa are aware of what this part of the world has to contribute philosophically. The principal aim of this book is to demonstrate the importance of certain relational, and specifically communal, ideas salient in the sub-Saharan philosophical tradition for anyone wanting to understand many theoretical and applied aspects of morality.

This aim—which I do not take to be the only sensible one—is outward, by which I mean a matter of considering which characteristically African understandings of morality would be reasonable to believe by thinkers both indigenous to the continent and from a wide array of other philosophical backgrounds.¹ This orientation differs from the more inward aims of, say, recovering facets of culture that had been denigrated by colonialists or seeking to protect local ways of life from the encroachments of globalization.² Such aims are important, but they have not substantially been mine. What contemporary philosophers throughout the world are likely to find *prima facie* appealing about African ethical thought is unlikely to be everything one might find of interest about sub-Saharan cultures.

In pursuing this outward aim, I have sought to balance two desiderata, positing an ethic that is sub-Saharan, on the one hand, and one that is philosophically defensible to a global audience, on the other. Although there do seem to be some thinkers who contend that a view is to be believed if and only if it is African (whether for reasons of relativism or resistance), I am not one of them. In the course of developing a recognizably African moral theory that could give moral theories from other (especially Western) philosophical traditions pause, I have sometimes had to trade off what some would consider Africanness for what could be received by non-Africans. For instance, ancestors—i.e., wise and influential members of a clan who

have survived the deaths of their bodies and who continue to live on Earth and guide the clan—play no essential role in my favoured interpretation of African morality. If such ancestors exist, the ethic in principle provides instruction about how a moral agent should act in respect of them. However, the ethic does not by definition say that one should treat ancestors a certain way, as I have sought to set aside metaphysical claims that cannot resonate amongst philosophers with an array of multicultural backgrounds.

Some African readers might find these kinds of judgements to be offensive—just another criticism of their cultures by a white settler. However, the primary goal of this book is to argue that sub-Saharan ethical philosophy has been unjustly neglected around the world. I hope readers will appreciate that one major claim here is that the African tradition grounds a moral theory that is more attractive than predominant modern Western ones—and on terms that even Western moral theorists should find compelling.³ In addition, readers should remember that there is no single African ethic; there are instead many interpretations of sub-Saharan morality, inviting the use of philosophical judgement to choose between them or to construct one that tries to avoid all their apparent weaknesses.

What I have sought to do here is to provide a definitive and comprehensive analysis, application, and defence of my favoured principle of right action that has been heavily influenced by African philosophy. My ideas have shifted somewhat from initial statements made nearly fifteen years ago, and there have been too many piecemeal essays of mine published and in a variety of places for a given reader to absorb. It is time for a firm, unified treatment. For me to undertake that project has meant downplaying concerns about, say, whether I should have rather undertaken some other project. I wish I could have done more in what follows to respond in particular to the published critical discussions in the literature, but, for a variety of reasons, if I had tried to engage with them systematically here, I would have been unable to complete this book.

I am thankful to the many students and colleagues from Africa who have supported my work. Their interest and encouragement have helped to keep me going. Although my intellectual horizons have been broadened because of my exposure to Africa, it has been difficult at times.⁴ I would like those of African descent to know that I have been buoyed by their willingness to engage with my project. The kind words and other forms of support that I have routinely received from my sub-Saharan students and colleagues over

the years, beyond sharing their constructive criticisms, are partially responsible for the appearance of this book. It was also heartening to have been appointed to a South African parastatal, the National Heritage Council, because of my work on the southern African ethic of *ubuntu* (humanness in the Nguni languages there), as well as to have been commissioned by senior African scholars to compose a piece titled ‘What Africa Can Contribute to the World’ for the United Nations’ *General History of Africa* project.

My research into African ethics began as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, but really took off once I accepted a research post at the University of Johannesburg in 2009. I am grateful to the latter institution for having proactively structured a position that would suit my temperament and support my aims. I hope that it finds some measure of return in this book, the draft for which I overhauled upon joining the University of Pretoria in 2020.

Another source of support has been the South African National Research Foundation (NRF), which awarded me Incentive Funding, grant money with which I was able to purchase books, organize workshops, travel abroad, and support postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and other lecturers in the field of African philosophy. This book is based on work that was supported financially by the NRF, and any opinion, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in it are those of the author, with the NRF not accepting any liability in regard thereto.

A Relational Moral Theory includes an array of parts of journal articles, book chapters, and encyclopaedia entries published since 2007 that I have reconsidered, revised, and sewn together into what is meant to be a unity, not a patchwork. I thank the many people who provided input on these previously published essays, acknowledging here those (besides anonymous referees) who took the time to share written comments or to speak with me one-on-one with the aim of mutual understanding and learning, of whom I recall the following: Martin Ajei, Lucy Allais, Tom Angier, Aribiah Attoe, Caesar Atuire, Oladele Balogun, Kevin Behrens, Daniel A. Bell, Mfuniselwa Bhengu, David Bilchitz, Alex Broadbent, Bénézet Bujo, Munamoto Chemhuru, Jonathan Chimakonam, Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Drucilla Cornell, Louise du Toit, Mbongisi Dyantyi, Edwin Etieyibo, Cornelius Ewuoso, Nir Eyal, Michael Onyebuchi Eze, Douglas Farland, Ademola Fayemi, Katrin Flikschuh, Yaw Frimpong-Mansoh, Joseph Gaie,

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With regard to the book *qua* book, I am pleased to acknowledge the input of my editor, Peter Momtchiloff, who is invariably a source of good advice (and enormous patience), and two anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press, whose comments have helped to strengthen the manuscript. Special thanks go to Darrel Moellendorf for having organized a workshop devoted to a draft of the book manuscript at the Normative Orders Cluster of Goethe Universität. My work benefited greatly from not only his input, but also that of Lara Denis, Dorothea Gädeke, Jimmy Lenman, Uchenna Okeja, and Frans Svensson. Special thanks also go to Hennie Lötter, who convened a similar gathering at the University of Johannesburg. The active participation there of him, Colin Chasi, Dylan Futter, Nyasha Mboti, Tristen Taylor, and Nikolai Viedge has also made this a better book, even though not what many of them would have liked to see.

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Having already dedicated my first sole-authored and lengthy book, begun in the United States, to my first son who was born there, it is apt to dedicate my second one, begun in South Africa, to my second son who was born there. Jamil Metz, although you were a young person at the time that I began to write this book, your empathy, compassion, generosity, and gregariousness had already taught me a lot about what it means to relate communally. This work is for you.

¹ For some discussion of why I believe it is worth taking this sort of outward approach in respect to Africa, see Metz (2022a).

² For one scholar who clearly believes inward aims are more important than outward ones, see Lamola (2019).

³ I have also begun to put African ethics into critical dialogue with East Asian views, on which see, e.g., Bell and Metz (2011); Metz (2016a, 2017a).

⁴ For a reply to some of the political criticisms, see Jones and Metz (2015).

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1

Introduction

1.1 ‘The Great Gift from Africa’

For much of my academic career as a professional philosopher, I have been aware of patent gaps in contemporary Western moral theory about how we should treat others.¹ I have thought that animals matter for their own sake but not as much as human beings, that many human beings have a dignity but that pain is morally relevant insofar as it reduces a person’s quality of life, and that, despite everyone mattering from a moral point of view, an agent is obligated to do more for those related to her in certain ways. And I have found it extremely difficult for Kantianism, utilitarianism, and related Euro-American-Australasian principles of right action to account for these judgements.

It is sometimes said that a useful strategy by which to make headway in a philosophical debate is to reject a premise shared by its major interlocutors. In this book, I have applied this approach to normative ethical theory, the project of advancing a basic principle that plausibly entails and best explains what all morally right (and, conversely, wrong) actions have in common. I maintain that the major moral theories of the past 200 years in the Western tradition, ranging from egoism to utilitarianism to Lockean natural rights to respect for autonomy to respect for human life, share a certain, individualist claim. Once individualism is rejected, one can develop a relational alternative that fills in many of the gaps left open by these competing theories. Or so I argue here.

The idea that morality is a function of relational properties is not new. Confucianism in the East Asian tradition is an instance of this view, as are

the ethic of care and some of Karl Marx's ideas in the Western tradition. However, it is only lately that relationalism has been articulated as a distinct kind of ethic in English-speaking philosophy, despite having predated more individualist views by many centuries. In addition, adherents to the above relational perspectives have eschewed my project of systematically developing and defending a theory of morally right action, for reasons that I address below.

Although I construct a relational moral theory by drawing occasionally on the work of Confucians and care ethicists, the sub-title of this book is telling. It is principally the African philosophical tradition (and then its large English-language and literate vein) that I have considered for insights. That is partly because I find the ideas in this tradition particularly promising, and partly because I believe it is important for African ideas to contribute meaningfully to world philosophy. About the only thing that most non-African philosophers seem to know about indigenous sub-Saharan worldviews is that they are characteristically communitarian. While that has sometimes taken the unfortunate form of corporatism, which assigns moral primacy to a community in the sense of a group, it is more promising to think of morality as a function of communal relationship, a way that individuals can and should interact. In this book I work to systematize this relational approach to right action by creating and arguing for a moral theory with a recognizably sub-Saharan pedigree that should be weighed up against at least contemporary Western moral theories. The salient African idea that morality is a function of prizing communality is what I develop into the form of a normative theory, apply to a variety of practical debates, and advance as something that an international philosophical audience should take seriously as a rival to Kantianism, utilitarianism, and the like.

Although the principle I advance is largely *from* Africa, it is not meant to be only *for* Africans. I argue here that it does better than influential Western theories at accounting for a wide array of uncontroversial moral judgements that Westerners themselves (amongst others) hold. Note that I do not argue that the Western tradition of moral philosophy is utterly bankrupt; any long-standing body of thought should be expected to have some kernels of truth in it. And I indeed draw on some salient Western ideas, particularly Kantian ones about human rights and respectful treatment, when developing a relational moral theory. However, by the same token, the African tradition,

which is grossly under-represented on the global stage, should be expected to have some kernels of truth in it, and my claim is that its focus on communal relationship can be understood in a way that grounds a promising foundational ethic.

The South African intellectual Steve Biko predicts that sub-Saharan Africa's keen appreciation of relationship will eventually be recognized by other parts of the world:

We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa—giving the world a more human face.

(2004: 47)

Other Africanists have made similar claims for about 100 years (du Bois 1897, 1924; Busia 1962: 108; Mutwa 1964: 552, 691; Kaunda 1966: 22; Iroegbu 2007: 151). I do not know whether Biko's prophesy will come true. However, in this book I do what I can to help make it come true in respect of a global audience of moral philosophers.

In the rest of this chapter, I do more to explain and motivate the project of advancing a moral theory with an African content (1.2), after which I provide an overview of what I seek to accomplish in each of the three major parts of this book. Part I of the book concerns meta-ethical issues about how I aim to justify my favoured moral theory (1.3), which is roughly with argumentation that appeals to moral intuitions and avoids contested metaphysical claims. Part II of the book argues for the best African theory of morality, contending that a certain communal principle of right action is most philosophically defensible compared to others suggested by the sub-Saharan tradition such as vitalism (1.4). Part III argues for the best moral theory, which happens to be from Africa; it contends that the communal ethic developed in the second part of the book is more defensible than the most influential Western moral theories such as utilitarian and Kantianism when it comes to implications for a wide array of contemporary interpersonal controversies (1.5).²

1.2 An African Moral Theory

Many will be either unclear or sceptical about the nature of my project in this book, and I briefly address some of the more common and important concerns. In particular, some will not understand, or will reject, the aim of developing a moral theory (1.2.1); others will be unfamiliar with what words such as ‘African’ mean, or will contend that they should not be used (1.2.2); and still others will doubt that it makes sense to speak of an ‘African moral theory’, or will argue that it is pointless to seek one out (1.2.3). In this section, I try to allay these worries.³