

African Philosophical Inquiry

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The journal is not committed to any school of thought or orientation in philosophy. It is intended to serve as a converging point for philosophical discussion within and outside Africa. The journal is open to a broad range of topics which have philosophical relevance in the humanities and in the sciences. Contributions are double-blind peer-reviewed and include articles, discussions of articles previously published, review articles and book reviews.

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Editor's Introduction: On an African Moral Theory

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One of the objectives of the *African Philosophical Inquiry* is to facilitate critical discussions that enlarge the space of the African philosophical endeavor, and thereby add to our understanding of the African and global philosophical experiences. And tis is what the journal has achieved by bringing the *A Relational Moral Theory* (RMT) to the table. Thaddeus Metz has so far remained one of the most significant philosophical voices pushing the boundaries of moral thinking in Africa. And RMT is a *tour de force*. In it, Metz sets out to

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 (v).

On its own, this is a worthwhile philosophical objective. But then, Metz is not just doing philosophy, but *African* philosophy. And that opens him up to so many issues and queries that are not just philosophical, but also bothering on the proprietariness of the carefully articulated arguments he makes on behalf of his communal-relational ethic. African philosophy is

one fecund space where what it takes to hold an argument relies on much more than the coherence of the argument itself. For instance, an adequate mastery of an indigenous language becomes an almost axiomatic element that provides critical philosophical insights. And this is despite the fact that, according to Wiredu, “language can only incline, not necessitate” (1980: 35). The famous Bedu-Addo and Wiredu debate on the Akan concept of truth makes this point more poignant. And as A.G.A. Bello also contends, “...the sources of African philosophizing... – proverbs, maxims, tales, myths, lyrics, poetry, etc. – presuppose, in their use, an intimate knowledge of a given vernacular. Thus, in attempting to discuss the Yoruba concept of mind, I must have an intimate knowledge of the Yoruba language and the culture of which it is a part” (2004: 266).

And yet, as Metz himself acknowledged, he is not just an “American white guy,” but one who since he made the decision to study African ethics, “still does not know an indigenous African language well” (vi). And this explains why some of the criticisms of RMT have been about the “Africanness” of the communal-relational ethical framework. And to further complicate matters, Metz, as an outsider, not only wants to develop a normative ethical theory founded on African moral intuitions, but wants to make such a theory appealing to a multicultural global 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” (vi).

This “outward” objective—that balances between “developing an ethic that is African and “one that is philosophically defensible to a global audience” (vii)—comes at the great cost of trading 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 (vii).

The essays gathered here, in this unique edition of the *African Philosophical Inquiry*, critically engage with RMT, and take Metz to task over those trade-offs, and their impact not only on his moral theory, but also on the nature of African ethics and its place in global moral discourse.

We hope that this discussion will further expand the space of moral discourse, and true to Metz's aim, open the field of African ethics to more critical engagement in the global philosophical community. And in the process, what it means for anything to be labeled "African" will keep getting iterated in a manner that keep us reflecting on Africa's place in the world.

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A Moral Theory from Africa

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine three aspects of Metz's work in his book, *A Relational Moral Theory*: methods and assumptions, theoretical foundations, and application. I observe that while Metz's theory is largely influenced by his living in Africa and becoming acquainted with indigenous philosophical African traditions, he insists on presenting a theory that is philosophically defensible to a global audience. This makes him reject some African views and concepts, which may otherwise be philosophically enriching when properly analyzed and critiqued. On theoretical foundations, I addressed some of the objections Metz raised against the theory of common good by Kwame Gyekye. Finally, I examined Metz's theory and its applications in the area of research ethics.

Introduction

Thaddeus Metz has presented to the philosophical world an outstanding and respectable work of moral philosophy fashioned out of the fertile ground of African philosophical tradition.¹ The opportunity to engage with

¹Thaddeus Metz, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Pages references in text are to this volume.

Metz's work is a priceless one because this book has a lot of insights for the philosophical world in and out of Africa. In what follows, I examine only three aspects of Metz's work: method and assumptions, theoretical foundations, and application.

A Relational Moral Theory (henceforth, RMT) is about ethical theory, intended to be of interest to any major tradition of ethics. It however owes its origin and motivation to the author's living in Africa and becoming acquainted with indigenous philosophical African worldviews and common ways of life. Metz studied "African ethics, the characteristic mores, and the philosophical interpretations of them ...read and spoke to philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, and sociologists about indigenous, precolonial, or 'traditional' Africa, and considered what sub-Saharan cultures could contribute to contemporary debates amongst those studying moral philosophy anywhere in the world" (v).

Metz's first intention was to "see what a theory of right action grounded in African norms would look like in comparison to 'modern' Western ones such as the principle of utility and of respect for autonomy" (v). He found that the iteration of theory in African philosophical literature tends toward the descriptive whereas he wanted to articulate a prescriptive theory, "a principle with a sub-Saharan pedigree that promises to account comprehensively for how one morally ought to act" (v). In his search, he found the African tradition which "treats harmonious or communal relationship as an end to be the most promising" (v). And he thinks that it captures "a variety of moral intuitions shared by many ethicists around the world" (v). This is the "relational moral theory" presented and defended in this book.

Methods and Assumptions

Critically, however, Metz underscores the point that his project "has not involved representing indigenous African morality" (vi); rather, what it involves is drawing on "salient aspects of it...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" (vi). Given

this background motivation, the avowed principal aim of the author 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” (vi). Metz differentiates between this “outward” aim—the focus of which is to consider “which characteristically African understandings of morality would be reasonable to believe by thinkers both indigenous to the continent and from a wide array of philosophical backgrounds”—and an ‘inward’ aim of “recovering facets of culture that had been denigrated by colonialists or seeking to protect local ways of life from the encroachments of globalization” (vi-vii). For obvious reason, the latter cannot be the aim of the author. That must be left to indigenes in the business of historical redemption. Metz lets his readers know the balancing act that he has had to perform, “positing an ethic that is sub-Saharan, on the one hand, and one that is philosophically defensible to a global audience, on the other” (vii). For instance, an ethic that features ancestors demanding respect and obligation may be authentically sub-Saharan, but the metaphysical implications may not sit well with a global audience.

While the foregoing caveat is important, it is even more important to understand where Metz is coming from. This book is a statement of and defense of Metz’s moral theory. As he declares, what he has “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” (vii). Metz approaches his task by rejecting conventional and contemporary Western moral theories, including egoism, utilitarianism, Kantianism, and other Western principles of right action to account for our intuitive moral judgements—about the dignity of human life, the moral relevance of pain, the moral equality of everyone, and the moral weight of the claims of close relations. Metz finds these Western theories inadequate because they all share certain “individualist claim”. Rejecting individualism leaves room for developing “a relational alternative.”

While acknowledging that other traditions, including Confucianism, ethics of care, and Marxism, have utilized relational and communal tendencies, Metz insists that it is “principally the African philosophical tradition that I have considered for insights” (2). Hence his developing “the African idea that morality is a function of prizing communality” into “the form of a normative theory” and applying it “to a variety of practical debates” (2). Specifically, Metz's main thesis is that “individuals matter morally because of their relational properties, features that do make essential reference to something beyond the individual” (232), with relationality treated as an end rather than as a means to some other end such as the common good or vital force. With the moral value of relationality established, Metz defines right acts as “those respecting individual's capacity to be party to communal or harmonious ways of relating, those of identity and solidarity” (232).

Metz's analytic approach is one which he believes is a better alternative to some other method, perhaps speculative. Comparing it with the natural sciences, he observes that it requires precise definition of the meaning of one's terms to avoid confusion and ambiguity. Specifically, Metz rejects a certain approach which he attributes to some African thinkers who think that defining African terms may rid them of their meaning or that it is impossible to define such terms. One of his examples of such terms is “the spirit of Ubuntu” which is common in Southern African philosophical literature. For instance, Metz asks what it means to say that the “community is prior to the individual.” In what sense is the community “prior” to the individual—“Temporally? Logically? Metaphysically? Causally? Evaluatively? Normatively?” And he worried that this “kind of careful specification is rarely provided in the field” (45). Another term that he finds troubling because it is not explicitly analyzed is “I am because we are and we are because I am”. According to Metz, “This statement means a number of different things to Africans who use it”. As a result, Metz's approach is to avoid “using language ambiguously and asking interlocutors to specify what they have in mind when using such a sentence” (45-46).

Now, the foregoing position of Metz raises for me an interesting observation which I think goes to the heart of what it is to explore African philosophy. For me, the thoughts expressed in those terms and statements which are difficult because of the ambiguity they express are at the core of the task that an African philosopher should be interested in. Indeed, Metz is right that questions are rarely raised, neither is the necessary task of unpacking the meaning of these thoughts and ideas engaged in. But instead of just “avoiding using language ambiguously” and thus also avoiding those statements or concepts altogether, an African philosopher, who is well equipped in the native language, is best positioned to take up their analysis. At least that is what is done by English language philosophers for such concepts as “mind”, “truth”, “dignity”, “happiness” etc. And it is what serious African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu of blessed memory rewardingly engaged in for most of their career.²

Metz’s “analogous source of justification in prescriptive matters” is “widely shared intuitions about right and wrong” (47). He contrasts this approach with “a recurrent part of the African tradition” which believes that “the most reliable sources of moral knowledge are ancestors,” and he claims not to “invoke any of this moral epistemology” in his book (47). Instead, the evidence he proffers for and against moral theories is “a certain kind of argumentation” (47). Metz tells us that his familiarity with the African moral norms and philosophy is through the writings of African philosophers and thinkers. In the last 100 years or so, a variety of writings has emerged on the African continent. While a great number of this fall into the type that Metz has in mind here, it is also true that a significant number of them have been secular in approach. He also referenced some of these. This shows that African philosophy is not monolithic just as the African tradition is not. Therefore the “moral epistemology” that makes ancestors

²Kwasi Wiredu, “The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans of Ghana,” in G. Floistad (ed.) *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey. Vol. 5: African Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1987).

central to justification is not the defining mark of African tradition nor of its philosophical outlook. Sage philosophy makes this clear. This is also true of the issue of the secular approach. It appears there's too much of a generalization here, though Metz is careful to imply that his reference is to "some of my colleagues working in the African tradition" who apparently "appeal to imperceptible agents and forces" (47). For Metz, the Africanness of his relational moral theory inheres in the fact that "it accounts well for the... intuitions" which he argues are generally accepted in the African tradition and articulated by African philosophers—"it entails and plausibly explains a wide array of sub-Saharan mores" (61).

On his method and assumptions, there is one issue that appears to dominate or at least play an important role in Metz's approach and he makes sure that his readers appreciate where he is coming from. Metz wants his theory to make sense not only to African philosophers, but also to a global audience. This is a major reason he doesn't want to deal with imperceptible agents even if there is a belief in such agents. The Preface and Introduction are laced with references to this need to find acceptability with the global community. Thus, he would "trade off what some would consider Africanness for what could be received by non-Africans" (vii). And he would "set aside metaphysical claims that cannot resonate among philosophers with an array of multicultural backgrounds" (vii). Now, I think that beside his worry that a theory that thrives on the idea that ancestors and other imperceptible agents exist and have some control over human beings may be unappealing to outsiders, Metz himself finds the belief in ancestors to be either false or philosophically indefensible. I am wondering then why he just doesn't make his objection to the belief clear instead of setting the belief aside. By setting it aside, he is suggesting that he doesn't want to deal with it because he is an "outsider" and he would rather just defend a theory that is acceptable to a global audience.

There is another way of looking at this same issue. Metz insists that his theory accounts well for intuitions which are generally accepted in the African tradition. For advancing African philosophy, this should be a great and satisfactory achievement. And if it does, this in itself should be

celebrated by the author and open-minded readers. After all, it is a major contribution to African philosophical tradition and if it is done right, it is expected or at least hoped that it will attract a global audience. But it appears that this is not enough for Metz. He wants to deliberately discard whatever might be displeasing to outsiders so the theory is attractive. His example of what a United Nation's audience might find unattractive is to buttress his point (49). I assume, however, that many in the United Nation's audience are believers in the Judeo-Christian or Islamic religion or in Hinduism or Buddhism with philosophies based on those religious traditions. And they might be offended by an African philosophy that references ancestors. But what if there is some kernel of truth in what is being discarded but is unappealing to the sought-after audience? And if Metz is convinced that the belief he discards is false anyway, he should have just presented his objection to that effect and lay its ghost.

Theoretical Foundation

Following the tradition of analytic philosophy, Metz sees the need to clear the “rubbish” of theoretical weed in order to prepare the ground for the planting of his own theory. One of the theoretical weeds to clear is the theory of the common good, of which Kwame Gyekye's is his target. Gyekye has suggested that common good is the master value theory (65). This is coming from his communitarian approach to ethics according to which the most important and fundamental value to see is the common good. Rejecting this argument, however, Metz doesn't see why “a requirement to advance the common good...would forbid great inequalities when everyone's needs have in fact been met” (70). This argument is to suggest that there is at least a moral intuition upheld by Africans to the effect that great inequalities are immoral even if everyone's needs are met. He refers to Nyerere's position that capitalism is morally objectionable because it permits “some to own the means of production which would enable exploitation, where a minority does no work but instead has a majority to work for it” (70). He also references Magesa who suggests that capitalism fosters feeling of envy “on the part of those who do not own great wealth” (70).

Now, I am wondering what to make of this objection to the theory of common good based on a supposed intuition held among the people. Nyerere gave expression to a common view among the nationalists in the anti-colonial struggles against capitalist exploitation which they associated with colonialism. They argue that in precolonial Africa, land, which was the major means of production, was held in common. Each person had an allocation which would eventually revert to the community. With a parcel at their disposal, however, individuals can often outpace one another depending on their competence and the circle of helpers, including family and friends. So, while access to land was egalitarian, the outcome of individual or family efforts was not always egalitarian. And great wealth was also created in the process, even before slave labor crept in. Therefore, to my mind, the so-called intuition captured in Nyerere's maxim is more of a contemporary reaction to capitalism and colonialism than an accurate representation of the socio-economic system that was prevalent in pre-colonial times. Of course, due to the absence of technology, productivity could only be limited and, therefore, the inequality of wealth cannot be as enormous as it is in a capitalist economy. But it was there. We did not have a complete egalitarian system in pre-colonial Africa. What this means is that the intuition that is implied in the counter objection to Gyekye's here is not a commonly held one. reference for instance the Yoruba proverb: *Ai fāgbà fénikan ni ko jáyé ó rójú* (The world is in turmoil because the inequality in age is not respected).

Metz also argues that a focus on common good as the basis of right action cannot capture the common African intuition that it is less than ideal for economic production to be dominated by self-interested behavior and competition even when it indirectly benefits others. Presumably, this is because the focus on common good entails seeking the best outcome for all through a cooperative approach to production; but cooperative planning does not ensure the best outcome in terms of high productivity. It is the difference between presumably a socialist and a capitalist approach. Metz's point, if I am correct, is that focus on the best outcome in terms of high productivity will be best served by the "invisible hand" model, but this is

antithetical to the African intuition. Therefore, the theory that leads to that counter-intuitive conclusion is inadequate.

I can imagine a response from the “common good” approach to the effect that Metz may have misconstrued the ultimate appeal of the common good theory in terms of what it proposes. Julius Nyerere, famous for his common good approach, once argued that Africans are either rich together or poor together, but they deplore the economic approach that makes a few super rich and the majority dirt poor. The ideal is therefore not stupendous wealth for everyone. The typical African mental outlook is to afford the basic needs for everyone. Therefore, the common good theory is not after enormous wealth and will not be impressed by the self-interest competitive approach as opposed to the cooperative approach even if, as Metz puts it, “markets (along with state intervention) were indeed marginally best for all in the long run” (70). Interestingly, in a latter chapter, Metz also proposes that for his relational moral theory, acting beneficently means “meeting others’ needs, fostering their liveliness, or enhancing their virtue qua communality” (169).

For a third counter example to the theory of the common good, Metz cites the African intuition about greeting and argues that Gyekye’s theory cannot account for why greeting is morally required in the African moral universe. This argument is based on his interpretation of the common good approach which emphasizes the wellbeing of members and sees right action in terms of the promotion of the wellbeing of everyone. First, then, Metz is arguing that greeting does not promote wellbeing in the ordinary sense of that word. But if we extend the meaning of the common good and wellbeing to include greeting, my greeting someone will still not promote the wellbeing of everyone. For Metz, greeting is required because it is a recognition of the humanity of others, and for elders with virtue, it is respect for their age and virtuous life. Therefore, while greeting is a right action, it is not for the reason of promoting wellbeing as the theory of common good implies.

In fact, there is a sense in which greeting promotes the wellbeing of individuals and of the community if we do not restrict wellbeing to the

material aspects of life, and include mental and emotional wellbeing both of which contribute to a harmonious community relation. From family units to whole community settings in, for instance, Yorubaland, people take seriously the importance of greeting, and they take offense whenever they are ignored or sidelined by others. The first two lines of the lyrics of a popular Yoruba *agidigbo* song of the 1960s capture the emotional anguish that could be experienced when one is shunned in greeting: *Bẹẹ bá rí wa lóde, ẹ̀yò mọ̀ wa. Òjò ló sọ ọmọ adìẹ́ dá sío* (When you meet us, please greet us. The wetness and miserable appearance of the chicken is caused by rain). In other words, we may look miserable and pathetic, but it is not our natural condition; some external cause is responsible. Therefore, extend to us your hand of fellowship in greeting. And Yoruba talking drum is effectively used to cast aspersions on those who refuse to greet: *Bí ẹ́ bá rí wa, tí ẹ́ ò kí wa; ẹ̀yin lẹ̀ mọ̀, ẹ̀yin lẹ̀ mọ̀ ohun tó ẹ́ yín, ẹ̀yin lẹ̀ mọ̀* (If you see us and you refuse to greet us, it is your problem. You know what the matter is with you. You alone know). Such attitude to non-greeting can disrupt social and communal relations. Therefore, we can accommodate the African intuition by expanding the idea of common good to include mental and emotional wellbeing that is disrupted, and the potentials of an attendant disturbance of community relations, when the obligation to greet is violated.

Metz has another counterexample to the common good theory, namely the importance of customs and shared life which Africans generally value. His objection to the common good theory, with its emphasis on wellbeing is that it cannot account for the immorality of dispensing with shared values or customs which are morally justified, when doing so would be better off for everyone. In his words, Gyekye's theory of common good "cannot make sense of the characteristically African intuition that it would be wrong to *some* degree to fail to participate [in shared customs] when not participating would make everyone marginally better off than participating" (72. Emphasis in original). In other words, Metz argues that even when specific changes are justified, all things considered, "letting go of shared ways of life can come at *some* moral cost, and that an exclusive focus on doing whatever advances the common good cannot account for this intuition" (72).

In the case of this objection, Metz does not give any example of customs or shared ways of life that may fit the bill of his objection. But we can supply one or two. First, however, notice the significance of the concepts in Metz's critique. "Shared ways of life" which he appears to separate from the "common good" as if the two are poles apart. But in the tradition of the common good theory, shared ways of life can be conveniently accommodated as it is constitutive of the common good which is also reducible to the good of everyone. Take shared language for instance. There is a debate going on in Yorubaland about the progressive abandonment of the language in the upbringing of children. People are worried that it could lead to the obliteration of the language and the identity of every Yoruba person. If language is a shared value of life, it is also a common good that must be protected and promoted, and it is by extension a good of each member of the language group, in this case the Yoruba. It is unclear in what sense abandoning the language would be marginally beneficial to individuals' wellbeing. Perhaps a family may prefer that its material interest is best promoted by getting their children educated in English or French. The common good theory may respond with the argument that losing your mother tongue is losing an identity that you will always regret. The point here is to make clear the all-inclusive nature of wellbeing. When Metz argues that "Sometimes permitting great inequalities of wealth, being competitive in the economic sphere, undermining cultures, and remaining childless can best meet people's needs, or otherwise improve their welfare, and yet many African philosophers would judge these actions to be wrong to some degree (even when justified on balance)" (75), he may be working with a less inclusive notion of welfare, limiting it to material needs.

It is important to note that Metz does not discountenance altogether the value of wellbeing in determining right actions. For him, wellbeing is "neither master nor slave" in this regard. That is to say, it is not the sole determinant of right action. Rather, it is a constitutive factor. He maintains that "right action is a matter of honoring individuals in virtue of their capacity for communal relationships, where one (but not the only) facet of these relationships involves helping others and being helped by others" (76).

So, if we ask Metz about what is involved in honoring individuals, he might respond that it is “helping them, but not only this.” But what more could there be? It will be interesting to know. Metz gives us a hint even in this early part of his treatise. For instance, he argues:

...action taken with the aim of improving others’ wellbeing is *partially constitutive* of the fundamental duty to treat individuals as having a moral status in virtue of their capacity to be party to communal relationships. Caring for others’ quality of life is one end of right action, but an additional one, essential to capture the missing intuitions, is sharing a way of life... (76).

Here, “sharing a way of life” or “being party to communal relationships” appears to be key to Metz's theory. But how does it determine right action? Shall we say what makes right action right is that it honors communal relationships? Or that it shows respect for sharing a way of life? But these still need to be cashed out in concrete terms to provide guidance for moral agents. We have a promise here that Metz will deliver later on, hopefully.

The Relational as Foundational

Having cleared the path of offending weeds, Metz is ready to plant his preferred theory. Relational ethics, derived from the communality of African society, is his candidate for grounding “the most attractive moral theory from Africa” (91). He labels the relationship “harmonious” or “communal,” and it is “a combination of two logically distinct ways of interacting, namely, identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them” (91). Hence, the opposite of harmonious or communal relationship, which is enmity or unfriendliness, is comprised of division and ill-will. (96)

Metz argues that both identity (sharing life, participating in a common life) and solidarity (caring for others) are needed for relational ethics which grounds moral theory on communality: “identity without solidarity is hard-hearted, while solidarity without identity is intrusive” (98). “Rightness as friendliness” and “wrongness as unfriendliness” is Metz’s favorite slogan for

what makes right actions right and wrong actions wrong. Importantly, Metz distinguishes his theory from those that treat harmonious, communal, or friendly relations as “merely a good to be maximized or as a goal to be promoted” (104). He thinks that doing so cannot account for human rights, e.g. a right that heavy burdens be placed on guilty parties instead of innocent ones even if this would cost harmonious or communal relationship, or the right of an innocent party not to be killed even though this would foster more harmonious relationships. His theory departs from a teleological or consequentialist approach in favor of a deontological principle, namely right action is one which respects the capacity to be party to friendly relations that encompasses identity and solidarity (104).

A Relational Moral Theory

Rejecting principles of wellbeing and vital force as inadequate, Metz now defends the principle of friendliness as the basis of right action. While his preferred principle is a derivative of the importance of communal relationship which he defines in terms of identity and solidarity, Metz also rejects African thinkers’ treatment of relationality teleologically—as a good or goal to be promoted. There is communal or friendly way of relating. Then there is the capacity to be party to it. For Metz, the two aren’t the same. The moral principle underlying his theory is the following: A moral agent ought to respect individuals in virtue of their dignified capacity to befriend or be befriended (105).

Based on Metz’s theory, we may cash out rightness and wrongness as follows:

1. An action is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their dignified capacity to befriend or be befriended.
2. An action is wrong if and only if it does not respect individuals in virtue of their dignified capacity to befriend or be befriended.

Metz's approach is deontological. He rejects teleological or consequentialist approaches because they are incapable of accounting for human rights. Here is how he puts it: “My view is not that communal relationship itself has a

moral status or that only those who are in such a relationship have it, but rather that those who in principle could relate in that way have it” (106). In other words, the capacity to relate in a communal or friendly way is what confers moral status, hence his subtitle for the chapter: “The Capacity to Commune as Foundation.” That capacity could be as a subject—able to cooperate with others, help them, act for their sake, etc.; or as an object—when other human beings think of it as “part of ‘we’” to advance its goals, benefit it, and act for its sake, out of sympathy for it.

But what is “involved in being capable of being either a subject or an object of communality”? For Metz, it “consists of being able in principle, i.e., without changes to a thing's nature” (107). That “a given person is unaware” of the being or “is scared of it” is irrelevant to its being an object of a communal relationship. This fact may hinder the being becoming the “object of identity and solidarity with one of us,” but it doesn’t determine the moral status of the being (107). It follows that having a moral status is the equivalence of being capable of being an object of communality. Metz also suggests that to be a subject of communality, contingent inabilities such as “being asleep, having drunk too much and electing not to sympathize,” are not disqualifying factors: “While these might hinder a being’s actually becoming the subject of identity and solidarity, they are not relevant to determining its moral status” (107). Which raises the same question: what determines moral status?

It appears from the foregoing that Metz’s view is that the moral status of a being is determined by the being’s capability for being a subject and object of communal relationship and it does not really matter if some contingent facts about the being makes it incapable at any point in time. I see a similarity here with Kant’s concept of dignity which is meant as the basis for the moral status of human beings. In the case of Kant, even the wicked act of a person doesn’t invalidate his or her dignity, a priceless possession. But while Kant appears to tie his fundamental concept with the rational nature of the person, here Metz’s fundamental concept is tied up with the capacity for communing: “the more a being is capable of relating communally, the greater its moral status” (107). There is, however, a further key question to

ask and answer: what is it about the capability for relating communally that confers moral status? It cannot be that it is the way of Africans. Metz must identify something unique about this capability that makes it confer moral status. What is it?

It appears that there is an inbuilt definitional truism that characterizes the idea. Communing, as Metz describes it, is already infused with moral character. To have the capacity to commune is to “enjoy a sense of togetherness, participate cooperatively with others [presumably for good projects], help others [presumably to achieve good projects], and do so out of sympathetic altruism” (108). These various accounts of what “communing” means are themselves already morally implicated. Enjoying a sense of togetherness is a morally good thing. Participating cooperatively with others is morally praiseworthy. In other words, the capacity to commune is the capacity to be moral. But then the capacity to commune is what confers moral status. But how else can it be since the former is already defined in terms of the latter! Put another way, if we understand the capacity for communing as conferring moral status on individuals, and we cash out this capacity in terms of participating cooperatively with others, we still need an account of what makes participating cooperatively with others a morally fundamental good without relating it to the capacity for communing.

The foregoing observation notwithstanding, we may sum up Metz’s account of the relational moral theory as I think he would: The capacity for communal relationship is what is “superlatively good for its own sake and bestows a moral status” and “we fundamentally have duties” towards individuals who are capable of a communal relationship. For this reason, they deserve respect and honor. This is the key insight of the RMT, according to Metz. The theory posits negative duties (avoid treating people in unfriendly or discordant ways) and positive duties (participating with people capable of communal relationships on a cooperative basis and enabling them to do the same toward others). But it doesn’t prohibit acting in an unfriendly way to someone who has been unfriendly to him or herself. It differs from Western theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism in that

it can account for many African intuitions which those theories cannot account for, and it can do as well as those theories in accounting for the rightness of other global intuitions. With regard to African moral theories, it can best them in its acceptability to philosophers outside the African tradition, especially because it rejects some African philosophical approaches which are alien to the global community, including belief in, and appeal to, non-material entities such as ancestral spirits. Thus, while the theory is African in the sense that it makes use of African intuitions to formulate principles of right actions, it also rejects those African worldviews that are alien to Western sensibilities.

Applied Ethics

Metz not only develops a comprehensive theory of morality: what makes right actions right and what makes wrong actions wrong, he also develops the rudiments of applied ethics with his application of his moral theory to the areas of environmental, biomedical, research, educational, and business ethics. In this last section of my comments, I focus on his accounts of research ethics.

Research Ethics

The relational moral theory's defence of informed consent prior to research on individuals, following its fundamental understanding of the basis of right actions, is that "it would be unfriendly or discordant to study (or treat) a person without her free and informed consent, and so almost always wrong since the person is innocent. Without an informed and free consent, the capacity of an innocent study participant "to be cooperated with and to cooperate" is undermined (191). This follows the author's basic position that "right action consists of *respecting* an individual's *capacity* to be party to harmonious relationships." Not having the informed consent of an individual "degrades her ability to be the subject and object of a shared way of life between them" (191).

Metz raises and dismisses a possible objection to his theory vis-a-vis informed consent. A communal ethic, such as offered by Metz, might be felt

to require a participant to participate in a research which she may not fully understand, but which by virtue of its potential for leading to forging harmonious relationship, and by virtue of the communal ethic instructing “people to commune” with others, a person might take this instruction as a moral reason to assist researchers in their projects. Metz dismisses this on the ground that prospective research participants are not unreasonable and would know that they do not owe researchers “anything in particular.” One is not necessarily obligated to help. Significantly, Metz’s defence of informed consent does not countenance the position of some bioethicists that informed consent is derived from a Western ethical theoretical assumption regarding the autonomy of individuals, and is therefore inapplicable to Africa and other nonwestern societies which are communally oriented in their worldview. Rather he underscores the universality of the requirement based on the relational moral theory.

The requirement of confidentiality is, like informed consent, an essential one in biomedical research. Metz grapples with the question when there may be an exception to the requirement of confidentiality. He zeroed in on the understanding of African communal relations where members of a family are invested in the wellbeing of one another. He rightly references African authors, including myself, who have canvassed the notion that since family members have a stake in the health of an individual member, they “ought to be aware of her illness and play a role in discussing how she ought to be treated” (193). This is to provide a justifiable exception to the requirement of confidentiality.

However, Metz’s pivot to a duty to provide material support for dependents as a reason for a researcher to justifiably divulge information of his condition if he himself doesn’t, sounds to me to be mistaken: As he puts it: “It probably follows that a person has a duty to tell his dependents of foreseeable risks to his being able to continue to help them, and that, if he refuses to do so, a medical professional would do no wrong to him if she revealed such to his dependents” (193-194). Those who argue for a modified version of confidentiality in the African context base it on the relationship between family members who share a common understanding that “we are

in everything together.” It is not an imposed understanding; rather, it emanates from generations of mutual understanding that we owe each other support and empathy. Therefore, if one member falls sick, others want to know so they can help. It is not based on the perception that some material help from the sick may not be forthcoming and, therefore, if that is the case, other members who depend on that help must know and brace themselves for the loss. That is not an African mindset, which is based on genuine feeling of empathy for a kin, and the need to know how one can help. In other words, this African understanding of family relationship would not support a research divulging the state of health of a sick family member just so his relations may know that there is a potential risk to the material help coming from the sick.

With regard to the requirements of informed consent and confidentiality, it is pertinent that Metz sees them as logically distinct and he is right. But they are also crucially related in a mutually dependent manner. Whatever is revealed or presented to a patient or research participant in the informed consent procedure would seem to go a long way in determining the responsibility of confidentiality on the part of the researcher. Thus, it is unimaginable to me that a patient would consent to his health condition being revealed to his dependents just so they know that the material help coming from him is at risk. Should this be included in the details of the informed consent document, I am not sure that reasonable participants who value their dignity would consent. So, it is with an informed consent that stipulates that the researcher should be free to divulge information about a family member's secret which is not a health risk to another member of the family but which is only required by the norm of transparency. I doubt that should the family member whose secret is in question be given this information about what the researcher may do with her secret upfront, she would voluntarily accept to participate in the study. If so, a researcher should be guided against disclosing such information to another family member. It seems clear, then, that informed consent and confidentiality work together.

I congratulate Thaddeus Metz for his outstanding contributions to philosophical scholarship in general, and to African philosophy in particular. As scholars delve into the rich analysis embedded in the pages of RMT in the years to come, so will the prospects of African philosophy brighten and future generations will benefit more and contribute more to its further development.

On the Relevance of the Ontological

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Abstract

Metz seeks a stance beyond metaphysics, but any such attempt must be grounded in some thinking about what is and what can be said about it. Metz's *is/oughtism* assures that his questions and answers conform to expectations that are in principle up for questioning in African Philosophy. A relational ethics in the African context can and perhaps should have a broader vocabulary, as it were. Moral life is a collective interpretive practice. Moral theory can and perhaps should be developed in a way that doesn't consider cultural experience and beliefs about nature and human nature to be illogical distractions but, rather, as the medium in which we work out our moral existence as persons *relating* to one another.

Thaddeus Metz is to be applauded for his work to encourage wide-ranging conversation between African and traditional Western philosophers on a variety of topics. He has established himself as a prolific and influential contributor to this expansive and expanding conversation. The explosion of literature in Western languages on or about African Philosophy in recent decades has seemed to accelerate both within and beyond the horizons of academic publishing and awareness, and credit must be given to those like him who have devoted considerable energy to sustaining and extending this

dialogue, several of whom are considered in this book. If we are to make the most of this conversation philosophically, we must acknowledge that there are methodological as well as substantive dimensions to its subject matter and the choices we make about how to approach it which engage the full being of the interlocutors and their ideas in dialogue. The issues taken up in this book go to the heart of this subject matter, since regardless of the topics it is primarily focused on, the conversation between African and Western philosophical traditions has powerful political and ethical aspects that cannot be ignored.

My brief comments here are directed at some of the assumptions and implications I see as structural to the approach the author adopts in this book and how they affect his account of what a relational ethics can be in the context of African Philosophy. The fact that I am critical of these assumptions and implications should not be misunderstood as diminishing the importance and the value of other aspects of the book, its overall message, or my sense that there are many fruitful conversations it will no doubt contribute to and generate. I think something like the kind of ethics the author is driving at should be recommended, although I am skeptical about his reasoning as to why that is so, and how he argues for it. And I recommend an alternative approach for the discussion about relational ethics in the context of African thought which might be considered a hermeneutical interpretation of the basic idea. In that spirit, if the effect of Metz's book is to add new voices and perspectives to the increasingly global conversation about how to think about conduct, we should celebrate it as a great success.

Stealthy Metaphysics and Is/Oughtism

Metz situates his project, in *A Relational Moral Theory*, in relation to “the major moral theories of the past 200 years in the Western tradition,” which he calls “individualist” as opposed to “relational” (2022: 1). He notes “patent gaps,” in them which he thinks of as explanatory: We find ourselves with moral intuitions in life but cannot explain how they are justified, and so it is the job of moral philosophy to systematically “account for” these intuitions

by advancing and defending “a basic principle that plausibly entails and best explains what all morally right actions have in common” (1). So far, this goal has not been achieved, but Metz has no doubt that it can and should be pursued.

The author believes that African Philosophy can help resolve the explanatory failure of modern Western moral theory. And if it does, it will not merely be providing a service to Western moral theory but to humanity as a whole, since the author assumes that moral theory’s scope should properly be global. But we should note at the outset that some aspects of this approach are not uncontroversial, particularly in the context of a philosophical project with aims as cross-cultural as this one. The defining feature of the project as indicated from the start is an essentially modern Western conception of the question or problem of ethical life, and the role of philosophy including what is called “moral theory” in relation to it. The reader is encouraged to imagine moral theory as a competitive endeavor of global scope and relevance, where the contest can leave but one competitor standing victorious at the end. If the author succeeds, they will have established in a “systematically develop[ed] and defend[ed]” manner that relational properties logically function to entail and explain widespread moral intuitions better than any of the “individualist” theories of the last 200 years of Western moral theory. But in thus extending the methods of Western moral theory to distinctly African content the project defers dialogue and criticism of those methods and the “gaps” they engender. It is to this extent unselfconscious and perhaps, as I suggest below, uncritical. There may be good reasons why relational non-“individualist” moral theories, despite going back at least to Confucius, have not been given the same systematizing logical criticism and development as the familiar Western individualist ones. But these reasons aren’t addressed.

The meta-ethical landscape Metz takes us through is sparse even by Western standards and is not one traveled by most African philosophers. “A moral theory is an account of which basic, general duty purportedly grounds all other, more particular duties” (4). As if to reassure us that he is not simply assuming this way of delimiting the task of moral philosophy

dogmatically, Metz asks the rhetorical question, “Would it not be interesting if there were just one thing in virtue of which ... [intuitively wrong] actions are wrong as well as all others that are wrong?” (4). But, like all rhetorical questions, the intent of this one is to keep us focused on what the questioner thinks is important without being distracted by other possibilities.

In fact, it doesn't take much effort to think of a *lot* more interesting and arguably more urgent things that might be the focus for moral philosophy developed in conversation with African Philosophy compared to this. For example, perhaps it would be interesting to look at how duties and the duty to choose among them are 'grounded' historically, and how cultural tradition and language keep them alive and enact them in life. Maybe it would be interesting to investigate the possibility that duties and obligations have not one but multiple 'grounds'. Or how they reflect the practice and attitudes of cultures and groups who live more 'relational' and less 'individualist' forms of life and have nothing to do with logical reconstructions of propositional claims. Maybe they have everything to do with the way the expectations and negotiations of everyday existence make their ways to us through sayings, proverbs, storytelling, and culture which come from the past and live through reappropriation and re-interpretation in the present. Maybe moral intuitions are better grasped through ambiguity and paradox, rather than with the intention of speaking in ways so as to “demarcate competing candidates...clearly and rigorously” (14). Whether or not Metz's “style and method” should count as African is not my concern here – it is whether or not the challenge and difference of ethical philosophy is engaged or addressed very much at all by a style and method such as the one he employs.

For this approach, the clue to the truth of moral intuitions should be sought as far as possible from their roots and sources in life and culture. It is telling in this regard that Metz entitles the meta-ethical part of the book “African Ethics without a Metaphysical Ground”, as if he expects that the effect of his critical reconstruction will be to provide African ethical philosophers with magical powers of levitation, or a cure for the principal widespread complaint associated with wanting to have their moral cake and

logically eating it too—something he insists African philosophers frequently attempt by trying to eat with their feet on the ground of their culture, history, and practice:

Many in the African tradition believe that ethical claims follow immediately from metaphysical ones that must be established first. For example, Kwame Nkrumah (1970) maintains that an egalitarian ethic follows directly from a prior physicalist ontology, Henry Odera Oruka and Calestous Juma (1994: 115) suggest that a duty to respect nature is entailed by the purported fact that everything in the universe is interrelated, and Kwame Gyekye (1997: 35–76) contends that his 'moderate communitarian' moral and political philosophy is derived from a certain conception of the self...I aim to show how these and similar attempts fail to clear the 'is/ought gap,' as it is known in Western meta-ethics, and how various strategies one might use to bridge the gap do not work (16).

The claim that African Philosophy is characterized by a widespread *is/oughtism* that presents a serious and fundamental obstacle to the primary task of moral theory is central to Metz's project. I'll have more to say about this claim in what follows, but first I will address what the diagnosis takes for granted. David Hume notwithstanding, there is simply no universe in which purported facts about what people *ought* to do can be arrived at in a rational way based on *anything other than* purported facts about what kinds of things *exist* and who we think we *are*. The trick in making it seem like there is a terribly important logical canon here that severely restricts moral philosophy is to hedge on how "direct," "immediate," or "sudden" the *ought* is thought to be arrived at in a rational way based on the *is*. As I note below, Metz realizes this, as his own qualifications make abundantly clear. But the point I want to make here is that he is forced nonetheless to overstate the significance of his own criticism because he has committed himself and relational ethics to an especially narrow vision of what the endeavor of moral theory must be: to *explain* moral intuitions by showing from which

general principle they are best entailed or deduced.

From a historical perspective we should note that Hume announced that one may not derive *ought* from *is* in a work whose entire moral outlook is framed by a peculiarly mechanistic “Newtonian” metaphysics and psychology of which Hume's moral theory is claimed to be the implication. Kant, for what it's worth, in sidestepping the world in pursuit of the ground of the Categorical Imperative, arrives at a principle so formal as to require an austere logical dance that quite notoriously guides action very poorly and renders some cherished and widespread moral intuitions highly problematic. “Ought” doesn't *mean* “is,” but pointing this out is of little help toward understanding morality, guiding choices, or grounding social critique. And by the way, we can as well say that no *is* may be derived or entailed in a direct, sudden, or immediate way from pure metaphysics or ontology either, since the incontrovertible logical or analytic truth of a proposition has exactly no impact on the reality of what it concludes as a matter-of-fact. Both Hume and Kant argued this at length, and with more consistency than the *is/ought* prohibition.¹

As support for his claim that widespread logical error is something like a “default position amongst African philosophers,” Metz informs us that “an entire book has been devoted to exploring” it, and that “amongst the four basic themes in traditional African religion, one scholar includes ‘an ethic that flows from ontology’” (25). It is hard to comprehend how the testimony of one book and the opinion of one scholar of *religion*, no less, would seem like strong evidence that African moral philosophy rests on a logical mistake. It is at best little to go by in order to sustain the diagnosis—although qualified almost completely out of significance, that in African Philosophy, “at least on many occasions... a theoretical claim about how to act morally follows immediately from a broad metaphysical claim about what exists” (25). Metz wants to deliver something powerful and unambiguous but just as he giveth, so also he taketh away: Within a few lines

¹It is perhaps for this reason that both are remembered as destroyers of metaphysics rather than destroyers of ethics.

of his claim that most contemporary Western philosophers “would view such argumentative strategies [as are reflected in the “default position”], as illegitimately attempting to cross what is called the ‘is/ought gap’;” he again limits the scope of what he nonetheless promises to “systematically argue” in the critiques of Nkrumah and Gyekye that follow – that “nothing moral *straightaway* follows from any *purely* ontological view, that is, a view about the nature of reality that includes no evaluative elements (about what is good/bad) or normative elements (about what an agent should/not do)...” (26, emphasis in the original). One oughtn't ever derive an *ought* from an *is* because it is illogical, except under many reasonable circumstances when it *isn't*. Your mileage may vary. We can argue later about what is required for an ontology to be a “pure” one and what makes a reasonable inference more or less “straightaway.”

Despite all this, a pandemic of *is/oughtism* is declared by Metz, notwithstanding the ambivalence that belies the seriousness he keeps attributing to the condition. He asks us to reject the approach he deems typical of African philosophers because there is a consensus among Western philosophers that *is/oughtistic* claims are logically incoherent or “illegitimate.” The specifics of African ethics can be set aside because some Western philosophers and a smaller proportion of African ones believe the universe is irrelevant to morality. But it seems to me that the author's rejection, for example, of Onyibor's reference to “the hierarchy of forces in the universe” as providing us with grounds upon which to make assertions about human conduct is at least as much a result of his own reliance upon a *different* metaphysics that posits *other* cosmic forces as it is the result of a logical mistake made by Onyibor. As I have noted above, the method seems to be more about bringing African philosophers onto familiar Western metaphysical ground than detaching them from their own. Of course it is trying to do both. But even if such detachment as is suggested in the subtitle for Part 1 were possible, it would not result in the illumination of how real moral intuitions are explained or justified but rather in *anomie* in the face of intuitions that have been rendered meaningless because shorn of meaning, that is to say, severed from all intuitions about the rest of reality and human

nature.

Although Metz's qualifications suggest that he understands the sheer impossibility of the mission he is encouraging African ethical thought to accept, he forges ahead with it zealously. Nkrumah's and Gyekye's arguments "are fallacious [because] there is a gulf between ontological claims about what is or exists, on the one hand, and ethical claims about what is good or how agents ought to act, on the other, in the sense that nothing about the latter is justified *merely* on the basis of the former," (38, emphasis in the original). African morals seem always to be concatenated with metaphysical views specifically stressing interdependence in the context of social existence (39). The problem arises, according to Metz, because African philosophers have not just tried to show that morality is rooted in cultural wisdom that reflects traditional understandings of reality and human nature but rather should be taken to regard these facts as *closing the explanatory gap*. In other words, Metz's critique takes for granted that African philosophers are or should be trying to accomplish the same philosophical aim as the one that matters to him, which he has defined as identifying the abstract, pure principle that will "plausibly entail and best explain what all morally right actions have in common" (1). Not only is relationality and social interdependence an idea that African philosophers draw upon in developing their views about the conduct of persons, Metz assumes they posit such ideas in order to fulfill the logical role an explanatory principle would have in the traditional foundational sense, as pure, general, and basic. If Metz doesn't take for granted that they can be held to this standard, his criticisms of African philosophers are more or less beside the point, because there is no other reason to believe they are trying to show that *ubuntu* or anything else about nature or human nature allows us to demonstratively entail duties in the manner of modern moral theory as Metz has laid it out.

I do not believe either Nkrumah or Gyekye is best understood as having moral theory in Metz's sense as a significant philosophical aim or intention. More importantly, the interpretation of African ethics attributed to Metz in the above paragraph is in some tension with his earlier assertion that moral

theory, as he defined it in laying out the project of this book, has not been widely attempted or prioritized in the work of philosophers for whom communitarian and relational ideas have been central, going back to Confucius, (1). Perhaps sensing this tension, Metz reasserts the general force of his diagnosis using a thought experiment. Imagine we are *not* socially interdependent as a species, and that individual existence is understood to be prior to and independent of community and relatedness to others. From the sheer acknowledgement of the reality of such a state, dare I say, *of nature*, Metz claims that nothing necessary about how individuals should treat one another would logically follow (39). Next, he asks us to consider the opposite condition, in which “nearly everything about us is...a product of socialization and other external influences. My claim is: nothing yet follows with respect to the way we ought to treat people...What these thought experiments demonstrate is that *argumentatively settling* questions about how we are obligated to treat other persons cannot be done *immediately* on the basis of *purely* metaphysical descriptions of human nature” (39, some emphasis added).

What Metz doesn't acknowledge here is that the reader can agree with what he concludes from the thought experiment without granting that it supports the exaggerated significance he repeatedly attributes to his diagnosis of *is/oughtism*. For agreement that no definitive principle of obligation follows strictly and deductively, (is “demonstrated”), from either of two opposite hypothetical states of nature has no effect on the belief that moral philosophical conversation can illuminate the complexities of our moral circumstance plausibly and reasonably by referring to aspects of nature and human nature that are regarded as relevant to conduct to a greater or lesser degree depending on metaphysics. One can accept his conclusion and nonetheless hold that different accounts of nature and human nature in the context of different metaphysical beliefs, make some forms of conduct appear more reasonable and admirable than others. Ontology makes a difference. Indeed, the claim that ontology is relevant should count as a belief that is internal to some broad metaphysical views even though it is excluded by others as “illegitimate.” But it is only from the

latter standpoint that philosophical conversation burdens itself with what would from the other position seem an illusory expectation that moral philosophy is unsuccessful unless it argumentatively settles all questions about obligations and duties by establishing principles from which they are entailed, and that in referring to beliefs about natural and human natural states-of-affairs that is the only philosophical use we could imagine putting them to.

At their best, neither Hobbes nor Rousseau expected their readers to see moral entailments following directly from either of their quite different hypothetical starting points. There are many ways to interpret the 'debate' between Hobbes and Rousseau, but I would contend that among the least plausible would be those choosing to regard their political and moral claims as uninteresting and moot because neither one *argumentatively settles* debate about what kind of moral or political regime is entailed by the state of nature. Indeed, the value of such thought experiments lies in the shades of plausible relevance to life that are illuminated when we consider what it would be reasonable to think and do in light of the complex circumstances *we* face. In my view, it is mainly their ability to generate interpretations that are compelling enough to engage us in further discussion about our lives and conduct that hypothetical cases have their greatest philosophical use in moral theory. But this means it is their ability to *unsettle* what seems settled and generate further conversation in light of wider experience in which they have their greatest value, rather than a hope or expectation of settling and closing it.

In any event, making sense of what is compelling in Hobbes' thought experiment involves our ability to place ourselves in a hypothetical state of nature and imagine the irrationality of a life ruled by the metaphysical belief that persons are utterly independent individuals. Revisionist Hobbes might have considered that if *ubuntu* didn't exist, humans would have had to invent it, because of our human nature. For Revisionist Rousseau, the thought experiment begins differently, but achieves a similar result – we are cursed by our *ubuntu*-nature and must constantly struggle with it – to paraphrase, 'we are *everywhere* born free but *everywhere* in chains.' But

struggle with those metaphorical chains we must because they are the result of our nature as social individuals. Both return us to the central question animating Nkrumah's and a lot of Gyekye's philosophies – not which abstraction settles the argumentative debate and provides the principle that explains how morality is justified, but how should society be structured and individual life conducted so as to allow each one to flourish as the person they are, *bound* to one another but *not chained*. In both Hobbes and Rousseau these issues engage us in questions that become more recognizably political than moral in Metz's sense. But this is not surprising given the superiority modern moral theory attributes to 'the right' over 'the good' and its general form as *metaphysics*. In all four of these thinkers there is an acknowledgement that rightness must be rooted to some degree in an understanding of nature and human nature, whether that refers to natural law and natural rights, the "General Will," the Common Good, or something else.

Throughout *A Relational Moral Theory*, it occurred to me that a less dogmatic approach might have considered whether it would mean more to the endeavor of philosophizing about conduct to consider arguments that try to establish a reasonable basis for beliefs about *which* facts are relevant to *some* conduct, *why* they are relevant, and *what* they tell us that may plausibly be true about what should or should not be done. I know that this view of what is at stake in moral philosophy goes considerably beyond the carefully bounded philosophical project the author takes on here—but that is my point. Something like this alternate view is closer to that of the African philosophers Metz criticizes for falling afoul of the is/ought dichotomy and failing to show how the explanatory gap can finally be closed. Both of these are problems from the standpoint of a narrowly conceived Western meta-ethics, and challenges to both of them are at play in the work of some African philosophers grounded in the living experience, history, and language of their traditions rather than the abstract formal expectations of logic. The fact that "the default position amongst African philosophers" is to take the purported facts of human life in the world as relevant and compelling to some degree as implying human duties and responsibilities doesn't suggest

that a project announcing itself as so deeply indebted to moving African Philosophy forward onto a global level as this one is getting off on the right foot by insisting on one of the hollowest of the slow-dying dogmas of empiricism.

As Wittgenstein and others argued in the last century, the problem of ethical philosophy isn't that facts obstruct us from making progress toward reasonable conclusions about morality, it's regarding abstract formal logic as the touchstone or template for moral truth. Western metaphysics arrived at the dictum to never deduce values from facts largely as a result of the struggle to free itself from Thomistic metaphysics through the good offices of scholastic logical canons that were also appropriated from Aristotle. Excluding "most contemporary Western philosophers," the rest of humanity (including Africa) would understand this to be moot since deducing is not something one does in order to determine what is morally right or good in any real situation, past, present, or future. The right is no kind of deduction whatsoever, thus it is true but trivial that one cannot merely deduce an *ought* from what *is*. What ought to be done in some particular context is a matter of judgment that brings everything about us as persons who are irreducibly social beings into play. In other words, concerning morality abstract propositions whose truth value can be charted in a table illuminate for us less than the *saying*, the proverb, in its meaningful cultural complexity and even its ambiguity. But this forces moral philosophy out from the barren desert landscape of purity and deductive logic and back toward its real home in language, history, experience, culture, life, and interpretation.

Yet, relational ethics is here advanced not as a compelling picture of human conduct that draws strength from its rootedness in language, tradition, and experience but instead as a basis for principles that fit more logically with broadly distributed intuitions than the other leading brands of modern moral theory. The disappointing thing is that, in my opinion, some of the approaches of African philosophers from whom the author distances himself in the book bring the relational idea more fully and powerfully into view. To see that one's existence and dignity as an individual is dependent

upon that of others is to see the latter as valuable and thus as making a claim (an ought) to me and upon me. To believe that such *relations* are real is to believe they are really *of value* and that they ought to be regarded as such, which means they *ought to lead to practices and institutions*. To *relate* to another thus has two relevant senses: to relate means to acknowledge that our existences are connected and also expresses the hope and expectation of being understood by the other. The *saying* to another in conversation reflects a meaningful connection that is always at least potentially thereby on the way to understanding. It isn't a foggy metaphysical cloud of ambiguities from which all that can be hoped for is that logical work will allow us to precipitate the clarity of an abstract moral principle. The everyday wisdom of the proverb or saying usually conceals an enigma or a paradox that quite confounds the expectation that our intuitions and principles of practical judgment may be formulated in a straightforwardly logical manner, or that the syllogism will be its form. These are some of the routes back to the prodigious relationality of ethics reflected in the ambiguity of cultural wisdom and its truth that were suggested by Henry Odera Oruka, Kwame Gyekye, and others.

“What is Admirable is Inexplicable”²: *Phronesis* and the Horizons of African Ethical Philosophy

Near the end of the book Metz briefly considers how “rightness as friendliness” might be able to address broader philosophical concerns including those that stem from the traditional discussion of virtue ethics (237-9). But in my opinion he considers the virtue-ethical approach too narrowly here. It would have been interesting to see Metz give more consideration to the reverberations of understanding right action as intrinsically related to personhood, identity, and *who we are* in the communities we inhabit. This would be a dramatic shift, forcing Metz to reconsider the relevance of ontology to morality, but in my view, it would also mark a more serious attempt to engage in a conversation with and

²LeGuin, 2019, 83.

alongside African ethical thought. This point seems aptly illustrated in the limited and controlled way he frames this part of the discussion as considering an “extension” of “rightness as friendliness” in order to see if it can provide an account of what moral virtue is (237). Rather than going “from right action to good character” as the heading indicates, I think the project of relational ethics would be more authentic and successful by trying to go in the opposite direction, which is really much more in the spirit of virtue ethics going back to Aristotle, and also, of course, why the virtue ethics tradition is usually seen as out of step with the modern moral approach that I have taken issue with here. The way things are with *zoon politikon* is that we move through the world in a cultured, social way on the basis of dispositions to act that we have developed mostly by conducting ourselves in relation to others in ways that are regarded as admirable as a function of life belonging to an ongoing conversation in light of traditional wisdom subject to application in the present. For Aristotle, the state of nature tells us nothing because a human considered as being outside the *polis* cannot really be a human at all, but only a god or a monster.

An alternative way of engaging the relational in ethics might start at the level of culture and practices. Moral intuitions are interwoven within the texture of cultural and linguistic life, from which they emerge and in the context of which they find their justifications. They are carried in proverbs and wisdom which live in literature and the humanities, popular culture, the arts, storytelling, music, and language. This doesn't make them philosophical or unphilosophical, but no philosophical attention to morality can tell us much by making its home in language merely disappear like so much “metaphysics.” Taking African moral ideas seriously on their own terms should lead Western Philosophy to reconsider whether it would really have understood human moral experience any better if it had succeeded in discovering an abstract, fundamental, and explanatory principle. But at the start of the book Metz told us that it hadn't done that yet despite centuries of trying and the project seems ever more anachronistic with each decade that separates us further from the twentieth century.

As Gyekye for one has suggested, something more like Aristotle's approach could provide a context for fruitful conversation between African ethics and contemporary Western Philosophy (Gyekye, 2011). Practical judgment—*phronesis*, for Aristotle—is more like interpretation in light of goals and expectations about the world and each other through which we understand and make further sense of our experience than a pronouncement based on what a general principle entails. It is not the dead traditions and languages of ancestors and what they *have said*, but the activity of appropriating, criticizing, interpreting, and applying what is living *in the saying*.

To act ethically in any circumstance is to do so from inclinations or dispositions that are admirable. To be admirably disposed is in one sense the origin of moral conduct, but in another sense, since the way to develop such moral dispositions is precisely to enact them historically in the meaningful context of one's cultural existence, disposition or virtue is also the result. Moral life is a collective interpretive practice that can only be worked-out in an irreducibly personal way. Moral theory needs to be developed in a way that doesn't consider cultural experience and beliefs about nature and human nature to be distractions or obstacles but, rather, as the medium in which we work out our moral existence as persons.

The details of that working-out reflect whether our sense of solidarity is broader or narrower. If it is broader, we recognize how our fates are linked together. But who are "we"? If "we" is narrower, to that extent our conversation refuses perhaps in an arbitrary way to recognize the moral status of those who are excluded. Enlightenment claimed universality for its ethical principles despite their being another ground upon which to advance its own (White, European, male, propertied, straight) interests. Enlightenment-*further* didn't proceed automatically, but through conversation and contestation by the oppressed and excluded of the limits and boundaries imposed upon them, some of those boundaries were breached and the solidarity of the liberated was expanded. Our present hope is to identify right action with what we want to admire in our future as a human race, whose thinking remains badly mired in the narrowness of its

association with merely exclusive forms of national, ethnic, religious, and other identities. Our hopes of overcoming parochialism and false universalism cannot rest on establishing either a logical or an empirical universal principle that applies to all but instead depends on our willingness to make conversation and contestation on the basis of expanding solidarity a reality.

This is not to suggest that a relational ethics could only be developed in the idiom of virtue ethics or something like it. But taking the virtue-ethical approach seriously may help resist some of the tendencies of modern moral philosophy that result in its being framed as a contest between ever more abstract principles that resemble real life situations poorly. Real relations turn into variables that can be manipulated to produce a variety of effects designed to provoke and illuminate the reader's intuitions. But through such work morally fraught experiences and situations are *misrepresented* so as to appear more like Trolley Problems rather than returning to the questions of who we are in relation to others and the community, which make more sense as questions of character. As Plato and Aristotle both suggest, the integrity of persons and polity is not incidental to their individual and collective actions.

It has been all too common for the modern discourse of ethics to sidestep what preceded it historically as either hopelessly indeterminate, or relativistic, or 'essentialist' in its drive toward making the agency of the subject considered as an individual paramount. It could be that the key to the failure of individualist moral theories has had more to do with the metaphysical underpinnings guiding them than their inability to find the abstract needle of a principle in the haystack of human moral experience. If there isn't a needle in there, it will not do to simply keep trying to blow away as much of the hay as possible. The usual charges against approaching ethics in a way that sees persons as social have by now amply been rebuffed by a wide range of twentieth and twenty-first century thinkers who have used ideas like character and personhood as starting points for thinking about ethics. It would seem like an especially fruitful starting point for an ethics based on a notion of relationality that announces itself as being against

individualism and that does so via a critical appropriation of African moral ideas. As Gyekye says “For the Greek, as for the African and the Arab, the character of the individual matters most in our moral life and thought” (2010).

Finally, along with unduly honoring the modern commitment to the idea of the subject as paramount, Metz's approach also sacrifices relational ethics upon modernity's altar of precision, clarity and distinctness, and closure. In practical life there is little about human moral experience that recommends an approach in which these concepts feature prominently. Concerning the question of what it means to justify conduct, we are still learning from Aristotle that based on his metaphysics, we ought to “expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits” (Aristotle, 1934). With regard to morality, we are talking about something less like a syllogism than a song. Distinguishing between compelling ideas about the rightness of conduct may be more like telling music from noise than testing for soundness.

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The Limits of Individualism and the Potential for Friendliness in Thad Metz's *A Relational Moral Theory*

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Abstract

Metz's recent book *A Relational Moral Theory* explores a version of ethics that begins from friendliness rather than individual duty or utility. I examine Metz's bracketing of individualism, and explore what ethics might look like if he went even further in that project. I argue for friendliness as an affect, that is, as a way of facing and understanding the world. This allows a more grounded understanding of moral deliberation, moral imagination, and moral luck.

Thaddeus Metz's work in *A Relational Moral Theory* is a carefully reasoned argument for an ethics consistent with intuitions of African values. It stands as an alternative or answer to modernist Western versions of ethics, specifically theories of the right, which have tended to foreground the individual and center ethical questions on how that individual might be assured that his or her actions are the best ones possible.

My interest in these reflections will not be to determine whether Metz is right or not about relational ethics as being a plausible ethical theory or having African elements. I'm willing to grant these things. I am more interested in the way he frames the study, and in the assumptions he makes,

both explicit and implicit, in order to make his case. But, I am also not planning to argue that he is wrong about these assumptions, either. What I want to do here is, in fact, what he himself does: “reject a premise shared by its major interlocutors” (2022: 1). Or, if not reject, at least bracket, in order to see what happens when we take the argument in a different direction than he does. That premise is the same one that he sets to the side: individualism.

The point is not that Metz’s move to this form of individuality will not accomplish his stated goal of finding an African ethic that does a better job of addressing the justification for a moral system. Even if I might want to argue with a few specific elements of that, I’m willing to admit that he is successful in his goal. The more interesting point is to see what happens when we change the central question that motivates this study. If the goal is no longer just finding an ethical theory that individuals can use to justify judgment and direct action towards other individuals, we might open the door to thinking about a more productive version of ethics that captures other aspects of African intellectual life.

Varieties of Individuality

Instead of changing one element of a theory to see whether it generates a more adequate metaethical approach, what happens if we change an element and just see where it takes us? What happens when we take the bracketing of individualism further than Metz does? Entertaining this thought will require that we understand how far he does take his bracketing and where it stops. He still wants a normative theory, that is, something that enables us to make judgments on specific moral problems.

There are at least four places where we might see individualism at work in most Western ethical theory:

1. The nature of the moral actor
2. The object of moral action
3. The underlying justification for the meta-ethical principles
4. The application of judgments to the world.

Metz brackets one of these, the third one, by substituting relationality in general and friendliness in particular as the basis for determining ethical judgments. The others all remain committed to individualism.

In the case of the actor, we assume that a judgment is made by one person, or mainly by one person, and so the question is about how that person ought to act given a set of conditions. We assume that person has particular characteristics. In a moral sphere, that person holds values cognitively, as propositions to be followed, and the (fully rational and moral) person acts based on those propositions. Obviously, people can have weak will and act for all sorts of reasons, but in this scenario the person who is properly exercising moral reasoning holds these values, has what we might think of as an algorithm (i.e., a metaethical theory) that sorts and prioritizes values and enables judgment; and based on all this, the individual acts. Actions do not affect this process – the causal arrow goes in one direction, from moral reasoning to moral action. So, the task is to formulate a clear moral theory that can then result in moral action.

The second place for the individual is as the recipient or subject of ethical action. We might say that the individual is the proper object of ethics, and to the extent that other things are considered as objects, they are ultimately reducible to individuals. So, we might have concerns for institutions and see ethical action as relevant in our judgments about how to act towards institutions, but the ethical significance lies in the fact that institutions are collections of individuals. We might see that there are obligations towards nature or animals, but again these might be understood anthropomorphically, so that the reason we see our actions as falling within ethics is that human individuals will be harmed, at least eventually.

The third place where we might see individuals as central in Western ethical theory is in the structure or formulation of the grounds for right ethical action. While theories of the right are abstract in modern Western ethics, they usually assume that the proper justification for action needs to maximize utility or affirm duties that benefit the individual. Theories of the good (to use W. D. Ross's distinction), which have to do with the good life or human flourishing, may well be more diffuse in their justification. To use the

best-known theory of the good, Aristotle's ethics asks about the nature of the good life, and this may well be in connection with others (indeed, for him, human flourishing happens in human society). There is still, though, the question of whether that human society is grounded in the individual, that is, whether it is just the sum total of the flourishing of all individuals within it, or whether it is something separate from that.

The fourth place might look like the second, but I think it is different. It is the individualism implicit in the ethical activities or solutions one might advocate. This is like the second version of individualism, in that it is about the recipient of moral action. But instead of being focused on who the ethical object is, it is focused on the kinds of actions that we might see as appropriate to engage in, in order to accomplish the moral task we are trying to accomplish. It is this action and not another that will best support the values I want to support. Ethical action lies in individual acts, done by individuals to individuals based on a theory which abstracts from individuality but is ultimately reliant on it (i.e., it references autonomy or maximizing utility as core or determinative metaethical values).

So, Metz brackets only the third, and that only partially. While relationality moves us past the question of whether the welfare of individuals grounds metaethical theory, once it comes time to describe relationality it still involves the relationships between individuals. The end result, Metz's goal of his bracketing, is a new justification for ethical action, which is broadly based on relationality, and more specifically on friendliness.

So, it is worth thinking about what comes out of the bracketing of individualism in one place and not others. On the positive side, it enables Metz to isolate the problem he is addressing, which is the general lack of attention to the limitations of metaethical strategies in modern Western formulations that start from the interests or the autonomy of the individual. If we suppose that the context remains that of the individual for moral reasoning, but we change the justification, we can possibly broaden the kinds of cases and the kinds of values that ethics can handle.

That is a useful result. But it is also a potentially problematic one, if only because the broadening of the metaethical framework might cover over problems with retaining individualism in the other parts of ethical reasoning. If the goal is to find a plausible theory to justify some metaethical standards, then Metz has accomplished this. But we may still not have other things that we hope that ethics provides for us, such as a clear reflection of the world and a strategy for living well in it.

We can press further on the suspension of the individual, but that will require some reflection on the metaphysics of ethics. By this I am not referring to Kant's project translated into English as *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In that work, Kant is interested in the foundations of rights and virtues. I am more interested in the metaphysics of those about whom ethical judgments are made, who makes those judgments, and who formulates the principles by which they are made. Individuals are taken for granted in this process, as the subjects and objects of ethical thinking. Because of this, the nature and context of ethical activity is also clearly delineated, as a feature of judgment of a specific sort (i.e., not simple personal preference but at least shared preference, and more likely judgment about the right or the good that is not reducible to questions of shared preference but is grounded on more than that). Grounding ethics in individuals has enormous intuitive appeal. It enables us to judge action after the fact, assign praise and blame, and plan action for the future. It seems that without individuals in most, if not all parts of an ethical system, we will lose all of those valuable things.

And so, I speak here of bracketing individualism, not denying it. The reason is that I want to question its nature, its metaphysical foundations that enable these useful things to occur. It might seem to be the most parsimonious approach to begin with individuals, the atoms of the world, and regard everything else as constructed out of them. But metaphysically at least, individuals themselves are open to as much question as anything else. There is an element of constitution to any individual we care to focus on, including human ones. There is an element of interconnectedness, not just as the result of the decisions individuals make, but prior to their even

making decisions at all. Individuals are invariably assembled.

This fact might not seem relevant to ethics. Human individuals are, after all, clearly assembled from organs and genomes and so forth, but what seems important is the identity of the individual qua individual. It is that humans are rational beings, and so their compositionality is beside the point, so it seems, when we are dealing with questions pertaining to humans, such as ethical judgments. This is, in fact, the defining quality of individuals – they are substances that can act as the locus of a set of accidents. Out of this, we even get moral language – we talk about character, which is about the specific set of accidents that attach to a specific individual. We talk about integrity, which is the level of correspondence (more specifically, harmony or accord) between some accidents (virtues, ideals, ideas) and others (actions, habits, etc.). We end up with a very rich internal life for these individuals, and out of that life an ethical code is supported.

Indeed, the thing that is often put in tension with the individual, which is the group (and, there are several words that can substitute here), ends up being inextricably tied to the individual. We ask whether the individual comes first or the group does. This question simply supports the idea that both of these things exist, and they stand in some relation to each other. We might in fact suppose that we can diminish or even banish the idea of the individual, but it still haunts the discussion, in much the same way that banishing ethics based on sacred concepts in favor of secular ethics often turns out to bear the imprint of the sacred anyway, in the form of substitutes for a law-giver, a natural order, or something like that.

To bracket individuality, then, is going to take more than just preferring a group of some sort. The metaphysics remains the same. Preferring or prioritizing some sort of group simply reinforces the shadow of the individual, negating it but leaving it intact. We have not yet stepped outside of a metaphysics of the individual by focusing on, for example, race, gender, or class; we have just rendered it to be a secondary rather than a primary entity in a binary opposition.

Add to this the fact, already alluded to, that individualism as a metaphysical concept has some potential problems. Simply asserting that something is an individual because it bears certain characteristics (e.g., rationality) is susceptible to both the fact that it may just be an assertion and nothing more, and also that whatever characteristic we may choose could turn out to be less defining and less forceful than it seems. Are humans rational animals, and is that why we can build an ethical framework on them? Our ability to be rational has come under serious attack from many quarters, both within philosophy and outside, ever since its championing in the Enlightenment as the *sine qua non* of humanity. This has certainly been the case outside of philosophy, in areas such as anthropology and sociology (e.g., Hernando 2017, Callero 2009), but can also be seen among philosophers (e.g., Ott 2018).

We have a choice at this point. We could simply decide that the complications of individuality are not as great as they seem and continue to use the concept as the centerpiece of philosophical thought. Many in philosophy do this, but the price is that it becomes increasingly more difficult to ignore the ways in which classic Enlightenment assumptions about individuality are undermined by empirical data and more adequate accounts of human consciousness. We could, secondly, decide to assert individuality as a starting point, in much the same manner that economists at one time would assert the *homo oeconomicus*, the rational economic actor, as a foundational element of economic accounts. We could, in other words, opt for something like methodological individualism instead of ontological individualism. (see, for example, Udehn 2001). This could be done, but the price here is that this is at best an imaginary assertion, and the theory that results from it will cease to describe or explain the world (and indeed, assertions of rational economic actors in economics are waning in favor of a description of market actors closer to the actual behavior of humans in real markets). Or third, we could bracket the idea of the individual more completely. But what would that look like? I think we would be faced with an entirely different ontology of ethics. We would be faced with the a human.

Humans in the World

The heritage of ethical reflection in the West has been a form of humanism, which has foregrounded the individual. As I have outlined, that comes with some problems. But are there alternatives that don't just reduce to an individualism by other means?

One alternative comes through complexity theory. We might, as J. Paul Narkunas puts it, see ourselves through the lens of the "ahuman" (Narkunas 2018). Narkunas puts the more general question of the alternative to individuality in term of life within economic space. He points out that, far from the picture that we usually have of humans deliberating and acting, and their actions adding up to collective phenomena in the world, "[b]oth the human and its others self-organize, while creating functional entanglements of processes and relations between entities that generate forms of life" (2018: 3).

Consider for example our popular but incorrect account of animal behavior. We often imagine that animals are like humans in having an interiority that expresses itself in a limited form of agency. But if we look at complex animal behavior (e.g., the behavior of ants, starlings in a murmuration, or any other "social" animal), we see a different picture. The systems of interaction are complex, but not complicated. In other words, understanding the social activity of animals does not depend on delving into an unknowable interiority of the animal. It can be done through considering some very simple basic rules that each individual follows. Humans studying these animals still have to understand those rules, but the point is that they need not be understood as acting as individuals, either driven by their own agency or even by instinct. They can be driven by rules such as those of proximity (in the case of starlings) or rules of grasping, releasing, moving, and so forth in the case of ants. In other words, highly complex structures can result from simple rules. These structures are the emergent properties of collective behavior.

So, do we still have individuals here? Yes, we do. But those individuals also compose themselves into another individual, that of the murmuration or the collective task of the ants, or any of a thousand other assemblages

made possible by the meeting of rule-following behavior and perturbations in the networks that those rules create. In other words, ultimately we do not have individual but *dividuals* (Ott 2018). There is no one privileged space where we can say, this is where rational action happens, this is where ethics resides. The emergent properties of individuals give us more individuals, and we deal with these new assemblages as entities able to have values, act, and be held responsible. This is not simply reducible to the actions of the constituent humans, since emergent conditions by their nature cannot reliably be traced back to those humans. Instead, the interaction of networks brings states of affairs into actuality in ways not predictable from their constituent parts.

If we can see that the individual is not a particularly useful account of animal activity (and, of course, much more is needed to establish that than can be included in a brief paper), does it follow that the same will be true for humans? Our humanist assumptions in philosophy have tended to separate us from animals and assume that what is important about us is what makes us different from other beings. Our ethics follows that pattern – ethical human action must arise from what makes us different, specifically our rational ability to formulate metaethical accounts and be directed by them. When we use the term “individual” of humans, it is that difference we intend to highlight.

I would like to turn that humanist assumption around, and think about the continuities shared by interconnected groups within nature. We can reflect on the following of rules and the ways in which conditions emerge from that, which can't be reduced to or predicted from those rules themselves. We can try to stand back and reflect on those structures, but even our act of reflecting is part of that rule-following and emergent conditions. In other words, instead of beginning from the assumption that humans are different, more like gods than animals, and that our difference is where the ethical world resides, what if we see ethics as a space of thought and action that we are faced with, and that we can change or adapt to but which we never surmount? What if what matters is the way we face this reality? Metz gives us a tool to think about this possibility. It is friendliness.

Relationality and Friendliness

Relationality for Metz is a way of moving past individuality in ethics. As I have argued to this point, it is not clear that it does that, entirely, but on the other hand he offers something with real potential, even if it is not exactly the potential he hopes it has. For Metz, relationality enables us to have a metaethical theory that is not dependent on either Kantian ideas about autonomy or consequentialist ideas about utility (even though it does not deny that those might be useful virtues). A major message of Metz's study is that if we take relationality seriously we end up being able to account for features of our ethical world in ways that traditional Western ethics cannot.

Metz's version of relationality is still indebted to individualism ("I start by drawing a contrast between a communal or friendly way of relating and the capacity to be party to it, and advance the principle that a moral agent ought to respect individuals in virtue of their dignified capacity to befriend or be befriended," Metz 2022: 104), as are the reasons that someone might not see it as useful in a discussion of metaethics (both "particularism or a dialogical orientation" are also understood as versions of individualism, 104). In general, for Metz, we don't have a situation in which the relation precedes the individual. That possibility is summarily dismissed (this is what Metz calls "a dialogical orientation"). So, someone like Buber makes no sense in a scenario that still have individuals in the background. Individuals still come first. For Buber, the I of the I-Thou was not the same as the I of the I-It. Relationality, dialogue even, preceded the ontology of individuality. If we begin with a commitment to individuality, this makes no sense, because a relation cannot precede the metaphysical entities that comprise that relation. Buber, though, means for us to look elsewhere in our understanding of what being human means.

The kind of relationality that Metz has in mind, friendliness, can be thought of as something more than a way to understand rightness (as in his phrase "rightness as friendliness"). It can also be an affect, that is, a way of facing the world. It can be an organizing and interpreting principle of the world. This is not inconsistent with Metz's way of treating this idea. But I think it has more potential than he develops. Throughout the book, it wavers

between being an affect and being an attribute of individuals (so for instance, there is the recurring question of whether one can be friendly with those who don't have the ability to be friendly). So, in one sense there is a move away from individuality here, and in another there isn't. But the potential of the concept goes beyond this.

If friendliness is like an affect, that is, a way that we face the world, an organizing and interpreting mechanism for understanding the relationships in the world, we have something like an emergent property of our networks of cognition and the activity in the world that shows potential in forming an ethic. It is a way of framing the world so that ethics is possible in the first place, rather than a metaethical standard for determining rightness.

If one is rooted in humanist individualism, the response to this is obvious. Who is the one who treats the world this way? There must still be an individual involved. But that would be to re-inscribe individualism as an assumption, rather than to treat it as a virtuality brought about by friendliness. It is not that there is a prior individual, but that the individual becomes an individual through the relation. It is not the individual who lies before action, who can be held to praise or blame by the results of deliberation, but the individual who is a virtuality, the result of the interaction of existing forces in the material world.

What makes friendliness interesting is the same thing that makes the focus on nature work for Stoics. If we expect nature to be a metaethical standard as we see in modern ethical theory, we will be disappointed. Nature is not a standard for Stoics that will help to sort right from wrong action. Given the determinist nature of classic Stoicism, the problem is one of our own inability to recognize nature for what it is. We strive against it, wishing that things were different. Ataraxia, or tranquility for Stoics, is about aligning our narrative world with nature. But given the Stoic materialism, how we orient our minds and nature are not different things. There is no depth to Stoic metaphysics, no sense that there is something underneath the material such as individual (or worse, divine) agency that stands in a causal relationship to effects in the world, and for which we can be held to account

for. In a world where friendliness is an affect that we effect a world, morality is what we make, not just what we are judged for (for more on this, see Johnson 2020, especially 203ff).

What is made available if we see friendliness as an affect? It sets up a narrative about the world. This narrative does not cause the world to change, if by that we mean something quasi-Newtonian in causal efficacy. It does, however, produce virtualities. There are no guarantees about these virtualities, although there might be regularities within them (so for example, our cognitive systems interact with the world such that we have perceptual illusions in a number of cases, and these illusions are persistent; in other words, we not only see them but we cannot help but seeing them, whereas artificial intelligences evidently do not). A friendly posture to the world might maximize world-building and enhancing outcomes, although it might not in some conditions (we do not, for instance, want to take on a friendly affect towards dictators or murderers, generally).

Friendliness as an affect also takes us out of thinking of ethics in terms of short-term decisions, and orients us towards longer term relations. If I am faced with a trolley problem or something similar to it, the question I should be asking is not, “What is the most ethical action in this case?” but “How did we get here, how do we narrate this situation, and what are the real conditions in the world?” Friendliness is openness to other options, even if they are not ones I thought of myself. There is a “we”, not just an “I” in the classic Western sense, but that “we” is not just the assembly of “I”s. It coalesces into its own “I”, its own individuality.

And so Metz’s criterion of friendliness, and relationality more generally, are a very good place to start in this recast version of ethics based in complexity. And this is why I want to advocate to press further on the suspension of individuality in the other areas I identified earlier. Metz’s instinct here is on target, and indeed an ethic that does more than just provide judgements on past or future action is possible if we bracket individuality and bring ethics closer to the world as it is, rather than the world as philosophy wants it to be.

What a Further Bracketing of Individuality Might Afford

The reason for pressing the bracketing of the individual further than Metz does is to answer a basic question in philosophy, one that often does not get raised. The question is this: What question does this theory answer, and what problem does it solve? And, perhaps as importantly, what questions might be answered if we reframe the project somewhat? The most significant issue is that Metz's project assumes that if we have a reliable justification for action, philosophy has done its task. Once proper deliberation is in place, the individual can act, and can be seen as praiseworthy or blameworthy. Moral theory will have discharged its duty.

There is, though, good reason to wonder *whether deliberation is either necessary or sufficient for ethical action* (Bortolotti 2011; Brownstein 2018). In other words, if constructing a reliable metaethical standard does not lead to better ethics, has anything been accomplished? Metz's innovation of putting friendliness at the center of ethics makes it possible to not invest all ethical significance in the deliberative actions of an agent. We come into being as friends, and in doing so recognize the interconnections, the networks, the social reality of existing as humans. We deliberate, yes, but that is never sufficient to account for ethical activity. And, in facing the world through the affect of friendliness we make a world in which moral activity is possible. It is not a world of pure self-interest, like a marketplace (that is, after all, another potentiality of a different kind of facing the world, and one more likely to reduce us to calculative individuals). It is not a world of striated subjectivity, in which we are not just subjects but subjected to others, and which describes a different kind of moral landscape. Friendship is a smooth space, an opening up of creative potential when who we are is not dependent on our interiority or on our place in a hierarchy.

A second thing that might be afforded is *moral imagination*. If we have the remaining individualisms of the ethical calculus, we tend to be oriented towards adjudication and towards the solution of given moral problems. The questions we ask that frame those moral problems might not be fully interrogated. For every trolley problem-style moral quandary we are presented with, we find a host of other questions if we have the imagination

to both understand counterfactual and alternate scenarios and also the imagination to consider a wider range of outcomes than are present in a limited moral scenario.

It might be objected that this is exactly what is done anyway in moral reasoning, in order to determine the best outcome for all and therefore the right moral decision. A focus on relationality only makes that set of calculations more accurate. And this might be true, but moral imagination is more than this. If our moral world is not just a quasi-Newtonian one of causes and effects, but one in which there are networks, feedback conditions, emergent properties, and other nonlinear features, moral imagination becomes more than a calculation of the likelihood of outcomes or some free-flowing “what-ifs”. Imagination might make use of metaphor and the like (Johnson 1985) in order to do more than just examine possible existing scenarios, but to create new ones. If a moral judgment is just based on facts of the world we all in principle agree on, then there are no extra facts, and no extra events that can necessarily change the moral scenario. In fact, though, relationality understood as a historically-dependent and emerging phenomenon (and not just a relationship between two individuals) holds forth the possibility that the story is neither fully understood when a moral judgment must be made, nor is it over just because we think we have all the relevant facts in.

But imagination is not everything. It inevitably leverages metaphors of past action, changing familiar patterns into new ones. A moral imagination of race might well reinforce racist beliefs rather than produce scenarios in which the values of multiple different actors are supported. And so, imagination in itself is not enough. But it does one thing, in this story – it uncovers a gap in the sort of relationality that is rooted in individuality. While Metz does not quite say it, there's a self-sustaining aspect to the affect of friendliness. It begets more friendliness, and it could even be seen as a virtue to maintain this affect, that is, to reinforce the reasons for engaging the world in these terms (especially when there are other options, such as to engage the world as sets of discrete manipulable objects or as hierarchically ordered entities). While racism is a possible outcome of imagination, it

striates the world and undermines the potentiality of friendliness moving forward.

Likewise, we might have a better account of *moral luck*. Keeping individualism as a central part of morality, even if it is amended in one area with relationality, undermines the question of moral luck. In particular, seeing the task of ethics based in relationality as providing a renewed basis for moral responsibility for individuals ignores that some action at least is not the result of deliberation (even when the actor thinks it is), but is the result of luck. In this case, I understand luck as an emergent property of conditions we have no direct and complete control over. Taken ahistorically, we might look at the existing conditions of a moral quandary, and make a determination as to the best course of action (or alternatively, after the fact assign responsibility for actions already taken). This assumes that deliberation acts on these existing conditions, and is adequate to give guidance to the individual and to the authorities who must praise or blame actors.

Moral luck is often seen as a complicating factor in assigning responsibility to individuals, and as such might be seen as a concept fundamentally tied to individuality. This need not be the case, though, if we think of it in terms of the emergent properties of conditions of experience, which remain in principle unpredictable in any reliable sense since they activate conditions not reducible in a straightforward manner to prior conditions. When a tornado hits or misses a house, it is a question of luck, even though there is no way we could reduce the path of the tornado to its causal forces before the fact (which is, after all, when it matters). In other words, luck is as much about situations or states of affairs as it is about the probabilities of something happening to an individual.

If we extend the bracketing of individuality further than what is required to find an alternate metaethical guide, as Metz does, we open the door to seeing ethical action as more than what that kind of metaethics can describe. What might be called moral luck in some ways of understanding ethics, might be seen as the creation of a moral landscape, that is, a place where moral questions can arise. These questions are not just ones of

adjudication or exhortation to be good, or even reasons for supererogatory action. These are more basic than that. Moral luck is the opportunity for experiments with life. Luck is an intervention in a narrative that seems already set, and as such is an opening to rethink value and action. As with the Stoics, it is not the implacable ability to bear up under the inevitabilities of life, but rather the ability to experiment when given the chance, and find new ways of actualizing life.

There are other aspects of ethics that would be rethought if we bracket individualism in the manner I have described. As is already evident, binary thinking (often a result of Western ethics) would be minimized. Our moral epistemologies would look different – what it means to know something and have that have ethical weight would look different when the ethical world is created, not simply found. We would have different ways to think about the ethical status of non-humans and the environment (for more on this, see Janz 2009; Janz 2011). And, we would have new ways of thinking about ethics within African contexts, as something more than just an alternative source for ethical guidelines (Janz 2022).

Clearly, this is a version of ethics that is a long way from Metz's goals in *A Relational Moral Theory*. As I indicated at the beginning of these reflections, this is not intended as a direct critique of his argument, but rather a line of flight that is introduced when we extend the bracketing of individuality further than he does, and when we take his idea of relationality and friendship in a different direction than he does. I hope this provides some room for thinking about the larger space of ethics.

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Questioning the Foundations of Metz's Modal Relationalism

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Abstract

Thaddeus Metz argues that his relational moral theory, derived from sub-Saharan African relational experiences, is grounded on 'the capacity to relate' (potentiality) as opposed to 'relating itself' (actuality) and that this approach accounts better for human rights. While in his development, Metz prefers the modal notion 'capacity' to 'potentiality,' his use reflects Aristotle's second sense of potentiality in the theory of being relative to potency and act. In this article, I discuss Metz's modal foundation and give reasons why I think that, in its current status, it cannot fully account for morality. The first reason is that his relational moral theory cannot effectively account for the value of a person qua person independent of the 'we.' The second reason is that because of underlining the category 'community' as opposed to 'individual,' and 'capacity/potentiality' as opposed to 'actuality,' Metz's book ignores the element of rational agency. Although his theory provides a good basis for communal duties, it will need help providing insights into moral character formation and related aspects.

Introduction

Thaddeus Metz is one of the prominent philosophers who has attempted to offer a robust normative dimension of African relational moral theory building on modal notions in his various writings. (Metz 2012; Metz 2021). The relational moral theory in African philosophy has been dominated by a tradition that regards an action as right or wrong depending on how best it respects communal interests (Mbiti 1969; Menkiti 1984; Masolo 2004). Metz notes as the common element in these theories the centrality of ‘identifying with others’ or ‘sharing a way of life’ and the ‘exhibition of solidarity with others’ or ‘caring for others’ quality of life. He often summarises these common elements using the two concepts, namely, identity and solidarity. In this relational context, the notion of identity builds on the logic of the relation between part and the whole, where the basis is the consideration of the “I” as part of the “We” (whole). This is generally summarised in the maxims of Mbiti (1969): ‘I am because we are; We are therefore I am.’ Or by Desmond Tutu (1999): ‘...my humanity is caught up in your humanity because we say a person is a person through other persons’ (Tutu, 1999: ix). The notion of solidarity targets communal wellbeing. Based on this communitarianism, philosophers have elaborated different theories such as ubuntu ethics (Ramosé 2002), and African communitarian ethics (Metz 2007 summarised these various orientations). In most cases, there is an unnecessary overemphasis on communitarianism as giving identity to what it means to be African as opposed to individualism which is claimed to be Western.

While Metz is aware of the difficulties of overemphasizing African communitarianism (see Metz 2021), he recognizes the various insights from the communitarian ethics and opts for creating his own original version of ethics within the same framework. I read him as trying to correct the various infelicities in African communitarianism by offering an alternative perspective that responds better to the theoretical challenges. In an attempt to do this, he utilises the deontological framework where he builds on the modal notion of capacity as the foundation of his relational moral theory. The article will question this foundation by focusing on

whether it is an adequate basis for a normative theory capable of accounting for duties on self, moral character, human rights and other aspects.

In section 2, I will firstly introduce the concepts of modality and relation which are central to the argument of Metz. This will briefly introduce the reader to the meanings of modality and relation in metaphysics and modern logic. Section 3 focuses on discussing the modal foundations of his theory. This engages with Metz's foundationalism underlining several interesting issues in this relational moral theory. In section 4, I raise some serious issues that undermine the validity of his elaboration, hence my claim that the interpretation of his modal notion as per the current status is inadequate as a comprehensive foundation of African morality.

Modality and Relation

Metz argues that his book, *Relational Moral Theory*, is suggesting a modal relational theory. It is for this reason that I intend to briefly introduce the general understanding of 'modal' and 'relation' within the analytic tradition before considering their interpretation and use in his moral philosophy.

In modern analytic metaphysics and logic, the topic of modality deals with the way things are (actual status) or could have been different from their actual status. This also applies to propositions stating how things are, and those regarding how they could have been. The common concepts that summarises this mode of being are "possibility" and "actuality," and in some cases "contingency" and "necessity." These terms are often discussed in the relation between the possible worlds and the actual world. A possible world is about the possible state of affairs, while the actual world is about the actual state of affairs.

Traditionally, studies on modal notions differentiate between 'modality *de re*', which focuses on things in the world, and 'modality *de dicto*' focusing on what is said (propositions). (Kayange 2021). If we go further into the Aristotelian context, some of the commonly discussed moral notions are potentiality and actuality, which are also noted in Metz's book and other writings. Metz targets building his theory on potentiality and notes that "There are two sorts of modality from which to choose, and I need to

motivate the choice of capacity over potentiality” (2022: 154). Metz is probably worried about the two interpretations of potentiality (*dunamis*) in Aristotle, where the restricted meaning is that it is a ‘power’, a property of a thing to produce change, and the other is that it is a complete capacity to be or do something as opposed to doing it (see Aristotle 1995, 1048a25).¹

For modern logic and analytic metaphysics, many scholars have equally dealt with modality and the related modal terms such as necessity and possibility (Lewis 1973; Plantinga 1974; Kripke 1972). The various interpretations of modal notions and beliefs may be summarised into two main theoretical orientations namely, modal realism and moderate modal realism. For instance, modal realism is summarised in Lewis’ credo, “I believe that things could have been different in countless ways; I believe in permissible paraphrase of what I believe; taking the paraphrase at its face value, I therefore believe in the existence of entities that might be called ‘ways things could have been’. I prefer to call them ‘possible worlds’” (Lewis [1973], 84). This will differ from moderate modal realism which believes in the existence of only one actual world and the possible worlds are abstract ways the various possibilities may be presented (for instance through propositions).

Apart from engaging Metz from the modal background, the other concept that requires an introduction is ‘relation.’ From the ontological point of view, the common-sense understanding is that this notion requires consideration of entities that share properties or show a certain link. For example, in ontology and logic, the notion of relation may target the sharing of properties or the link between individual (“I”) qua individual (“I”) and the community (“We”), or the link between a part and the whole (a common focus for mereology) (see also Metz 2021). A notion of relation as applied to the “I” and “We” has been one of the contentious earlier concerns of African philosophers in the last century. For instance, Kaphagawani attempts to clarify this relation between the “I” and the “We” in the following passage:

¹I will comment further on this aspect below.

...to assert African communalism is not in any way to imply the denial of the recognition of individual human beings qua individuals. African communalism, in fact, takes cognizance of ontological pluralism; and to start, as Mbiti does, with the assertion that we are presumes prior recognition of the individuality of those making up the “we.” For although it is mathematically possible to imagine a set which happens to be empty, it seems impossible to imagine the existence of an empty human society. And to claim that “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group” and vice versa is no doubt to forget the difference between individuals, on the one hand, and sets of individuals on the other (1998/2004: 338).

The quotation refers to the problem raised by some radical African communitarians who argue that it is impossible to think of the “I” without the “We” in African thought. When dealing with the notion of relation based on the entities as a central focus, we end up with concepts such as ‘communal relations,’ ontological relations, individual relations (this is common in studies on self-consciousness and subjectivity), and family relations.

From the logical point of view, we shift from the consideration of entities being related and focus on defining the meaning of relation, which is often done through the consideration of different properties. For example, we consider relation by pointing at the properties of reflexivity, symmetry, transitivity, etc. If we consider relation S as symmetrical, then what we are saying is that given objects x and y , if S holds then it will also hold on y and x . Reflexivity applies when we refer to the relation of x by itself, which mainly bleeds identity where $(x) x = x$. Transitivity is when S holding on x and y also does on y and z , and we conclude that it also does on x and z . Generally, these relations are instantiated in the ontological context; for instance, isomorphism may apply as an identity relation regarding the properties of objects A and B . Isomorphism is a special case of identity. Identity mainly concerns the identification of a thing by itself (for example, in idealism, in the case of the thinking subject, the I objectify itself, and realises that the

subject and the object are the same thing). In Leibniz's logic, the principle of indiscernible shows that this relation of *identity* (Metz banks so much on the notion of identity) cannot hold onto two objects that are numerically different, this is based on the metaphysical truth that they can not have the same properties. If they do, then mathematically this is the same object. Already from this, building a theory that leans so much on identity entails entering a complex area. Briefly, the concept of relation is broad and may lead to complications if not well defined, but also a better rationale why it is selected as fundamental in the moral philosophy of Metz.

Metz and Modal Foundation

What is Metz's theory that is founded on a modal relational approach? In *A Relational Moral Philosophy*, Metz tells us, "I ground my moral theory on the capacity to relate, and not relating itself, since this approach does the best job of accounting for human rights" (2022: 106). If we are to use strictly modal terms and generalise his foundation, he is suggesting that his theory is founded on concepts such as possibility, potentiality, ability, power, capability, etc. The quotation denies the other side of moral terms such as actuality, the actual state of affairs, and actual worlds. This basis is already suggestive of two different foundations of African theories of morality if we are to build them on the ontological basis of modality. I will first refer to his formulation of the moral theory, and then analyse the modal notions and relations on which they are founded.

Metz provides the following related versions of his moral theory:

- I.** An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be party to harmonious ways of relating.
- ii.** An act is wrong insofar as it degrades those with the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects.
- iii.** An action is permissible if it treats beings as special in accordance with their ability to be friendly or to be befriended.
- iv.** An action is impermissible to the extent that it disrespects beings with the ability to be part of relationships of identity and solidarity (2022: 110).

The moral principles above are indicative of the following moral notions as their foundation: (i) capacity, (ii) capability, and (iii and iv) ability. The modal notion of capacity is decisive in the first formulation as a determinant of right and wrong, but it is qualified by a special type of communitarian relation captured by the common notion of harmony (see also Tutu 1999 on harmony). But what is the meaning of the modal notions: capacity, ability, and capability? What is the meaning of their qualification in the definition above? As I alluded above, although Metz says that he prefers capacity to potentiality, his use of these terms is similar to the Aristotelian second sense of potentiality. These notions in the Aristotelian sense are not 'spoken of in relation to potentiality' as motion (first sense), but it is clarified in the following examples of Aristotle (in 1048b1-5 he gives the impression that it is undefinable but can be grasped through analogy):

In this case, as the builder building is to the builder who potentially builds, or how we are when awake compared to how we are when asleep, or how we are when seeing compared to how we are when we have our eyes shut but possess sight, or as the product shaped from matter is to the matter, as the finished work is to the unworked <material> -let actuality be defined by the first part of this contrast, and the potential by the second.

In my view, I understand Metz's theory as founded on this type of modal concept—there is completeness, but it is not actual, there is also no obligation that it must be actual. I have my eyes shut, but I possess completeness (in this case sight).

I will now consider the qualification of the modal foundation in "the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects," as per the second formulation of Metz's moral theory. Just as 'I can shut my eyes but possess sight,' morality is founded on the possession of the capacity to relate communally as subjects or objects. For Metz, "A being can be a subject of communal relationship insofar as it can think of itself as a 'we,' cooperate with others, help others, and act for their sake out of sympathy" (2022: 107).

This gives us the ‘potentiality condition’ for one to have the capacity in question. For instance, the builder who can potentially build has what qualifies him/her to this state. Similarly, Metz is claiming that “the thinking of oneself as a We” is a ‘potentiality condition’ that qualifies one as having the capacity to relate communally as a subject. The idea of ‘thinking’ in this condition gives the impression that Metz is restricting the subject to homo sapiens, excluding other possible beings. The introduction of the ‘We’ confirms Metz’s belief that African ethics is communitarian in nature and goodness or rightness is defined by friendliness. On the object, Metz notes that

In contrast, a being can be an object of such a relationship insofar as characteristic human beings could think of it as part of a ‘we’, advance its goals, benefit it, and act for its sake out of sympathy (2022: 107).

Potentiality is viewed in this case from the ‘We’ to a particular being. In both cases, the ‘We’ plays a fundamental role for potentiality to be the case. The interpretation given above will equally hold for the formulation in (ii), given that, for Metz, “the ability to be friendly, and to be befriended” is used interchangeably with “capability of relating communally”.

It is the formulation in (iv) that has some aspects requiring attention relative to the foundation of morality on modal notions. While it is about a wrong action, it promotes ‘the ability to be part of relationships of identity and solidarity,’ as a foundation for why we have to treat others well or with dignity. Both concepts are given a communitarian interpretation by Metz. For instance, Molefe (2017) summarises these concepts this way: “By ‘identity’ Metz simply refers to an ability to ‘share a way of life with others’, and by ‘solidarity’ the ability ‘to care to improve the quality of others’ ‘life’ for non-instrumental reasons” (see also Metz 2009, 51; Metz 2022). Equally in (i) the ‘harmonious relations’ lead to the same ideas of identity and solidarity, etc. All in all, what counts in this foundation is the other-regarding component as the defining character and guarantor of moral status to the “I”.

Is Metz's Modal Foundation a Good Basis for Morality?

I propose two arguments that Metz's relational moral theory cannot adequately (a) account for duties to oneself, and (b) account explicitly for rational agency. First, I start from Metz's implicit acknowledgment of some difficulties of his relational theory relative to duties, where he points out that,

Although it might make my theory even 'less African' than it already is (for not essentially including imperceptible agents, and perhaps for its theoretical structure), I am at this stage inclined to accept a category of duties to oneself. That is, when the relational moral theory prescribes respecting beings that are capable of relating communally, I suggest reading that as including one's own such capability (2022: 121).

While Metz mentions the category of duties to oneself, I contend that his relation moral theory expressed in the principles above cannot adequately satisfy this claim. I will first show where duties to oneself originate from, within the deontological moral theory, and argue that his theory in its current status cannot lead to such duties.

Let us consider a scenario of a sense of duty to oneself, and see the consequences relative to Metz's foundation in the capacity to relate communally or in a friendly way. I may give a simple example where an African individual may decide to exercise moderation against the habit of excessive drinking of alcohol. The main reason for my interest in moderation is that experience shows that every time that I drink, I feel very sick. I, therefore, practice moderation to avoid this experience of sickness. This means that there is a certain state of life in an individual that is not pleasurable and does not entail personal wellbeing. In this regard, the individual will practice temperance/self-control to avoid the unpleasant experience, and in a way maintain a good state of life. For Metz's theory, others will respect me because I have the capacity to relate communally as a subject or object. But what has this to do with my practice of a self-regarding

virtue? Unless we move to the level of idealism and argue that, ‘my feeling pain because of excessive drinking is the pain for everyone’ (for all humanity), therefore I decide to practice self-control for the sake of everyone. In this case, the individual has no responsibility, no duty, but the community is the source of every explanation (this is a pure rationalisation of human experience to fit the straight jacket of the capacity to relate communally).

If we are to be slightly technical, a good basis for engaging with Metz is Immanuel Kant's moral foundation, where both duties to the self and others find a home. It is also a good context because Metz's writings show the interest to flip Kantian philosophy from its supposed rational individualist basis (man is a rational animal) to a communal basis (man is a relational animal), with the aid of insights from the Aristotelian metaphysics and African communitarian thought. For Kant, all persons are respected because of being persons who are rational subjects and not necessarily because they can relate. The advantage of this is that we approach individuals as ends in themselves, their worth comes from their being persons. It is this aspect that forbids considering them instrumentally, as the expression in Kant's imperative demonstrates: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your person or the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.” It follows from this that our duties or moral obligation towards the self and others come from respecting persons as ends in themselves. Persons in this case have intrinsic value, such that an action is right if it entails respect of persons as ends in themselves; otherwise it is wrong. Kantian philosophy also endorses indirect duties; for example, “I will not stone your dog in my yard because by doing that I indirectly harm you. I, therefore, have duty to treat your dog with respect as a gesture of indirectly fulfilling my duty to you.” I am aware that in *A Relational Moral Theory*, Metz also attempts to account for these indirect duties.

If we take the formulation of Metz above, we cannot establish the value of persons as ends in themselves independent of thinking of themselves as a ‘we’ and consequently their intrinsic value and duties to oneself. For

example, let us consider his formulation in (i) above, where ‘An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be a party to harmonious ways of relating,’ and (ii) ‘An act is wrong insofar as it degrades those with the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects.’ The interpretation of the capacity of relating communally makes the recognition of the subject rely on the capacity that in turn depends on others, who are an explanatory factor of his/her recognition as a moral subject. If we can go back to the earlier citation from Metz, “A being can be a subject of communal relationship insofar as it can think of itself as a ‘we,’ cooperate with others, help others, and act for their sake out of sympathy.” Already this makes a subject depend on the ‘we’ for its recognition. Even when they relate as objects, it is the community that gives value to those objects. The moral obligation of an individual, as subject and object, is dependent on others and not on oneself. This is confirmed in Metz’s understanding of the central notions of identity and solidarity. For example, he sees identity exclusively as identification with others, which in my understanding is an oversight. If we can use ‘identity’ metaphorically, then Metz is calling for partial identification, given that total isomorphism would entail the problem of indiscernible as noted in Leibniz. Can human dignity and rights be based on partial identification?

I now turn to my second argument based on the rational agent in the conflict between founding morality on the community or individual, and potentiality or actuality. Firstly, by endorsing communal relations as central to his theory, Metz ignores the importance of rational agency. As noted earlier, this moral philosophy is founded on the definition of the essence of a person as a relational being, which may entail the extension to a social animal. While I acknowledge this as one of the possible interpretations of a human subject, I argue that other perspectives are ignored, especially man as a rational and free animal. Metz may argue that this is implicit in some communal relations such as cooperation and consensus. For instance, consensus entails the acknowledgment of rational subjects who bargain their interests with those of others and find a common ground. Unfortunately, the tendency among various African communitarian

philosophers has sidelined ‘rationality’ which is often thought of as a Western concept as opposed to the African communal relations approach. For instance, Tutu echoes this thinking in the following way:

“We say, ‘a person is a person through other people’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong’.” In Kayange (2018), I showed that this compromises the role of reason in African thought. In other words, this formulation ascribes *identity* to Westerners and *relations* to Africans. While Metz may say that his theory is in fact cognizance of the property of rationality as central in African thought, evidence from *A Relational Moral Theory* proves otherwise. For him, it is relations that matter for morality to make sense.

Metz may further argue that the choice of the metaphysical notion of potentiality/capacity as the basis of his theory by implication forbids him from paying attention to morality in the context of actuality. As noted earlier, his meaning of potentiality ignores the first sense of Aristotle which calls for motion (potentiality as power), and he opts for a static conception, capacity. His choice of potentiality as capacity makes him select only some convenient interpretation of a human subject in relation to the communal element. This has devastating results for his theory because it cannot adequately account for moral character and its formation and generally the aspect of practical reason. It may be jettisoned as a failure in accounting for the human practical nature in society. This has been one of the problems that affected ethics in general in the last century due to the reaction of various neo-empiricists and neo-positivists. Metz may say that his interest is providing a normative foundation in deontology and not focusing on practice. But why should we hold a theory that says little or nothing about human practice? Metz’s theory risks being viewed as one of the normative theories whose relevance in addressing moral challenges that are increasingly affecting humanity is minimal.

Conclusion

Can we still count on Metz's *A Relational Moral Theory*, given its challenges in accounting for the foundation of duties to oneself and its explicit omission of rational agency? In my view, one possible way to maintain Metz's relational moral theory is by focusing on the capacity to relate with the self and others (humans and non-humans I suppose) as persons, in essence as a rational agent as well as a communal being. It is the capacity to relate with the self and the other that makes them an end in themselves, hence the moral obligation and duty to respect them. Metz has argued for a category of duties to oneself:

That is, when the relational moral theory prescribes respecting beings that are capable of relating communally, I suggest reading that as including one's own such capability (2022: 121).

However, I don't believe this assertion can save his theory. Metz's theory must also seriously reflect on how to balance the notions of potentiality and actuality as mutual foundations of his theory. A more comprehensive approach that includes various elements may also help Metz to avoid the exclusive terms such as 'friendly', which tend to be complex in the context of logical meaning. He may also wish to further explore the relation of other concepts such as a family with his 'friendly', whose basis for relations may seem stronger and richer than the concept of friendship. Of course, such terms equally suffer inadequacies in terms of logical meaning (both use-theoretical meaning as well as formal meaning).

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On the Use of Relationality in Thaddeus Metz's African Moral Theory

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine Thaddeus Metz's use of relationality in developing his African moral theory. In conceiving his moral theory, Metz deploys relationality (harmony) as the most promising principle to construe a normative theory of right action in the African context. In doing this, he however trades off reference to the realm of gods and ancestors in how he conceives relationality, preferring a secular conception of the concept. On the understanding that the trade-off Metz makes raises questions regarding the Africanness of his moral theory, I argue that the theory he proposes trades off an aspect (the reference to immaterials such as gods and ancestors) of the composite of relationality that is typical of the African worldview in preference for an understanding that is physicalist rather than holistic.

Introductory Remarks

In this paper, I examine Thaddeus Metz's use of relationality in developing a moral theory with an African bias. Though the moral theory is a focus of a

number of his early publications,¹ it is in his recent book, *A Relational Moral Theory* (hereafter, RMT),² that he systematically puts his ideas together into a normative moral theory. Taking the notion of communality as pivotal, he develops a normative relational moral theory, applies it to a variety of practical debates and advances it as a competing moral theory to, especially Kantianism and utilitarianism, that the international philosophical audience could take seriously. So, for my purpose of examining Metz's use of the notion of relationality, while some reference will be made to other works where he alludes to the concept of relationality, I will pay more attention to RMT.

In developing his African moral theory, Metz draws on the concept of communality to articulate what he refers to as a new deontological moral theory that instructs on the duty to morally treat other beings appropriately insofar as they are capable of entering a communing relationship either as subjects or as objects. From the perspective of his moral theory, what characteristically makes an action right is that such action does show pleasant or harmonious conduct towards other commune-able individuals, where, according to Metz, the opposite would be “particularly wrongful behaviour [that] is downright unfriendly or discordant in respect of them” (2022: 18). From this, Metz's understanding of relationality is not corporatist but communalist. Whereas corporatism assigns moral primacy to a community in the sense of a group, communality sees morality as a function of shared relationships. Metz thus takes it that the predominantly communitarian understanding of indigenous sub-Saharan moral

¹See, for instance, “Toward an African Moral Theory (Revised Edition),” in *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*, Isaac. E. Ukpokolo (ed.), (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 97-119; “What is the Essence of an Essence? Comparing Afro-Relational and Western-Individualist Ontologies,” *Synthesis Philosophica* 65 (1/2018), 209-224; “African Ethics,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, LaFollette, Hugh (ed.), (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2015), 1-9; “Questioning African Attempts to Ground Ethics on Metaphysics,” in *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-ethics*, Imafidon, Elvis and Bewaji, John (eds), (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 189-204; “An African Theory of Moral Status,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 15 (2012), 387-402.

²Further reference to the book will be given as *A Relational Moral Theory*.

worldviews is better conceived as a function of a way that individuals can and should interact. It is on the basis of this understanding that Metz states his aim in the book to include the demonstration of the importance of “certain relational, and specifically communal, ideas salient in the sub-Saharan philosophical tradition for the understanding of many theoretical and applied aspects of morality” (2022: vi).

No doubt, Metz’s analysis captures important aspects of the understanding of *relationality* in the African worldview. It, for instance, espouses the dictum among many cultures south of Sahara that “to be is to be communal.” Among the isiXhosa, which is an indigenous South African language, this dictum is given as “Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu ...” This can be rendered as “a person is a person through other people.” That is, it is ultimately through the connectedness of persons that a person is a person (See, Seehawer, 2018). With this understanding, it can be seen that Metz’s theory gives the *communal* a central place, as well as that it allows a significant role for individual action, particularly in terms of the individual’s capacity to enter into relationships. However, in developing his African moral theory, where he takes relationality to be foundational, Metz excludes any allusion to metaphysical assumptions of the sort that reference gods or ancestors as grounds for communal ethic. Amongst his motivations for this is that ethics should not be grounded on ontology, as there is an inferential gap between what is (a matter of fact) and what is supposed as acceptable ways of acting. Indeed, for Metz, “nothing moral can follow from anything merely metaphysical” (2022: 33). As such, he supposes that a moral theory that specifies how individuals should act on the basis of the normativity of pursuing harmonious relationships need no such allusions for its plausibility. Moreover, he wants to develop a theory with potential for a wider global comprehension in the international philosophy community; but the inclusion of such allusions, whose verification is rather challenging, makes the theory run the risk of lacking evidence-based validation and, hence, indefensible. To achieve his aim in this regard, the trade-off, for Metz, is between a secular moral theory that he supposes would achieve larger multicultural acceptance and another that is more parochial because it is

grounded on metaphysics.

In examining Metz's use of relationality, my concern is to draw attention to how his deployment of the concept imbues it with too much of a physicalist connotation than a holistic one that represents how the visible and the invisible aspects of the world co-exist in the African worldview.³ For clarity, I do not worry about the exclusion of a metaphysics that alludes to the existence of gods and ancestors in conceiving an African moral theory; what I worry about is the connotation of relationality in his African communal ethic that excludes how reality is understood as an organic whole in the African worldview. In effect, I assume that in conceiving an African moral theory it is possible to exclude an allusion to gods and ancestors; but when the theory is grounded on relationality—understood in the framework of the African worldview as the interaction of existents in the universe—it becomes a worry that such exclusion is made. To be sure, the worry is about the *Africanness* of the moral theory.

To attend to this concern, though I concede that a distinction between a holistic metaphysic that alludes to the existence of gods and ancestors and one that simply alludes to the nature of the world as a composite of the visible and invisible (or perceptible and imperceptible) can be made. But it is that which alludes to the existence of gods and ancestors that I pay attention to in arguing for how I suppose the African conception of relationality should be understood. This is because it is this view of metaphysics that captures the African disposition about the world, and by extension, the notion of relationality. The point here is that it is a holistic metaphysic which connotes the inter-relationality of entities in the world that largely

³My contention here is that it is possible to conceive an African moral theory that relies on some other principle(s), such as “respect for the elderly”, such that an allusion to gods and deities would be excluded. But if such moral theory is to be constructed on relationality, then it becomes worrisome to exclude such allusion. This is because in the African worldview, relationality is taken to denote the universe as unitive whole of interacting parts. This explains my worry that Metz excludes allusion to gods and ancestors in deploying relationality to conceive his moral African theory, while not being worried that such exclusion is made in conceiving an African moral theory.

undergirds the duty to communal living in the African context. Put differently, it is not simply the capacity for friendliness, as Metz supposes (2022: 113), but something much more at the level of the ontology of relationality that motivates communal living (in Africa) beyond any social commitment.

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that my contention about how relationality is understood in relation to the African worldview does not stress the inclusion of a metaphysical assumption about the existence of gods and ancestors in conceiving a moral theory, even if such allusions are integral to the African worldview. What it does emphasize is that the African understanding of relationality substantially alludes to an ontology that takes seriously the connexion between the imperceptible and the perceptible to the extent that significant life events, such as birth, naming, marriage, death, and so on, have their meaning within such assumption of ontology.⁴ No doubt, Metz recognises that trading off the reference to either a realm of imperceptible agents like gods and ancestors, or a view of the world as consisting of interdependent vital forces, perceptible and imperceptible, leaves his moral theory somewhat less African than an ethic that does include such reference. He however supposes that the theory he advances “remains African to a substantial degree, insofar as it is informed by a wide array of other properties that have been prominent on the continent over a long time and across a broad space” (2021: 11). To this, he adds that “[a]fter all, the moral theories of Kwasi Wiredu (1996) and Kwame Gyekye (1997) are invariably accepted as African despite a similarly secular content. If their respective doctrines of sympathetic impartiality and moderate communitarianism count as African despite the utter absence of any reference to ancestors or vital forces” (2022: 11), so can his own ethical theory grounded on a secular conception of relationality. But if it is possible

⁴There is not much difference, in this regard, even when other religions such as Christianity and Islam have replaced the African Traditional Religion (ATR) for some. In these religions, there is equally the allusion to an ontology that highlights the connexion of the imperceptible and the perceptible. Although, how such may be understood indicates significant differences for the faithful of ATR as it is for the believer in, say, Christianity and Islam.

to somehow conceive an ethic (or some other theory) which exclude a metaphysical theory about the connection of the imperceptible and the perceptible without necessarily including allusions to gods and ancestors,⁵ then I aver that the trade-off made by Metz leaves his theory without an essential ingredient that makes for its Africanness. As such, much like Metz's African theory of relational ethics, Wiredu's and Gyekye's sympathetic impartiality and moderate communitarianism, respectively, lack the features that qualify them as African.

To achieve my aim in the paper, I begin with a brief review of Metz' African moral theory. Specifically, I pay attention to his self-portrait in relation to philosophizing about African culture and his strategy for developing his African moral theory. I consider these aspects of his work key to how we understand what he takes to be central to developing a relational moral theory with an African bias, and how he thinks that such a theory should be worked out. To be sure, there are other significant aspects of the work that merits extensive reviews. For instance, there is his argument that in developing an African moral theory, the communal principle of right action grounded on "rightness as friendliness" is most philosophically

⁵The sense in which I take relationality to refer to how the imperceptible and perceptible are connected does not necessarily include that in matters of what is morally right and morally wrong ancestors are seen as providing moral instructions and punishing individuals for violating moral norms. Rather, the sense in which I take relationality in connection to moral questions about what is right and what is wrong is how the belief in a harmonious universe of the imperceptible and the perceptible informs moral behaviour. In this sense, when, say, a man is aware that his wife is sexually involved with other men and decides to be silent about it, in some cultures south of the Sahara, he may eventually fall ill and die (if he decides to continue to remain silent). Within this framework, the explanation for this is that the man has a duty to report such to the community, but in deciding to be silent about it he violates certain moral requirements and fails in his moral duty to make known such immoral acts; hence, he is punished. The moral requirement, in this instance, is that there is a balance of harmony that is held to exist in terms of how the imperceptible relates with the perceptible that the action of such a woman distorts and violates; and once this is known, it should not be kept silent, but reported to the community.

defensible when compared to other such principles as welfarism and vitalism. There is also the argument that communal ethic is more defensible than the most influential Western moral theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism when it comes to implications for a wide array of contemporary interpersonal controversies. While these are matters for any philosophically interesting and rewarding discussions, I will not pay attention to them for the reason that they do not directly inflect on how Metz develops his moral theory on the grounds of relationality. Rather, they concern how he establishes or validates the relational moral theory he develops in comparison to other competing principles to build a moral theory.

In the second section, I examine how Metz uses the concept of relationality in developing his African moral theory. I first make a presentation of his use of the concept, and then note that in avoiding allusions to gods or ancestors, Metz ends with a physicalist or secularist interpretation of the concept. While noting that the explication of relationality in physicalist sense is, for the most, a partial representation of how the concept is deployed in the African worldview, I contend that within that worldview, the concept connotes a reality that denotes the connexion of the perceptible and imperceptible. And in developing a communal ethic representative of the African worldview, it is imperative that such denotation be implied in the interpretation of the concept of relationality. I however note a challenge in conceiving relationality to include the imperceptible and perceptible, which I suppose sort of explains the trade-off Metz makes in his analysis. This challenge, at least as read from Metz's work, is that the African worldview usually includes allusions to imperceptibles, such as gods and ancestors, that raise questions about how to effectively conceive it in ways that make it meaningful to an international philosophical audience. In the section before the concluding remarks, I attempt to address this challenge by examining the nature of the ontological commitments that arise for holders of such worldviews.

Metz's African Moral Theory: A Short Review

Two considerations will guide this short review of Metz's *A Relational Moral Theory*. The first consideration is Metz's self-portrait in relation to his philosophizing about African culture, and the second is his strategy for developing his African moral theory. Whereas the latter is instructive for appreciating how he constructs the alternative framework on which a relational moral theory may rest, the former is important for understanding his choice of what he takes as the most defensible principle on which a relational moral theory may be constructed. In brief, while he takes communality as foundational to his strategy in the former consideration; in the latter, he sees harmony as the most defensible principle compared to others—common good and vital force—that have been suggested in the literature on African ethics.

As regards his self-portrait, though Metz says he remains an outsider even after having researched the cultures of Africans for a considerable length of time—since he first began to teach at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa in the late 1990s—and teaching aspects of the philosophy of some cultures to students in universities specifically in South Africa, where he has lived since he came to Africa, he expresses the hope that African readers will appreciate his effort, which is

...to grapple with African philosophies and cultures for the specific purpose of 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 (2022: vi).

Notwithstanding Metz's modest description of being an outsider in terms of his qualification to philosophize about African culture,⁶ he is able to identify a principle (of harmony) that many have come to accept to be characteristic of the African's experience of her lived-world on which to ground his relational moral theory.⁷ In this vein, Metz seeks to fashion and defend a principle of right action that is informed by recurring aspects of the cultures among an extensive selection of sub-Saharan peoples,⁸ or at least by the philosophical expressions of these aspects of the culture in the post-independence era. Moreover, he states that his "project has not involved representing indigenous African morality; instead, [he has] drawn on

⁶Metz's description of himself as an outsider is an attempt by him to indicate that he possesses minimal qualification to philosophize about the African culture, since he, perhaps, has not been initiated into any cultural group and cannot decipher the dictates of the gods and ancestors through divination. This, again, raises, for me, the question of what qualifies one to be an African philosopher. Quite true that one, like Metz, may not be able to use any African language, and hence, may not have an insider experience and insight about the nuances of the lived-world of the African. However, outside of having the capacity to language gives, I suppose that the length of time and exposure to the ways of life of the African that someone like Metz has had can count for being able to philosophize about an African culture. Moreover, in considering what qualifies one as an African, there are many Africans who cannot use their local language and have not undergone any initiation rites of, say, age group, though they may be able to philosophize about their lived experiences as Africans. So, the question is whether or not someone can qualify as an African philosopher for having lived here for a length of time and mastered some fundamental aspects of the culture? In my opinion, I believe Metz qualifies to be called an African philosopher, even despite his inability to speak an African language.

⁷As a conceptual framework, relationality has informed the works of a significant number of philosophers writing on aspects of African philosophy and African culture. Among others, this includes the works of L. Senghor, 1961, 1964; K.C. Anyanwu, 1983, 1984; A.K. Jimoh and J. Thomas, 2017; J.S. Mbiti, 1969; B. Idowu, 1962; E. Imafidon, 2013; P.A. Ikhane, 2018.

⁸Metz's sub-Saharan ethnic list range from the Zulu and Xhosa peoples in South Africa to the Basotho in Lesotho, the Shona in Zimbabwe, the Batswana in Botswana, the Nso' in Cameroon, the Gikuyu and the Luo in Kenya to the Oromo and Maasai in Ethiopia, the Acoli in Uganda, the Chewa in Malawi, the Dinka in Sudan, the Baluba in the Congo, the Bemba in Zambia, the Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, and Hausa in Nigeria, and the Akan in Ghana.

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” (2022: vi).

In the light of how he represents Africa geographically, Metz supposes that using geographical labels in the way he does invites a plausibly gradient conception of what is African. This is because for something – like an idea, a concept or notion – to be African is not an all-or-nothing stuff. Rather, something counts as more African the more it exhibits properties that have been salient in what is geographically taken to represent Africa in contrast to other parts of the world. He however notes that while the idea that morality is a function of relational properties is not new within the philosophical community, it is only until recently that relationalism has been articulated as a distinct kind of ethic in English-speaking philosophy, despite having predated more individualist views by many centuries. And so, for him, while a number of indigenous sub-Saharan philosophers have latched onto relational features of moral thought, those of other philosophical traditions around the world, particularly those in Anglo-America, Europe, and Australasia, have inadequately understood and appreciated the relational approach to moral theorising. In however developing his African moral theory, Metz’s strategy is to reject the premise shared by competing Western theories of morality. This premise has to do with the assumptions of individualism that ground these moral theories. For him, once individualism is rejected, it is possible to develop a relational alternative that fills many of the gaps left by the competing theories like, say, Kantianism and utilitarianism. Along with rejecting individualism, Metz deploys argumentation that appeals to moral intuitions and avoids contested metaphysical claims.

A point made by Metz needs addressing here. As noted above, in alluding to a gradient understanding of what passes as African when such a thing displays properties that have been salient in what is geographically taken to be Africa for a considerable length of time, Metz can be judged to be right as there are notable differences in worldviews, beliefs, values and practices in African cultures and spaces as one moves from Africa south of

the Sahara to Africa north of the Sahara. So, in this sense, one can speak of what qualifies as African in degrees. But in the sense of taking specific beliefs, such as the belief in a holistic universe that connects the immaterial and material, to conceptually represent frameworks for engaging the lived world of the African, it is problematic to accept the gradation of what passes as African. One reason for this is the assumptions – which are usually the result of seeking to explain phenomena occurrences – that drive such beliefs. In the case of the belief in a holistic universe, the assumption may be seen to result in the attempt to provide an explanatory model for such experiences as *abiku/ogbanje* and/or witchcraft. In this vein, it appears expedient to suppose the interconnectedness of the material and immaterial aspects of the world as an explanation for such phenomena. And, as it were, beliefs such as these can be seen to be present in most (if not all) indigenous African cultures. The pervasiveness of the experiences of these sorts of phenomena among indigenous African cultures, which in turn accounts for the assumption that grounds the belief, makes for describing it as African. As such, though there may be different representations of the experiences of such phenomena in the beliefs formed from them, it can be reductively claimed that the beliefs are similar to the extent that the assumptions are. When, however, a rather different sort of assumption emerges from trying to comprehend the phenomena, questions about the similarity of the beliefs that are undergirded by such different assumptions arise. It is with such differences in the assumptions of explanatory models that questions about the possibility of a gradient understanding of what passes as African arise. Put differently, when the assumptions that undergird the attempt to conceptualise the experiences are different, it is problematic to talk of a gradient understanding of what passes as African.⁹

⁹I am thinking here of the distinction in the assumptions of communitarianism and individualism.

Relationality ‘in Metz’ African Moral Theory

From his initial grasp of the harmonious and communal relationship that characterises African lived-world as the most promising framework to construct his normative African moral theory, Metz notes that he has developed the relational approach to morality in a variety of ways (2022: v).¹⁰ In preferring relationality as the ground on which to build his African moral theory, Metz chooses what he considers “the most promising candidate for a sole fundamental moral value in the African tradition” (2022: 14) in relation to the other grounds of well-being and vital force. For emphasis, among the variety of ways Metz develops his relational moral theory include his illustrations of the relationality between water and man (See Metz 2018).

The variety of ways in which Metz develops his moral theory is regulated by the distinction between what he considers the two strategies for conceiving African morality. These are the outward and the inward orientations. While the outward orientation involves the consideration of which African understandings of morality would be reasonable for thinkers both indigenous to the continent and from a wide array of other philosophical backgrounds to believe, the inward orientation has to do with recovering facets of the African cultures disparaged by colonialism, and the encroachments of globalization (2022: vii). In deciding in favor of the outward orientation, Metz seeks to balance two desiderata; namely, positing an ethic that is sub-Saharan, on the one hand, and one that is philosophically

¹⁰Some of the ways Metz has developed his African moral theory may be found in his publications, which include: 'Toward an African Moral Theory', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, (2007) 15: 321-41; 'For the Sake of the Friendship: Relationality and Relationship as Grounds of Beneficence', *Theoria*, (2010) 57: 54-76; 'Questioning African Attempts to Ground Ethics on Metaphysics', in *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-ethics*, Imafidon, Elvis and Bewaji, John (eds), Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, pp. 189-204; 'The Western Ethic of Care or an Afro-Communitarian Ethic?', *Journal of Global Ethics*, (2013) 9: 77-92; 'An African Theory of Moral Status', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, (2012) 15: 387-402.

defensible to a global audience, on the other. Metz's preference for the outward orientation derives from the need to set aside metaphysical claims that cannot resonate with philosophers situated within diverse multicultural backgrounds. Moreover, he supposes that his moral theory, in principle, equally provides for how a moral agent should act with respect to how the allusion to metaphysical claims require her to act.¹¹

As such, Metz is interested in developing a recognizably African moral theory that could give moral theories from other non-African philosophical traditions a run for their money. Very importantly, however, Metz has had to trade-off what some would consider the Africanness of such a theory for the sake of its acceptability by non-Africans. One such trade-offs in Metz's analysis concerns the place he gives ancestors in the theory. He states that 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 his preferred interpretation of African morality. A number of reasons may be seen to undergird this trade-off. Two will be noted here. The first, which has already been hinted at earlier, is that the trade-off of allusion to gods and ancestors allows Metz to develop a theory with potential for multicultural comprehension.

The second is the is/ought gap. The argument for the trade-off, according to Metz, is that most contemporary Western philosophers would view argumentative strategies that include metaphysical allusions to gods and ancestors with suspicion, as illegitimately attempting to cross the “is/ought gap” (2022: 25). In this vein, he contends that a moral theory cannot be epistemically justified by an immediate appeal to metaphysical considerations (that seek to ground ethics on ontology) utterly shorn of evaluative or normative judgements (2022: 26). This is because such a metaphysical view is not primarily the view that a claim should avoid false or unjustified assertions about what exists. Rather, it is essentially the view

¹¹See, for instance, what he says regarding setting aside the belief and reference to the existence of ancestors among Africans (See Metz 2022).

about what exists. In relation to ethics, it is not merely the view that an ethic should avoid false or unjustified claims about the moral status of what exists. It is instead the much stronger view that a theoretical claim about how to act morally follows immediately from claims about *what is taken* to exist (2022: 25). In, however, examining Metz's use of relationality in developing moral theory, I pay more attention to the first reason that serves as the basis for his trade-off. This is because I suppose that the consideration of the second will require more sustained reflection than what this present paper can allow.

In his use of relationality, Metz seeks to create a principle with a thoroughbred sub-Saharan perspective that a global audience of philosophers could take seriously in the light of their own backgrounds. This, for him, means taking a secular approach to conceiving relationality. And this secular understanding allows him to ground the relational moral theory on the dictum of "rightness as friendliness". The implied meaning of this, for Metz, is that one must honour individuals because of their *capacity* to relate in a communal or friendly way, either as a subject or an object (2022: 106). His explication of what it is to have the capacity to relate communally or harmoniously is that "the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them is...prima facie morally attractive, [that] it amounts to a friendly way of relating, with one rough slogan for my approach being 'Rightness as friendliness'" (2022: 91, 106). Metz, however, contends that "one should not fundamentally treat friendly or communal relationship as a final good or end to be promoted, as this teleological structure has difficulty accounting for rights" (2022: 106); and further that a superlative non-instrumental value should be ascribed to our capacity to be party to communal relationship.

A caveat: I do not question the entirety of the Africanness of Metz's use of relationality because of its trade-off of gods and ancestors. Rather, my argument is that his use of relationality trades off a conception of relationality grounded on (the African view of) how the imperceptible interacts with the perceptible, without a necessary reference to gods and

ancestors.¹² As such, while I do not find Metz's trade-off unacademic, I suppose that in the context of his analysis of an African moral theory, it leaves off an aspect that is critical to what is usually taken to represent Africa, at least, at the level of theorising being (See, for instance, Lajul 2017). That is, it leaves off the widely accepted understanding that the things that make up what is regarded as the world constitute a unitive whole of interacting entities (See Lajul 2017; Imafidon 2013; Onyibor 2007).

One point that seems obvious to me about the trade-off that Metz makes has to do with the challenge of providing evidence for allusions to the imperceptible, rather than with accepting that the African understanding of morality necessary includes the metaphysical. It seems that the validity of the belief about the metaphysical necessarily requires providing evidence for such allusions. This challenge seems to have bedevilled a number of philosophical analyses that have to do with Africa. Briefly conceived, the challenge is that given the nature of characteristically African beliefs, practices, and assumptions that includes allusions to the imperceptible, the question of how to effectively present it in ways that affords such beliefs and practices global philosophical audience arises.¹³

In brief, therefore, Metz's view of relationality is broad-based in the sense that it is an attempt to present the sub-Saharan view, while making that view available to scholars of other non-African traditions. It however trades off an aspect (the reference to immaterials such as gods and ancestors) of the composite of relationality that is typical of the African worldview in preference for an understanding of relationality that can be describe as physicalist rather than holistic.

¹²I think of imperceptibles as "You" will also need references for your understanding of such metaphysics that references the imperceptible without allusion to gods and goddesses, and what fundamental differences li between the two strange animals.

¹³Characteristic African beliefs about ontology are such that they are inclusive of allusions to non-sensual perceptible entities such as gods and ancestors. While such beliefs are not typically African, in the sense that they are only available to Africans and their worldview, they are widely seen to be integral to African beliefs about the world.

In what follows in the next section, I will attempt to address this challenge with reference to African beliefs about the metaphysical. That is, I will attempt to provide some argument that may evince grounds on which to defend the characteristically African beliefs. I suppose that if my attempt succeeds, then it can be argued that what is taken to be distinctively African about, say, relationality, need not be traded off.

Relationality in Metz's African Moral Theory: Some Comments

I begin my comments on the use of relationality in Metz' African moral theory with a distinction between *what is* (out there) and what is *believed* to be (out there). The import of this distinction is that it portrays some of the constraint of presenting African beliefs in a global context. The distinction between *what is* and *what is believed* to be is an attempt to conceive of being. This attempt is usually not value-free; it is usually a conception that is informed by sometimes identifiable biases or preferences. This may explain why in many instances where people provide reports about the same phenomenon, there are usually identifiable differences in such reports.

In relation to making aspects of the African cultures available to those unfamiliar with them, the strategies can broadly be described to include the exclusionary strategy and the inclusive strategy.¹⁴ The exclusionary strategy supposes that only what is evidential should be taken seriously in any analysis about the things that exists; the inclusive strategy supposes that the talk about what exists necessarily include even those that are not evidential. In this sense, it becomes clear that the exclusionary strategy is less controversial than the inclusive strategy. Viewed in the light of Metz's

¹⁴The expressions, 'exclusionary strategy' and 'inclusive strategy' are used for want of better ones. They are used to simply depict that in deploying the 'exclusionary strategy', aspects of the culture that are seen to be controversial in terms of providing tenable evidential grounds for what exists are excluded in the analysis. In contrast, in using the 'inclusive strategy' such aspects are not excluded, even though such evidential grounds may not be readily available. While it is the case that in choosing to deploy a particular strategy, something would always be traded off, it is instructive that what is characteristically African should not be traded off.

outward and inward orientations as strategies for conceiving African morality, it may be loosely stated that the exclusionary strategy serves the same goal as that of the outward orientation, while the inclusive strategy serves that of the inward orientation.

In examining the challenge, as well as defending the use of the inclusive strategy, the African belief about the metaphysical may be stated as the belief in a harmonious universe; that is, the belief in the organic unity of the universe (hereafter, *p*). To be sure, this belief is seen to provide impetus for relationality in such contexts as social relations, extended family ties, age-group connectedness, ancestral connection, and so on, in the African lived world. Hence, the imperative to not trade it off as a characteristic of relationality in Africa. And so, it can be said that *p* represents the foundational belief of the African regarding *what is*; that is, regarding being. As such, *p*, for the African, envisions the universe as a whole with a hierarchy of existents. Taken as foundational in the African belief system, it foregrounds and organizes the conceptual and practical life of the African; it permeates the social, ethical, religious and political life of the African. In effect, it yields what may be referred to as methodological ontologism – the theory that the organizing category of human thought and social relations derives from our ontological commitments (that is, the beliefs we hold about the nature of reality or *what is*).

Furthermore, it can be taken that irrespective of how *p* is expressed or what it is believed make up the hierarchy of existents, the belief asserts the existence of certain entities. This is what is taken to represent the claims about existence with respect to *p*. And since we can know what ontology people endorse by finding out what existential claims or assertion they are prepared to make or accept, it is by establishing what a belief says *there is* that we understand the ontological commitment of such belief. More precisely, since beliefs are inert and cannot themselves make claims, we should ask what claims or assertions about existence would be made by someone, an African, who asserts a certain belief about *what is*. More important, too, is the argument that the ontological commitment of an utterance depends on whether the utterer believes that utterances of the kind made are

ontologically significant. For the African, statements of the kind *p* are utterances that are ontologically significant. The basis for this is that assenting to *p* calibrates the life of the African in terms of what she does, believes and says; the things that matter and those that do not. Talks about the ontological significance of beliefs or statements imply talks about what it means for the belief-contents (as the case may be) to exist. So, the discourse of the ontological significance of beliefs presupposes the discourse about ontological commitment, and commits one to certain ontological existents.

Drawing on the analysis of the American philosopher, William von Orman Quine, in “A Logical Approach to the Ontological Problem” (1939) on ontological commitment, the matter about existence is the question of what it *means* to affirm the existence of an entity, rather than what *things* exist. It is instructive to note that the outcome of Quine's investigation was not a register of what things exist, but a construal of *what it is to exist*. This is how Quine puts it:

Note that we can use the word ‘roundness’ without acknowledging any such entity. We can maintain that the word is syncategorematic, like prepositions, conjunctions, articles, commas, etc.: that though it occurs as an essential part of various meaningful sentences it is not a name of anything. To ask whether there is such an entity as roundness is thus not to question the meaningfulness of ‘roundness’; it amounts rather to asking whether this word is a name or a syncategorematic expression (1966: 64).

From the above, Quine can be read as making a distinction between understanding the notion of existence as *meaningfulness* and as a *reference* (that is, a name or a syncategorematic expression). For clarity, relating existence with meaningfulness seems a good way of connecting with idealistic or phenomenistic conceptions of existence, or even with a deflationism regarding ontology itself, while relating being with reference, by contrast, seems a plausible path toward ontological realism. Indeed,

taking existence as a syncategorematic expression implies that though the notion is taken to lack a denotation, it can nonetheless affect the denotation of a larger expression that contains it.¹⁵ The ideas of *meaningfulness* and *reference* by which existence may be conceived, according to Quine, can be seen to be radically different in terms of the relation between concepts and the contents of concepts.

Following Quine's analysis, the examination of the nature of the ontological commitment of the African worldview about the universe bothers on whether (a) the wholly harmonious universe made of gods, deities and ancestors actually exist; or (b) what it *means* to say (or belief) that the world is an organic whole in which gods, deities and ancestors exist. The distinction here is that whereas the former demands an explication of the evidences that the wholly organic universe of gods, deities and ancestors exists, the latter requires an appraisal of *what it means* to hold that a harmonious universe with a hierarchy of gods, deities and ancestors.

In the light of the foregoing, a question that arises here is what ontological commitments exist for an African who hold the belief in the existence of a harmonious universe with a hierarchy of gods, deities and ancestors? Does it commit her to ontological realism about the entities of her belief? Or, does it commit her to a kind of meaning-making about the universe? In the first instance, the African faces the daunting task of evidential justification (very likely in the positivist/empiricist sense of this) if the belief commits her to ontological realism (particularly the hard version) regarding the existents to which reference is made in the belief. This is because reference to entities of the immaterial worlds of gods and ancestors would only be meaningful if such a reference had referents that are perceptually accessible. But since no sense-dependent reference that evidentially justifies the existence of the entities of the African belief are readily available, it seems safe to say that commitments to the ontology of the claims of the African belief do not require those of realism. The

¹⁵Syncategorematic expressions are contrasted with categorematic expressions, which have their own denotations.

challenge with this, however, is that the indigenous or autochthonous African believes in the “real” existence of the entities of her belief in a wholly harmonious universe. This implies that since the African believes in real existence of gods and ancestors, even though she is not able to evidentially justify her belief, the ontological commitment of the African belief in a wholly harmonious universe of gods and deities requires the specification of the reference understanding of what it means to exist.

Given this new challenge, I will pay attention to examining the ontological commitment of *b* in terms of the requirement of specifying its reference. This is because I suppose that in addressing the ontological commitment arising from the reference specification of what existence implies, I would be addressing myself to how it is that the African conceives the reality of the universe of gods and ancestors. That is, the reference version of the ontological commitment of what existence implies seems to better describe the *dispositional* attitude of the African regarding the immaterial entities of the belief regarding the universe. My examination of the ontological commitment of *b* in terms of specifying its reference draws on the idea of “abduction” or “inference to the best explanation.” This is because on a review of evidential justification – one that takes its understanding beyond those of the positivists – it is possible to provide some justification.

The idea of abduction or inference to the best explanation is that when faced with a set of alternative hypotheses – all of which cover the data – to explain a phenomenon, we are likely to accept the hypothesis that we, somehow, judge to be superior to the others (See Vahid 2005: 181).¹⁶ In this sense, the chosen hypothesis, in comparison with others, entails a better

¹⁶I would like to note here that how I approach providing explanation for the allusion to the existence of gods and ancestors in the African worldview by recourse to abduction or inference to the best explanation is not novel. Indeed, inference to the best explanation has informed the views of many theorists in areas as diverse as metaphysics, epistemology, and science. Armstrong's (1978) defence of universals is an instance of this. The existence of God is inferred as the best explanation of the existence and order of the universe.

explanation of the phenomenon in question. To be sure, abduction has been taken as a useful mechanism in belief formation. As a belief-forming mechanism, we sort of begin, in one instance, by putting up hypotheses to (possibly) explain a certain phenomenon. We then continue to make observations to determine which hypothesis best explains the phenomenon. Informed by what scientists describe as the doctrine of the accumulation of knowledge, we may eventually settle for a hypothesis that sorts of provide an expansive explanation when compared with others.

Relating this to the belief of the African in the real existence of gods and ancestors, a rational ground for the belief may be provided by recourse to inference to the best explanation. In this vein, one may rhetorically ask whether the non-belief of an African in the reality of gods and ancestors in the face of certain experiences such as, say, the *abiku/ogbanje* phenomenon, or other supranatural events would not have posed more explanatory inconsistencies, without recourse to hypothesising the existence of imperceptibles.¹⁷ Put differently, how is the African to explain meta-physical occurrences such as that of the *abiku/ogbanje* without postulating the existence of the immaterial entities she alludes to as grounds for such phenomena?¹⁸ And so, in the sense in which inference to the best explanation is understood historically as explanatory reasoning in generating hypotheses, it may be taken to have undergirded the allusions indigenous Africans made in referring to the existence of forces as explanation for occurrences such as those of the *abiku/ogbanje*.

¹⁷For an elaborate examination of the phenomenon of *abiku/ogbanje*, see, Maduka Chidi T. "African Religious Beliefs in Literary Imagination: Ogbanje and Abiku in Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 22.1 (1987): 17-25; Timothy Mobolade, "The Concept of Abiku," *African Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1973): 62-64.

¹⁸There is no pretense here to the knowledge of the causal relation medical science makes between certain illness, such as sickle, and child mortality. Irrespective of this, the phenomenon of *abiku* (Yoruba)/*ogbanje* (Igbo) remains a reality. What can be said then is that (medical) science has shown that not all child mortality can be connected to the phenomenon of *abiku*.

It would however be noted that in instances of abduction, “the connection between the evidence and the hypothesis is non-demonstrative or inductive” (Lipton 2000: 184). This implies that though the hypothesis has been inferred on the basis of what is observed of the phenomenon, it remains possible that the hypothesis is false even though the observed phenomenon is what it is. As such, while abduction or inference to the best explanation seems a rather fair mechanism of belief formation in areas such as common-sense, science and philosophy, it is also the source of a great many puzzles. The main question that it raises concerns the nature of the inferential mechanism that is thought to underlie these cases of belief formation.

Concluding Remarks

Let me recapitulate the fundamental argument of the paper. In his deployment of relationality as the key feature of his African moral theory, a key feature regarding how relationality is represented in relation to the African worldview has been traded off. Of course, Metz offers his reason for leaving-off such a key feature of relationality—the idea of a harmonious universe that includes gods and ancestors. And Metz’s concern derived from providing a defensible normative moral theory with an African bias that will be accessible to a wider international philosophy community from a variety of intellectual traditions. He wants to offer a publicly accessible argumentation for what he presents as African moral theory, as opposed to merely private or otherwise fairly parochial considerations. It was however argued that it was possible to make the theory more African and yet publicly available to the international community of philosophers without trading off reference to the realm of imperceptible, which may be taken to include gods and ancestors. This was shown by making reference to the conception of relationality as a connection between the perceptible and imperceptible.

My intention in this paper has not been to directly engage with his relational moral theory in terms of its cogency or its superiority to other contending moral theories. On the contrary, whereas Metz's relation moral theory may remain tenable, I take his use of relationality to raise some

concern about what an *African* moral theory looks like. In the way I have conceive relationality, I have not taken it to necessarily include allusions to gods and ancestors, but rather its depiction of a connection between the imperceptible (or immaterial) aspect of reality to the perceptible (or material) aspect. This is the case even though my conception of the African conception of relationality assumes that relationality makes allusion to a holistic view of reality that includes gods and ancestors. And so, as I have argued, an understanding of relationality in the African context demands an ontological framework that includes how the visible relates to the invisible; that is, how they achieve an organic whole. Any analysis of the African sense of relationality that excludes this insight is at best a partial analysis. This is because for the African, the imperative for esteeming her relationship with others, and with her environment, derives from her belief that the relation she bears to and with others transcends the perceptible (or material).

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A Critical Evaluation of Rightness as Friendliness in Metz's Relational Moral Theory

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates Thaddeus Metz's argument on the appropriate secular moral theory that will be acceptable to a multicultural philosophical audience. While defending his ethical view on harmony, friendliness, and cooperative relationship, Metz objects to welfarist and vitalist views, and leans toward a deontological ethical theory. Against this background, the paper interrogates Metz's concept of "rightness as friendliness" within the context of Yoruba moral principles, as well as demonstrating the relevance of Metz's arguments in contrast to the existing moral ideas. The paper concludes by elucidating the limitations and strengths of Metz's proposed ethical theory when compared with other theories like that of the Yoruba culture.

Introduction

The idea of what is right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in the ethics of a society. Such thoughts and beliefs encompass the conceptions of good social relations, and attitudes community members hold (Gyekye 2011). Scholars have described morality in different codes of conduct that applies to a

diverse group of people and organisations. Morality also dictates the rules and norms that people ought to follow. Moral philosophy, as such, is concerned with questions of how people ought to act and the search for a description of ethical conduct that brings forth the highest good and well-being (Gyekye 2011).

Moral issues arise when the choices people make or face affect their well-being either positively or negatively, it could also mean causing harm or benefit to people. Humans are primarily moral because of their self-interest and secondarily because of the well-being of the community of which they are members. The rationale for being ethical is to ensure the well-being of humans, that is, it is imperative to promote the well beings of humans. For a harmonious living in society, it is essential to distinguish between right and wrong actions. Furthermore, morality is rooted in the forms or patterns of attitude that the community members assume to bring about social harmony, communal living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct are framed, analyzed and discerned by the ethical scholars of the society (Gyekye 2011).

African societies have evolved as organised and functioning human communities through ethical systems, values, and principles. However, the moral dynamics of African societies have continued to remain the focus of critical examination by African philosophers. This is the occasion for the recent publication of Thaddeus Metz's *A Relational Moral Theory* (2022). This paper therefore critically engages with Metz's arguments for an African moral theory that possesses an Africanness, and also has universal acceptability, especially within the global philosophical audience.

In *A Relational Moral Theory*, Metz defends a moral theory based on the communal principle of right action in the African thought system. His support is for an African ethical approach that is grounded on a metaphysics of interdependence or essential references to ancestors. Metz disagrees with the ontological claims of the radical and moderate communitarianism of Nkrumah and Gyekye, respectively, in his argument for a proper secular moral theory. Metz further provides a normative approach to moral disputes in African philosophy as the common ground for African

philosophers in explaining the extent to which African ethical theories explain moral judgments about cases that are less controversial than the theories. Subsequently, he argues for a particular relational moral approach relative to other African moral alternatives like welfarism and vitalism, as well as the existing communal moral theories. And in constructing his African moral theory, Metz appeals to African intuitions about what is right or wrong, and other moral features that have been prominent in much of the sub-Saharan region for a long.

Against this backdrop, this paper, in three sections, will elaborate on the nature of moral philosophy in traditional African thought through an emphasis on the Yoruba thought system while analyzing Metz's philosophically defensible principle of right action within the sphere of the Yoruba ethical thought system.

Features of Moral Philosophy in Traditional Yoruba Thought System

Communal ethics is dominant in traditional African society. Themes such as harmony, peace, friendliness, decency, kindness, compassion, benevolence, and concern for others, interdependence, cooperation, and reciprocity are inherent in traditional African moral ideals or virtues. Gyekye (1998; 1996) and Wiredu (1998: 305) posit that traditional African morality is “typically social” such that an individual's image is dependent on how their actions benefit others rather than themselves (Wiredu, 1998: 312). Therefore, traditional African society is depicted not by individual rights to themselves but by their duties towards others (Walt 2003).

African ethics is, therefore, based on character, such that it sustains the quality of the individual's personality and how it is most fundamental in our moral life. On this note, distinguishing African ethics from communal might be difficult. Communalism defines the individual character, and good character is the spirit of the African moral system, and the cornerstone of African ethics (Gyekye 2011). African ethics, in this vein, instils moral knowledge in the society, creating the awareness of the moral values, ethical conduct, and principles of that society (Gyekye, 1998).

The duty of fostering moral awareness among its members is fulfilled by society through the implementation of diverse forms of moral education. In African communities, this is accomplished through the dissemination of proverbs and folktales to individuals within the society (Olusola, 2017; Oladipo, 1987). Moral awareness pertains to the cognitive recognition and understanding of the moral principles and societal rules governing ethical conduct, enabling individuals to navigate their lives in accordance with these principles. Consequently, the lack of adherence to moral principles, as exemplified in the Akan or Yoruba ethical frameworks, signifies a deficiency in one's moral character. Accordingly, the ability to adhere to society's moral principles and rules necessitates the cultivation of a virtuous character (Hallen, 2016). Therefore, the foundation of ethical behaviour in human decision-making, aimed at adhering to moral principles and fulfilling moral duty is contingent upon the individual's character traits.

Furthermore, the Yoruba proverb: *Iwa rere L'eso eniyan* ('Good character is a person's guard') shows that it is from an individual's character that such individual action, either good or bad emanates (Owoseni, 2016; Oyeshile, 2002). The display of good or evil acts relies on the state of a person's character. *Iwa* (character) is a significant moral concept within the Yoruba thought system, and a person is morally examined based on the *iwa* (either good or bad) that such person exhibits (Olusola 2017; Owoseni 2016; Gyekye 2011; Oyeshile 2002; Gbadegesin 1991, 79; Oke 1988). Character, for the Yoruba, is therefore a moral concept that becomes fundamental to a well-ordered moral community. Just as we have the moral ideas such as good, bad, right, and wrong in any ethical system in the world, so we have *iwà rere* (good character) and *iwà buburu* (bad character) as well as *iwà toto* (exemplary character) and *iwà tikoto* (immoral behaviour) in Yoruba ethics or moral system. Bewaji (2004) argues that being morally right deals more with promoting human welfare than pleasing any supernatural forces. To be morally upright, for the Yoruba, is to be regarded as an *omolúwàbí*.

Omólúàbí is a Yoruba word for an honest, moral, upright person. *Iwa omoluabi* (a true character), just as it implies, is an aspect of behaviour deemed valuable and expected to be imbibed or embraced by all. An

individual with *iwa rere* (good character), *iwa pele/ iwa tutu* (gentleness), and *iwa Irele* (respect) is an *omoluabi* (an ethical/honorable person) (Oyeshile 2002; Olusola 2017). With the understanding of the Yoruba ethical study established in this section, let us proceed with Metz's argument on a new moral theory.

Metz's Relational Moral Theory

In part two of his book, Metz argued for communality as the grounds for African morality by elucidating the limitations of existing normative approaches to African morality, such as the common good (or well-being) theory, the vital force theory, and other existing communal principles which allowed him to posit a new idea (Metz, 2022: 65). This is in contrast to arguments of African scholars like Gyekye (1995; 1997; 2013) who contend that within African societies, particularly the Akan system in Ghana, moral value is assessed based on its impact on humanity and society. According to Gyekye, actions deemed morally “good” must advance human interests, safeguard human welfare, and foster social harmony (Molefe 2020).

Wiredu's (1992), which is not fundamentally different from that of Gyekye, is also that the highest moral value in Akan tradition is the harmonization of interest and promotion of social well-being. This is further corroborated by Bewaji's argument that the basis of morality in the Yoruba thought lies in the concern for human welfare, demonstrated by the acknowledgement of Ifá demonstration that being morally upright goes beyond pleasing spiritual forces (Bewaji 2004: 398). Against this utilitarian position, Metz (2022: 68) argues that while the interpretation of African morality in terms of the promotion of well-being might be correct, but there are several reasonings noticeable in the African tradition that do not clearly explain or support the promotion of people's well-being without interfering with individual's liberties. These intuitions, in his view, question whether the right action is exhausted by a prescription to promote the common good without violating rights.

Metz argues that ethical actions involve honoring individuals through their traits of being capable of communal relationships, which implies the

ability to help others or receiving help from others (Metz, 2022:75). In other words, well-being is not the master value of morality, as argued by the welfarist as the unique communal nature of man in African society. Instead, an action taken to improve others' well-being is partially constitutive of the primary duty to treat individuals as having a moral status in virtue of their capacity to be a party to communal relationships. That is to say, caring for others is not the end of right action or almost morality but just part of right actions.

Metz's critics of the intuition by the vitalist are majorly from a comment from Noah Dzobo (1992) which avers that the African tradition is best understood to be vitalist at the bottom. Instead of a person's quality of life being what matters morally, for Dzobo and many others in the field, it is life itself as far as it is intense, complex, and creative (Metz 2022:78). To the vitalist, life amongst traditional indigenous Sub-Saharan Africa is an invisible energy that has come from God and is infused in everything in the world, including so-called 'inanimate' objects.

Metz, on the contrary, presents an understanding of vitality in terms of liveliness that, in contrast, does not rest on highly controversial metaphysical claims and thereby has more significant potential to present a moral theory of interest to a global audience. He proposes counterexamples to the idea that right actions promote liveliness; he suggests that instead of commonality being a means to produce vitality, as explored by some philosophers mentioned above, exuberance is one of the significant facets of communality (Metz, 2022: 80).

As the value of well-being, that of vital force is recurrent in Sub-Saharan African thought about ethics, so relating with others morally and properly can include making them livelier. From this perspective, the vital force is not, per Dzobo, the 'most excellent' value, which is part of our unique relational nature, neither is vitality the smallest value, for it is not merely an instrumental good rather it is an action taken to improve others' liveliness which is partially constitutive of the fundamental duty to treat individuals with a moral standing because of their capacity to be a party to communal relationships (Metz, 2022: 89).

Furthermore, on the communal relationship principles, Metz critically explored and argued against the suggestion from Paris (1995), Tutu (1999), and others that a harmonious or communal relationship is the highest good for the African tradition compared with the well-being or vital force. He noted that when African thinkers are specific about how people ought to relate as something good for its own sake, they intend to mention two distinct elements, which are between 'identifying with others or sharing a way of life with them' and 'exhibiting solidarity with others or caring for their quality of life' (Metz, 2022: 91).

Metz points out that the combination of identity and solidarity amounts to a friendly way of relating with others. Hence, harmony, communal relationship, and friendliness are synonymous with 'rightness as friendliness,' which is the catchphrase for his preferred ethics. To Metz, the right way to respond to harmony/communality or friendliness is not to treat this way of relations merely as a good to be maximized or as a goal to be promoted, for various instantiations of this teleological approach but to account for human rights, with consideration for relationships of identity and solidarity towards the promotion of the highest good. It is essential to understand Metz's criticisms of the welfarist and vitality approaches to African ethics to understand his deontological approach better. With this background, the following section explores Metz's *relational* approach as the most philosophically defensible principle of right action in a global audience (Metz, 2022: 92).

The Relational Moral Theory

Following Metz's critique of fundamental intuitions of what is morally right or wrong by the principles of well-being and the principal vital force in African philosophical thought, Metz argued for a principle of right action as the most substantial secular moral theory from the African tradition. According to Metz, the 'rightness as friendliness' approach avoids objections facing other Afro-relational ethics, and this is because its fundamental intuitions are better than its African welfarist and vitalist rivals' intuitions (Metz, 2022: 44).

“Rightness as friendliness” relates to a specific interpretation of what it is to connect communally or harmoniously, contending with the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them as it connotes a friendly way of relating. According to this approach, being friendly or taking a communal relationship as a final good or an end to be promoted might result in some teleological difficulties in accounting for rights. Therefore, in Metz’s view, this theory is such that one must honour individuals because of their capacity to relate in a communal or friendly way, either as a subject or an object (Metz, 2022: 105). Being the subject here connotes identifying with others and exhibiting individual solidarity with others. A being can be a subject of the communal relationship as far as it can think of itself as a ‘we,’ cooperate with others, help others, and act for their sake out of sympathy. While in contrast, a being can also be an object of such a relationship as its character with human beings could think of it as part of a ‘we,’ advance its goals, benefit it, and act for its sake, out of its sympathy (Metz, 2022: 105).

In defending this deontological moral theory relative to the African principles criticized in previous chapters, Metz posits that a communal relationship or way of relating is one thing. In contrast, a being’s ability to relate in that way is another (Metz, 2022: 108). His relational moral theory therefore involves the *capacity* to relate, or not relate, since this approach best accounts for human rights. This capacity to relate determines an individual’s moral status, i.e., the beings that are owed duties for their own sake. For Metz, in principle, those who can relate in a communal relationship have moral status and are not to be treated as objects in a communal relationship. Individuals with moral standing in this regard thus enjoy a sense of togetherness, participate cooperatively with others, help others, and do so out of sympathetic altruism while expecting much in return (Metz, 2022: 108).

A better understanding of this theory then means that the ability of a person to do what is suitable for their sake which results in moral status is the highest good that is basic to morality. Thus, individuals possess moral status or dignity not just because they are members of a community but by

their nature are subjects or objects of such relationship. A moral agent must avoid degrading or disrespecting those capable of being party to communal relationships (Metz, 2022: 109). Morality is, therefore, deontological as opposed to being teleological. Furthermore, acting in a friendly way to others and enabling others to be friendly connotes positive duties. At the same time, negative responsibilities allow one to work in unfriendly ways, like harming people for their own benefit (Metz, 2022: 110).

The relational moral theory entails that an individual can have the right not to be killed which is characteristically stronger than others' positive rights to save their own lives (Metz, 2022: 110). The relational moral theory encompasses the recognition and preservation of rights, both in terms of safeguarding individuals and ensuring their protection. Nevertheless, although the concept asserts that agents should prioritize the capacity for harmony or friendliness as the utmost important ultimate good, it does not universally prohibit acts of unfriendliness or even hostility. Engaging in behaviour that is characterized by a significant lack of harmony or friendliness can be considered respectful of the potential for harmony or friendliness, particularly when the intention is to counteract a similar level of initial discord or unfriendliness displayed by another individual.

Community forms the basis for a primary and comprehensive moral duty that resonates with both African and global moral philosophers (Metz, 2022: 112). In the African tradition, welfare theorists, like Gyekye, have historically been anthropocentric, considering human well-being as the sole moral end. However, some contemporary perspectives regarding animal welfare have emerged. One approach regards animal welfare as an end, recognizing the intrinsic value of animals and emphasizing the importance of treating them with empathy and compassion, beyond their instrumental use to humans.

Conversely, there is another viewpoint that perceives animal welfare as a constraint on human well-being. This perspective acknowledges that our treatment of animals can have direct and indirect impacts on human society and the environment. Mistreatment of animals or subjecting them to inhumane conditions can negatively affect human health and lead to

environmental consequences, such as deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions from large-scale animal agriculture. These two views on animal welfare showcase the interconnectedness between the treatment of animals and human society.

One advantage of the relational moral theory relative to these accounts is that it can capture the sense in which it is possible to degrade an animal, not merely cause it harm. The *prima facie* problem with keeping birds caged for the pleasure of looking at them or repeatedly tricking animals for one's amusement does not have to do with pain or suffering. According to rightness as friendliness, these creatures are essential; they have a moral status that merits respect (even if they lack dignity) (Metz 2022; Ikuenobe 2016).

While the relational theory does not forbid all contact with animals and, in fact, probably provides some support for domesticating them under certain circumstances, it does suggest that some specific ways of interacting with them can be disrespectful and not merely because of the harm done to them; subordination, too, can be a form of degradation. At this stage, I submit that there is a strong case for taking a principle of respect for our communal nature to be the best secular and theoretical interpretation of the African tradition. The relational moral theory merits the most considered principle of the Sub-Saharan African morals that could appeal to a multicultural audience. The following section explains the strengths and limitations of the argument on friendliness as the right action within the Yoruba thought system.

Metz's Relational Argument and the Yoruba Thought System

Thaddeus Metz should be applauded for his work on the concept of friendliness and his arguments regarding communal relationship. In considering and analysing the strengths of his argument, contrary to Bewaji's (2004) teleological argument which was based on Yoruba ethical thought, Metz's deontological moral argument explains the ethics of duty inherent in human actions. Without being immodest, the elements of deontology can be found in Yoruba ethics especially when one considers the

principles of *omoluabi* (good character). The rightness or wrongness of an *Omoluabi's* actions goes beyond the consequences of such action based on benefits but rather on duty. On this note, it is the duty of an *omoluabi* to be morally upright.

To the credit of Metz, the deontological moral argument can further be illustrated in the Yoruba thought system—the rightness or wrongness of an action at times is based on the ‘motive’ behind such actions (Oluwole, 1984). In the Yoruba thought system, the ‘motive’ of an action also contributes to the determination of the rightness or wrongness of such action. This is illustrated in the story of the toothless queen, narrated by Sophie Oluwole (1984). The story goes that a particular community ruled that it is a taboo for anyone to be toothless. Anyone with such deficiency would be killed. Following the ruling, one of the king’s wives discovered that one of her counterparts was toothless. And so, her spiteful intention led her to report her discovery to the king and the community. A day was thus fixed to pass judgment on the offender. But while the toothless queen was in agony over her impending fate, she encountered the spirit of her long-dead mother who prescribed specific herbs that led to the acquisition of a set of teeth. When the judgment day arrived, she was found to be with teeth, and therefore acquitted. The spiteful wife was consequently labeled a liar and executed. Her motive was detected, and it led to her demise.

Similarly, Metz should be commended on his argument for the friendliness of nature. Metz's argument on the friendliness of animals and nature sets a pace for the concept of animal rights and ethics in the Yoruba moral thought system. The traditional Yoruba ethical framework harbors certain element of disrespect and violation of animal rights. This is captured by the saying, *eniyàn o tí sùn, aja n hanrun* (“humans are deprived of opportunity to sleep, and yet a dog is snoring”). Such a saying gives room for some inhumane treatment of the animals. But Metz's approach provides the ethical framework for cordial, respectful and friendly relationship with animals. This connotes that a morally right action towards animals is to be friendly with them and accord them their rights.

The issue of deforestation and degradation, land, environmental, and marine pollutions are all morally wrong and require urgent attention in today's world. The negative human attitude to nature has brought a lot of woes in the form of tsunamis, earthquakes, tornados, and flooding in our world. These natural disasters can be prevented through friendliness with nature and right attitudes because natural creatures possess a moral status that deserves respect.

Furthermore, Metz's argument on friendliness seems to be one of the best ways to counter the concept of moral evil and human wickedness in the world. Reflecting on this problem from the Yoruba point of view can lend credence to Metz's argument. For the Yoruba, the idea of evil (*ibi*) comes in three different forms: physical, natural and moral. Physical evil arises from diseases, accidents, or from any form of duress upon the body which bring pain and discomforts. In contrast, natural evil occurs as a result of the operation of the laws of nature, while moral evil refers to pain and suffering inflicted on humans by humans.

The Yoruba believe that humans can inflict pain and be cruel to one another, either physically or supernaturally; this kind of evil is known as human wickedness or wicked act (*iwa ika*) perpetuated by evil workers (*onise ibi*) or an evil person (*ika eniyan*) (Balogun 2018). The enormity of evil in the world has made some scholars like Bertrand Russell (1957) argued that this is not the best of all possible worlds and as a result, God deserves no handshake for leaving the world as it is after millions of years of trial and error. In an attempt to make the world better and reduce the enormity of evil as it exists in Yoruba society in particular and world in general, Metz's argument on friendliness is highly relevant. As such, the application of Metz's argument on friendliness possesses the capacity of instilling fellow-feeling, and the will to live peacefully and maintain a harmonious communal relationship. Although a critic can argue that an Ika eniyan (wicked individual) who seeks pleasure in doing evil will never pursue friendliness but the fact remains as moral agents, pursuance of harmony and friendliness within the society can foster effective communal relationship.

On the limitations of Metz's argument which provided for the deontological view that does not focus on the outcome or consequences of an action but on the rightness of an action based on its respect for individuals in virtue of their capacity to be a party to harmonious ways of relating (Metz, 2022: 108); while activities that degrade those with the capability of connecting communally as subjects or objects as wrong.

It is true that Metz (2022: 108) might be right when one realizes that there are deontological colorations in Yoruba ethics but the teleological identity cannot be easily discarded as actions in Yoruba thought can be said to be right when it promotes the welfare and produce benefits to others, our argument is that Metz's deontological normative argument, if applied to some African cultures can result in the derobing them of their teleological garments which serve as essential pillars for fostering harmony and friendliness in the society.

Similarly, Metz's secular moral theory which denies the involvement of religious and theoretical entities in any ethical formulation may not be acceptable to the Yoruba as the Yoruba explores the help of religious and theoretical entities in their moral scheme to justify human actions. For example, when the Yoruba pushes any moral argument to its logical conclusion and yet, because of human limitations, fails in accessing the motive behind such action, they exclaimed in resignation "oju Olorun to" which means the eyes of God see it all. This explains why some scholars, like Idowu (1962) and Owoseni (2016), believe that the Yoruba worldview is intertwined with religion and belief in the supernatural. Nevertheless, this does not downplay the rational basis of Yoruba ethical thinking (Oluwole 1984). Therefore, Metz's opinion does not relate to any metaphysical understanding or supernatural force underlying moral belief of the Yoruba.

It must be pointed out that while Metz's theory ascribes a high regard to communality, such communality differs from that of the Yoruba thought which defines it in terms of good character and welfarism as the highest good (Oyeshile 2002). This shows that most traditional African societies are depicted by their duties towards others and not by individual rights to themselves (Walt 2003). And this stands contrary to Metz's argument that

friendliness can constitute a duty to oneself.

Furthermore, moral status as portrayed in Metz's argument differs from moral status in the Yoruba thought system. Here, Metz's relational moral theory does not speak to relationship in its true self; rather, it is seen as the ability to connect in a proper ethical way. For Metz, in contrast to Yoruba moral thought, well-being is not the ground of moral rightness; instead, it is caring relationships that tend to produce well-being with moral status (Metz 2022).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Thaddeus Metz deserves applause for his relational moral theory, grounded on the principle of friendliness as rightness. Yet, it cannot be ruled out that there is a point of connection between welfarist and vitality arguments, that is, the teleological and deontological moral arguments in Yoruba ethical thought. It must therefore be emphasized that communality, coupled with utility or vitality, is the foundation for a primary and comprehensive moral duty that can appeal to Africans and global audience of moral philosophers.

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How to Do African Ethics: Replies to Six Critics of *A Relational Moral Theory*

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Abstract

This article is a lengthy response to six contributors to a special issue of *African Philosophical Inquiry* devoted to critical discussions of *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*. Key topics include: the proper role of metaphysics when doing moral philosophy; the appropriate aims of moral philosophy in the light of relational values and properties; the ir/relevance of imperceptible agents for an African ethic; the un/attractiveness of the principle that one morally should promote the common good; the nature of virtue and vice; and how to capture duties to oneself theoretically.

What an honour to have such a distinguished line up of contributors engage with my book *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (RMT), and moreover do so within the fecund and discursive space of the *African Philosophical Inquiry*! I am grateful to Peter Amato, Oladele Balogun, Segun Gbadegesin, Peter Ikhane, Bruce Janz, and Grivas Kayange for sharing their time and expertise, and I am furthermore

thankful to Adeshina Afolayan for driving this project and editing the symposium. I have been fortunate to have been given some things to think about, and hope that I provide some of the same in return to readers in what follows.

Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy

In his eloquent essay, Peter Amato provides reason to adopt aims when doing African ethics that differ from mine. My project in RMT involves articulating and defending a new comprehensive principle of what makes actions right as opposed to wrong, where the defence provided is largely a matter of showing that there is more coherence between widely shared moral intuitions and the principle than between them and rival principles in the African and Western traditions. That project does not involve trying to base a moral theory on prior metaphysical claims about the nature of the self or of reality. In the second chapter of the book (RMT 25-42), I explore several attempts to ground a principle of right action on such an ontology and could not find one that is logically promising, for either the inferences are weak or the premises are implausible. Amato posits different aims for moral philosophy, ones for which metaphysical reflection could be of real use.

Instead of advancing a moral theory that could be justified to a global audience of philosophers, Amato would have us do things such as ‘look at how duties and the duty to choose among them are “grounded” historically’ (pp 36) or ‘how they reflect the practice and attitudes of cultures and groups who live more “relational” and less “individualist” forms of life’ (pp 37). These are not normative projects. Instead of prescribing, they involve describing. These projects would not posit claims about moral requirements that in fact exist or that we have the most epistemic reason to believe exist, and would instead foster understanding of why people tend to share certain views about what is morally required.

As I say in the book (vi-vii, 12, 235-239), I do not suppose that my aim is the only legitimate one for philosophers to undertake. It is open to Amato to pursue ones different from mine, which I accept are worth doing, and to

remind readers of these other options when engaging with African ethical thought. None of this provides reason to doubt that my normative aim is philosophically appropriate.

However, there are other occasions in Amato's essay when he does address normative issues and in ways that are intended to question the project in RMT. In particular, he surmises there is no foundational ethic to be found. At one point he says that it would be 'interesting to investigate the possibility that duties and obligations have not one but multiple "grounds"' (pp 37), while at another he compares a moral theory to a needle in a haystack of human moral experience—which includes ontological viewpoints—and remarks with a compelling metaphor, 'If there isn't a needle in there, it will not do to simply keep trying to blow away as much of the hay as possible' (pp 49). So, while perhaps one cannot derive a moral theory, that is, a comprehensive principle of right action, from an ontology shorn of evaluative and prescriptive elements, which Amato might accept an ontology might be revealing of other aspects of morality, which is a claim I have no interest in rejecting.

In reply, I note that the field cannot know there is no single ground of duties and obligations, unless philosophers have looked for it in earnest and come up empty handed. The only reason to consider multiple grounds, instead of only one ground, would be that a single fully comprehensive ground has not been found upon systematic enquiry. However, as I point out in RMT (4-7), the enquiry up to now has not been systematic, for it has focused only on modern Western sources, and, still more, ones that have been characteristically individualist. In that respect, moral theory is in its infancy; it has yet to try to integrate the perspectives of a wide range of long-standing philosophical traditions. In RMT, I focus on two such traditions, where the relationality of the African tradition resonates with other ones in the Global South, notable examples being South American *buen vivir* and East Asian Confucianism (on which see Metz 2023). Amato does not engage with the moral theory I offer, but providing some reason to doubt it, say, by providing counterexamples it cannot account for, would have been a natural way to support his conclusions that no viable comprehensive principle is

available and that we ought instead to consider multiple grounds of duties.

At the end of the day, we could well conclude that the needle does not exist, and hence identify and explore a plurality of independent basic duties. However, it is not the end of the day yet! It is worth some philosophers' time at this stage to make headway in the search for a foundational ethic. In fact, if one wanted to identify multiple grounds of ethics, the best way to do so would be to try to reduce them all to a single one but end up being unable to do so. Trying to establish monism and failing would in fact be the strongest way to demolish monism and establish pluralism.

Towards the end of his essay, Amato addresses normative issues with claims that I find bold for stating that there is only one viable way to try to ground prescriptive claims about right and wrong action. He says,

Moral life is a collective interpretive practice that can only be worked-out in an irreducibly personal way. Moral theory needs to be developed in a way that doesn't consider cultural experience and beliefs about nature and human nature to be distractions or obstacles but, rather, as the medium in which we work out our moral existence as persons (pp 48).

Notice the strong language: the 'only' way one can work out moral life is personal, and moral theory 'needs to be' informed by ontological beliefs and more generally cultural viewpoints.

I offer no reason to think that Amato's approach would fail to be revealing of something philosophically interesting and important. I accept that it would be. I use my remaining limited space instead to deny Amato's claim that moral philosophy *must* be done in the way he favours.

I am not sure what a 'personal' way of doing moral philosophy would be for Amato, but it sounds parochial, relative to an 'impersonal' way of which I presume my approach is an instance. A personal approach would seem to involve addressing moral matters insofar as they affect oneself or in the light of one's own moral and non-moral beliefs. However, public policy, for instance, would be inappropriate to do from such a personal perspective, or

at least not inappropriate to do from an impersonal one. On two occasions I wrote briefs for the South African High Court providing moral analyses of certain facets of surrogacy. Did I do it incorrectly in having tried to set aside my own interests and my own background views? Presumably not.

In addition, it surely can be appropriate to evaluate a moral position in the light of evidence not accessible to, or given weight by, the agent who holds it, or to undertake moral theory with an eye towards justifying it to a global audience of philosophers. Suppose that someone rejects the death penalty for a reason that others from around the world, but not he, sees counterintuitively entails that all deadly force, even in defence of innocents, is unjustified. Or suppose that someone rejects the death penalty since she believes there exists an avenging spirit who will impose retribution on the guilty party, which belief is not supported by anything other than the testimony of elders in her community. The death penalty may well be unjustified, but there is *prima facie* ground to doubt that it should be rejected for such reasons, at least when, say, determining which penalty the International Criminal Court should impose or debating with philosophers from a variety of traditions at an international conference on the death penalty. A presumably impersonal perspective intuitively does have its place in moral philosophy.

Sensing an impending charge of inappropriate parochialism, Amato deals with it by advancing another strong claim about the purportedly *sole* way to do moral philosophy in the face of multicultural disagreement:

Our hopes of overcoming parochialism and false universalism cannot rest on establishing either a logical or an empirical universal principle that applies to all but instead depends on our willingness to make conversation and contestation on the basis of expanding solidarity a reality (pp 48).

I find the talk of 'cannot' again to be both bold and dubious. Sure, it would be desirable for people from different societies to speak to each other in search of agreement (perhaps temporary and about a specific subject matter) about

how to interact with one another. However, the mere fact that something has been agreed to after collective deliberation does not mean that it is just. After all, people might agree to something unjust for reasons of, say, lack of bargaining power, ignorance of some relevant empirical factors, or cognitive miscalculation. In addition, it could be useful for philosophers to offer widely shared principles to help guide the inclusive discussion. Pointing out common ground that exists amongst interlocutors would be one natural (not the only) way to forge a sensible resolution of a dispute between them.

There are several other facets of Amato's critical discussion that I unfortunately cannot thoroughly address here. For instance, at one point he says that I ask readers 'to reject the approach he deems typical of African philosophers because there is a consensus among Western philosophers that *is/oughtistic* claims are logically incoherent' (pp 40). All I have room to say is that I do not reject attempts to derive comprehensive moral principles from claims about the nature of the self or the universe, which are salient in the African philosophical literature, *because* there is a consensus amongst Western philosophers that *is/ought* inferences are logically incoherent. Instead, what I do in the book's second chapter is run with their concern about an *is/ought* gap (including a similar concern from Paulin Hountondji that frames the entire chapter), by carefully applying the criticism to two such attempts suggested by the works of Kwame Nkrumah and Kwame Gyekye. I use lots of space to quote from the texts of these African philosophers and to try to construct sound arguments on their behalf that move from an ontological claim about what exists to a general principle about how we ought to act. Then, upon finding myself unable to do so, I extend the criticism to additional such attempts in the literature. Amato does not address this intricate material, let alone provide reason to doubt the analysis. Instead, his strongest point is that metaphysical claims are relevant for achieving philosophical purposes that are not mine but that, I have contended here, are reasonable for me to have adopted.

Extending the Relational Framework

Bruce Janz's essay exemplifies the sort of creativity that has been characteristic of his philosophy for decades now. Although I do not (perhaps even cannot, by virtue of my temperament) do the sort of philosophy Janz does, whenever I hear him speak or read his work, my horizons expand and I see philosophy and the world from a different, refreshing perspective. In the present essay, Janz, like Amato, suggests doing moral philosophy in an African context in ways that I do not. Amato rejects my aim of justifying a comprehensive principle of right action informed by African cultures to a global audience of philosophers as inappropriate and also doubts that I have achieved it (and that I in principle ever could). In contrast, Janz accepts my aim as one appropriate task for philosophers and suggests I might well have achieved it, but he posits additional aims that philosophers might want to pursue by drawing on characteristically African and relational ideas.

As I noted when discussing Amato, I am a pluralist about the aims of philosophy. Janz remarks at one point that 'Metz's project assumes that if we have a reliable justification for action, philosophy has done its task' (pp 62-63). It is true that this is the only task that I take up in RMT, but I do not think that it is the sole task for philosophy. I do not suppose that the only thing we ought to be doing is aiming to defend a moral theory to ethicists from around the world, and I acknowledge at both the start and end of the book some other aims that make sense given an African setting (RMT vi-vii, 12, 235-239). For example, I mention the aims of recovering parts of a particular African culture that had been denigrated by colonial powers, of empirically understanding moral maturation in a way that rivals Lawrence Kohlberg's psychological theory, and of developing an account of what a good person is. So, I have no principled reason to want to close off other kinds of enquiry, noting that Janz's suggestions do go beyond the ones I mention in RMT.

In particular, Janz suggests that certain sensible ethical enquiries emerge, if we let go of certain individualist suppositions that RMT admittedly does not question. It is true that I by and large address myself to

(a) individual moral agents who are (b) faced with a particular reasoned decision about (c) how to treat individuals (whether human persons, non-personal humans, or non-human animals). Although I believe that certain relational values pertaining to friendliness, harmony, and communality provide a philosophically compelling way to address this matter, the project does presume some non-relationality in the forms of (a), (b), and (c), as Janz is fair to point out. In essence, Janz is urging us also to consider ethics (a*) applied to groups or interactions between individuals. He is furthermore suggesting we address ethics insofar as it (b*) describes what makes choice—which might not be rational—possible, understands how we arrived at a place where we face a moral dilemma, or perhaps prescribes in respect to many decisions and evaluates their large-scale social consequences. Lastly, he is saying that we ought to consider how these decisions and consequences might (c*) positively or negatively affect collectivities and relationships.

Insofar as Janz's alternate aims for moral philosophy are (unlike Amato's) meant to *supplement*, rather than to *supplant*, the one I adopt in RMT, I have no qualms with them and welcome them as ways of doing some interesting philosophy. If I had more space, I would have been happy to run a long way with his suggestive remarks about how relationality might be revealing in respect to (a*), (b*), and (c*). I instead conclude by briefly sharing my hunch that the concept of a friendly or communal way of relating advanced in the book, viz., as the combination of identity and solidarity understood in a particular way (RMT 91-101), might do the best job of explaining additional phenomena.

For one, I submit that communal ways of relating probably help account for how the moral point of view emerged amongst our hominid ancestors. When sociobiologists normally posit cooperative behaviour as having served the function of enabling our genes to be passed on to the next generation, it would be of interest to consider whether identity and solidarity could do better explanatory work. That is, perhaps it is not merely cooperating, in the sense of coordinating behaviour to realize ends that do not undermine one another, that enabled certain groups of hominids to

reproduce, but also, say, acting for the sake of another person or enjoying a shared sense of self with another that did so.

For another potentially fruitful way to deploy my favoured conception of relationality, consider the research on what happens to many human beings once they acquire wealth or power. It has been known for more than a decade that they tend to lose empathy and become less inclined to improve others' quality of life by sharing their resources (e.g., Goleman 2013). However, evidence has also emerged that they tend not to cooperate with others as much, at least not with those in lower economic classes (Suttie 2015; Melamed et al 2022). Perhaps a revealing way of understanding what goes wrong with the ethical orientation of elites upon politico-economic stratification is that they are less inclined to identify with others and exhibit solidarity with them as construed in RMT (91-101).

Imperceptible Agents

In his contribution, Peter Ikhane provides reason to think that my moral theory is unattractive for having not included essential reference to any imperceptible agents such as God or ancestors. Roughly, according to my ethic, one should respect beings insofar as they are capable of relating communally (whether as a subject or object), where the only beings I suppose in RMT are so capable are those that are 'physical', or, in more African terms, are part of the perceptible realm. Ikhane would have us revise the theory so that the concept of communality inherently involves relating with at least the living-dead, if not other imperceptible agents. Ikhane's contribution is careful, having read RMT closely, presented my views accurately, and drawn a number of pertinent distinctions. He has a firm grasp of why I elect to interpret the African ethical tradition in a secular manner, and offers what I see as three distinct reasons for a more 'spiritual' or thickly metaphysical ethic, to which I respond in this section.

As Ikhane rightly notes, I avoid basing an ethic on claims about imperceptible agents mainly because I am addressing a scholarly audience that transcends those who adhere to characteristically African worldviews. I strive to develop a principle of right action that could appeal to moral

philosophers from a variety of traditions, such as the African, the Western, the East Asian, and the South American. I suspect that it would be difficult to provide evidence of the existence of God and ancestors as construed in the African tradition to much of that audience, while one major point of the book is to show ethicists around the world that, given their own commitments to certain moral intuitions (e.g., that one should normally save the life of one's mother before that of a stranger), they have strong epistemic reason to adopt my favoured ethic.

I do not say in RMT why I address such a broad audience, but it is not pandering to the West or viewing African philosophy as an enterprise that is merely reactive to the West (both of which I have been sharply accused of at times). Instead, in the background is a certain view of epistemic justification, namely, that there is particularly strong evidence for a view if there is consensus amongst experts about it. That principle explains why we have epistemic reason to believe scientific theories such as natural selection, general relativity, and the spheroid shape of the Earth; the overwhelming majority of those who have most carefully considered the data in a variety of countries have homed in on these conclusions. If we could find a general principle of right action that were the object of consensus amongst moral philosophers around the world—naturally including those in the West, given that they have been doing moral theoretic philosophy for about 400 years—that would be strong evidence in its favour.

One important thing to note about my approach is that, while imperceptible agents such as ancestors are not essentially included in the ethic, the ethic also does not essentially exclude them. There are times in the book when I am open to interpreting the relational moral theory in different ways, given different metaphysical commitments. For one example, I point out that, if the essence of a being is constituted by relational properties, then the ethic has implications that will differ if a being's essence is instead exhausted by intrinsic properties, without making any firm pronouncement on which ontology is preferable (RMT 155-156, 184). Similarly, I note that, if imperceptible agents exist, then the ethic has implications for the way we ought to treat them, again with me avoiding any conclusive judgement

about whether they exist or not (RMT vii, 49-50, 80, 109). I simply try to bracket large metaphysical controversies as much as possible, to focus on the moral logic and in a way that would be of interest to a global array of ethicists.

That approach is not enough for Ikhane. One reason is that, according to him, it is not African. According to Ikhane, for any account of relationality to warrant the label 'African', it must include reference to the claim that the universe is composed of perceptible and imperceptible forces, both of which include agents, and all of which are part of a single, substantially harmonious order. Call this the 'metaphysical thesis'. Ikhane says that 'the worry is about the *Africanness* of the moral theory' (pp 86-87), given that it neither expresses nor is grounded on the metaphysical thesis. Insofar as I take myself to be providing a relational interpretation of the African ethical tradition, the criticism is of relevance to the project in RMT.

In reply, note that Ikhane does not respond to the rhetorical question I pose in RMT (12) to those who would deny that the communal ethic counts as African: Am I really to call it 'Metz's theory'? Here is another one: Was it indeed inappropriate for the editors of *African Philosophical Inquiry* to include the present studies of RMT, since RMT is not a work of African philosophy? Setting aside the rhetoric, in RMT (7-12) I advance an account of *Africanness* that I submit is quite plausible and that entails that it comes in degrees. Basically, the claim is that something is more African, the more it has been salient on the continent, that is, has been prominent over much of its space and for a long span of time and has not been similarly present in most other parts of the world. To add an example I did not discuss in RMT, Baobab trees are surely African, and I submit they are plausibly so for this reason. Baobab trees are not everywhere in Africa, they are also not solely in Africa (there are some in Australia), and one day Africa could lose all its Baobab trees—and hence Baobab trees are not essential to Africa. However, they merit the label 'African' nonetheless, because Baobab trees have been salient in Africa.

Now, the idea of harmony or communality central to my ethic builds on ideas from many African philosophers, which in turn have been informed

by the cultures of many sub-Saharan peoples. In addition, the ethic itself is justified in the second part of the book mainly on the basis of its ability to account for moral intuitions widely shared by African philosophers (in catchwords, e.g., ‘family first’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘consensus’, ‘tradition’), again drawing on their respective indigenous societies. As Ikhane recognizes, I grant that my theory would be *more* African if it was also essentially about how to interact with imperceptible agents, but I contend it still merits the label *to some degree* because it is grounded on many other moral properties salient in African philosophical thought.

Contra this claim, Ikhane suggests that ‘when the assumptions that undergird the attempt to conceptualise the experiences are different, it is problematic to talk of a gradient understanding of what passes as African’ (pp 94). I believe his claim is that what is pervasively taken amongst Africans to explain a wide array of data should be deemed fundamental and hence essential to what is African. So, Ikhane mentions that Africans often posit a universe populated by imperceptible agents as part of the best explanation of what is observed to happen in day to day life, including reincarnation and witchcraft. A widespread appeal to beliefs about the basic nature of reality to make sense of observations confers a special status on these beliefs, grounding an essentialism about Africanness, for Ikhane.

The question of what counts as African is of course enormous, and I lack the space here to say much more than I do in RMT. The problems with essentialism are well known, and, instead of repeating them here, I simply note that they tell in favour of my salience criterion, which is not essentialist (RMT 7-12). In addition, the reader should recognize that moves such as Ikhane’s risk excluding a lot of what intuitively counts as African. I point out in RMT that neither Kwasi Wiredu’s (1996) nor Kwame Gyekye’s (1997) moral philosophy is informed by the metaphysical idea of a harmonious order of perceptible and imperceptible forces, but that they have been some of the most widely discussed views amongst African philosophers over the past 25 years and indeed routinely labeled ‘African’. On this score, Ikhane bites the bullet and denies that they are in fact African (pp 88), but I submit that he has done so at the cost of cracked teeth. We could add to the list other

books that are often taken to be classic works of African philosophy, but that, for all I can tell, are not informed by the metaphysical thesis, such as Nkrumah (1970), Hountondji (1996), and Oruka (1997). For Ikhane to have to describe the key works of these five authors as ‘unAfrican’ strikes me as counterintuitive, and a strong indication that his account of what is African is too narrow.

Closing discussion of whether the communal ethic advanced in RMT is African or not, there remains the question of whether it should be believed. On this topic, Ikhane provides two distinguishable reasons why, in the absence of the metaphysical thesis, it should not be, one pragmatic (or what he calls ‘inclusive’) and the other evidential (for him ‘exclusionary’). Consider the pragmatic argument first, according to which belief in the metaphysical thesis would improve the lives of many African people.

(T)he belief in the organic unity of the universe... is seen to provide impetus for relationality in such contexts as social relations, extended family ties, age-group connectedness, ancestral connection, and so on, in the African lived world. Hence, the imperative to not trade it off as a characteristic of relationality in Africa (pp 98-99).

As Ikhane says elsewhere in his essay, belief in the metaphysical thesis ‘motivates communal living’ (pp 87). If people stopped believing that there are imperceptible agents, then discord/anti-sociality or a loss of meaning would likely result, so the argument goes.

However, the plain truth is that RMT is simply not going to have the effect of changing people's minds about the metaphysical thesis. For one, RMT merely sets it aside, and does not even present objections to it. For another, virtually no one other than a small handful of professional philosophers will read the book and hence be led to doubt the relevance of the metaphysical thesis for moral theory.

Ikhane might reply that, even if RMT does not instruct people to stop believing the metaphysical thesis, it ought to instruct them to continue believing it or to adopt it if they do not already believe it. However, the point

about pitifully small influence stands: a technical work of analytic philosophy is not going to have any effect on the lives of many people. Hence, there is neither substantial pragmatic harm to avoid nor benefit to gain from RMT having bracketed metaphysical issues. Similar remarks apply to readers of this article—they, too, are unlikely to be in a position to influence people's day to day life and hence threaten communal life with any secularism.

The second reason Ikhane provides to believe the metaphysical thesis, and hence to ensure that an ethic is informed by it, is evidential, in the sense of aiming to provide epistemic support. I welcome this argumentative move, and in a recent article urged African philosophers to try to marshal evidence in support of the reality of ancestors, the recent living-dead, and other imperceptible agents such as lesser divinities (Metz 2021: 646-649). More specifically, I suggested that it would be of real interest to provide evidence that would give those who do not already hold the metaphysical thesis some reason to change their minds. Ikhane admirably takes up the challenge.

Specifically, Ikhane argues that the metaphysical thesis, at least insofar as it includes the reality of imperceptible agency, best explains certain events pertaining to both witchcraft and reincarnation, or, more carefully, particular kinds of reincarnation associated with talk of '*abiku*' and '*ogbanje*' common in Nigeria. Inference to the best explanation is the standard rationale for positing unobservable properties such as gravity, causation, and quarks, and Ikhane deploys it to provide reason to believe in unobservable persons (cf. Menkiti 2004). There are two problems that need to be resolved before accepting Ikhane's reasoning. One is that inference to the best explanation is most compelling when what is being explained is quite uncontested. When it comes to gravity, it is plain for all to see that apples fall from trees towards the Earth and it is relatively uncontested (even if not obvious) that the planets orbit the sun. These movements of bodies are widely accepted as data by enquirers around the world, with gravity being a strong explanation of this data and therefore being reasonable to posit as real. There is an important difference between the movements of these bodies, which are apprehended by many from all parts of the globe, and the

presence of reincarnation or witchcraft, which are not. Claims to have observed the latter are quite contested, making an inference to the best explanation of them comparably contested.

The second problem is that, when the relevant data are rendered uncontroversial, it is far from clear that the metaphysical thesis best explains them. So, while reincarnation is a contested observation, it is not contested to detect similarities between a family member whose body has died and another family member who was subsequently born and reared. Let me grant that it is not unusual for people around the world to deem a younger family member to be a lot like a deceased family member. I accept *that* as an uncontested observation. However, that observation is perfectly well explained by appeal to biological and social similarities, that is, to continuities in genes and family dynamics. Why think that an imperceptible realm populated by agents must be invoked to account for what is uncontroversially observed? Perhaps there is a strong answer to this question available, but I am not yet aware of it.

The Common Good

It is an honour to engage with the elder Segun Gbadegesin as part of this symposium. I have learned much from his book, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*, which, after more than 30 years, is still influencing the field with its range of topics and depth of treatment. Although I hope in the future to engage with Gbadegesin about meaning in life, where he has been one of the few African philosophers to address the topic directly and substantively, today I focus on morality.

Gbadegesin carefully and accurately recounts my views, and raises a variety of critical points about them. Some pose questions about the proper role of metaphysics in moral theory (many of which are implicitly answered in my replies to Amato and Ikhane above), while others contest issues in applied ethics, e.g., regarding the contours of confidentiality. However, in this section I elect to focus strictly on Gbadegesin's sustained attempt to defend a normative ethical theory that fundamentally prescribes promoting

the common good.

In the second major part of RMT, I identify three plausible candidates for a basic duty in contemporary literate African philosophy: a duty to produce (or perhaps respect) vital force, a duty to promote the common good, and a duty to prize communality. In RMT, I argue that the latter, relational ethic is preferable to appeals to vital force and the common good since relationality is better able than the others to account for certain intuitions about right and wrong (some of which are characteristically African and others of which are more globally held). In reply, Gbadegesin either questions a given intuition or, more often, grants the intuition but contends that the common good can capture it.

In criticizing a moral theory grounded on the common good, in RMT (65-76) I considered only Kwame Gyekye's version of it, since it has been the most influential and since I had thought criticisms of it could be generalized to other versions. For Gyekye, the common good consists of what is desirable for all human beings; and, specifically, it amounts to the satisfaction of their needs, particularly ones required for a human to flourish in a society. Many of my criticisms amounted to contending that there are non-welfarist aspects of right and wrong (on which see also my reply to Balogun below). Some facets of morality have to do with enabling choice and respecting dignity, and not merely promoting well-being, let alone just meeting basic needs. My communal ethic instructs us to honour individuals roughly insofar as others can cooperate with and care for them and they can cooperate and care for others. Hence, my ethic includes a welfarist dimension (à la care or solidarity), but is not restricted to that, and has more theoretical resources to make sense of moral life, or so I argue in RMT.

One of my specific criticisms is that a focus on the common good has difficulty making sense of the intuition widely shared amongst African philosophers that a cooperative approach to economic production would be justified, so long as it produced a satisfactory amount of goods and services (RMT 55-57, 70-71). Even if a more competitive mode of production would maximize economic output, many in the African tradition would reject it as

wrong, supposing the less competitive mode avoided poverty. I argue in RMT that promoting well-being as the aim of moral action cannot easily account for this intuition. In reply, Gbadegesin contends, “The typical African mental outlook is to afford the basic needs for everyone. Therefore, the common good theory is not after enormous wealth” (pp 23). Since the common good ethic would not prescribe maximizing economic output, it can capture the intuition about the propriety of cooperation, so his reply goes.

I have two responses to this powerful suggestion. One is to question the adequacy of Gbadegesin's explanation of *why* cooperation is intuitively right, even if the logic of his principle indeed entails *that* it is right. By Gbadegesin's rationale, cooperation is permissible if it meets basic needs; there is nothing, for all that has been said so far, to think that cooperation has some moral value in itself. However, part of the reason why cooperation is intuitively right, I submit, is that a cooperative way of relating is *pro tanto* worth pursuing as a moral end and that a fiercely competitive mode merits avoidance to some degree because of its inherent nature, setting aside whatever causal influences these ways of interacting might have on people's well-being. My communal-relational ethic, prescribing respect for people's ability to identify (and also exhibit solidarity) with others, straightforwardly provides that kind of explanation, whereas one focused on meeting people's basic needs cannot.

A second response is to point out that, if the common good is restricted to the meeting of people's basic needs, then it is no longer promising as a contender for a moral theory, which is meant to be comprehensive. Recall that a moral theory is supposed to be a general principle of right action and hence able to distinguish right from wrong in any situation. Now, imagine a situation in which everyone's basic needs are met. Then, according to Gbadegesin's present interpretation of a requirement to promote the common good, no moral controversy about how to allocate additional resources can arise. However, intuitively there can still be moral controversy about how to distribute goods that are not needed to meet basic needs. For instance, how should the state regulate the distribution of automobiles,

classes in art history, and neighbourhood parks? How should I as a father allocate goods such as Nike shoes, Playstation time, and iPads in respect to my sons? Such questions could in principle be answered with a welfarist ethic that is not restricted to basic needs—but then the original objection about competition potentially maximizing well-being would resurface.

Another criticism I make of the common good in RMT (57-58, 71-72) is that it cannot easily make sense of why greetings are morally required, at least from the perspective of many working in the African tradition. After all, saying ‘Hello’ and enquiring how people and their families are faring do not involve meeting anyone’s basic needs. Hence, if promoting the common good consists merely of meeting people’s basic needs, then it cannot entail, let alone explain, a duty to greet.

In reply, Gbadegesin’s move is to broaden the notion of the common good—and in a way that looks to me to be in tension with his reply to the previous criticism regarding cooperation. He remarks that ‘there is a sense in which greeting promotes the wellbeing of individuals and of the community if we do not restrict wellbeing to the material aspects of life, and include mental and emotional wellbeing both of which contribute to a harmonious community relation’ (pp 24). Whatever mental and emotional welfare greeting someone tends to foster, it cannot be plausibly said to involve meeting a basic need. So, my first response is that I suspect Gbadegesin cannot make the present reply to the greeting objection in a way that coheres with his reply above to the cooperation objection. Suppose, though, that we should construe the common good more broadly than the meeting of basic needs, that is, as including more than ‘that set of goods that is essentially or fundamentally good for human beings as such’ (Gyekye 2004: 54). Then, where failing to greet would be taken badly because a greeting convention has been flouted, Gbadegesin can plausibly note that a prescription to improve people’s welfare can entail that it would be wrong not to greet (cf. RMT 71).

My second response is that an appeal to mental or emotional well-being cannot fully explain when and why it is wrong not to greet someone. To see the point, suppose that the community accepts someone as an elder, that is,

there is a person who is known by all in the society to have become genuinely wise and virtuous after several decades of life. Let us imagine that, not being insecure and instead having a strong sense of confidence, he would not feel bad if a younger man in his 20s failed to greet him. He would merely pity the rude person as lacking in humanness. Then, no mental or emotional harm would be done if the younger failed to greet the elder, and yet it would still be wrong for the younger not to have greeted the elder. A plausible explanation of why it would be wrong not to greet the elder, even though failing to do so would not cause him or anyone else any harm, is that greetings are a way to show respect. Although elders are deserving of more respect than others, everyone is deserving of some measure of respect because of their inherent dignity, making greetings of potentially anyone morally appropriate by my communal ethic.

There is one more element of Gbadegesin's reasoning about greetings that I should address, namely, the point that mental and emotional well-being 'contribute to a harmonious community relation' (pp 24). In another passage Gbadegesin also speaks of the 'potentials of an attendant disturbance of community relations, when the obligation to greet is violated' (pp 24-25). I respond that it is quite unlikely that communal relations would be (likely to be) disturbed by a single instance of failing to greet, even an elder, and yet it would for many African thinkers still be wrong to fail to greet on that occasion. A stronger way to invoke relationality, I submit, is not in terms of the harmful consequences of not greeting, which might not be forthcoming, but rather as what not greeting characteristically expresses, viz., that the other's ability to be party to communal relationship does not exist or is unimportant. It is not harm, but rather disrespect, that does the bulk of the moral work, where the communal ethic prescribes respect for the capacity to so relate.

A third criticism I make of the common good approach to right and wrong is that it has difficulty making sense of why there might be a *pro tanto* obligation to support customs (RMT 58-59, 72). I point out that, while it can of course be, all-things-considered, right to overturn a long-standing way of life when it causes real harm or prevents much benefit, for many African

philosophers there would still be *some* degree of moral cost to doing so. A welfarist ethic cannot easily make sense of that judgement, since, by it, right and wrong are a function merely of harm and benefit and nothing else. In contrast, my communal ethic prescribes sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life, where sometimes these two values can come into conflict. That principle grounds a sensible account of how customs could have some moral weight, as shared ways of life, despite being incompatible with robust care. In reply, Gbadegesin holds that the intuition can be accommodated with a broad notion of the common good, one that includes relational elements such as a shared way of life. He thoughtfully advances a case where, in order to obtain more wealth, a parent might need to forsake speaking Yoruba to her child in favour of English, where English would help on the job market. The best way to understand the case, Gbadegesin submits, is to say that one would have to make trade-offs amongst different kinds of well-being, in this case money and an identity essentially tied to participation in a language.

It is true that the line between the common good approach and my communal ethic is less sharp, if one conceives of the common good as including relational values. However, there are still some real differences between an ethic prescribing promotion of well-being, including certain ways of interacting that are considered good for their own sake, and my ethic instructing one to honour the dignity of persons in virtue of their capacity to relate communally. In particular, it is worth highlighting the sense of disrespect that can attend the loss of cultural membership. If a parent elected not to teach her child a language indigenous to Africa and instead to impart English, part of why that might be morally problematic is that it would be bad for the child (as per Gbadegesin), but another part would plausibly be the offence taken by siblings, cousins, and older members of the family. Or imagine that a parent has indeed sought to teach her child an indigenous language, but that the child rejects it when he becomes a teenager and he speaks only English to his mum. Again, perhaps that would indeed be bad for the child (and the parent), but another part of the morality concerns the sense of rejection the mother would reasonably

feel. When people have freely formed a way of life, it is an expression of their capacity to relate communally and deserves some measure of respect as a way to show respect for the people who participate in it.

Virtue and Consequences

In his useful contribution, Oladele Balogun draws on his Yoruba culture to reflect on what the best interpretation of African morality is. He accepts that there is a deontological facet of Yoruba thought about permissible action, where at least part of what makes an act right or wrong is the purpose for which it is done. In addition, he seems sympathetic at times to the idea that this deontological dimension of Yoruba morality is well captured by a prescription to honour individuals in virtue of their ability to relate communally. However, he maintains that a Yoruba, and more generally African, morality must include more than a duty-based ethic. In particular, for him, there must at the centre be an account of virtue and a focus on consequences that foster well-being.

Regarding virtue, I do not really disagree. In RMT I am not trying to provide a comprehensive account of African morality, let alone of morality as such, even though I am indeed trying to provide a comprehensive account of the difference between right and wrong, one facet of morality. Beyond right and wrong, however, there is also good and bad character, which is a different issue that merits its own sustained treatment. For all I can tell, Balogun is correct that indigenous African reflection about morality tends to be framed in terms of virtue and vice. However, in RMT I have elected to address the logically distinct issue of right and wrong, partly because it is indeed one major part of morality and also because of my prior view that what makes someone good is in part a function of that person's orientation towards right action, which has to be understood on an independent basis.

To begin to appreciate this approach to virtue, note that in more recent work I have begun to advance an account of good character grounded on RMT's account of right and wrong, where someone is virtuous roughly insofar as she has propositional attitudes that cohere with actions that

express respect for individuals' ability to commune, and someone exhibits vice when she fails to do so and instead has mental states that cohere with disrespect for such (RMT 237-239; Metz 2022b). For a few examples, it is wrong to treat a person as though he is of only instrumental value, say, by enslaving him on a rubber farm for one's own profit, but it is (also) bad to think that the person indeed lacks a dignity. It is normally wrong to inflict extreme pain on someone that is not part of a corrective or punitive response to his wrongdoing, but it would (also) be bad to enjoy doing so. It is wrong to ruin another person's reputation when one has insufficient evidence to think he has been wicked, but it is bad to do so because one is extremely jealous and insecure with oneself. It would be wrong to drive when drunk, but, even if one did not do so because one could not find the keys to the car, it is bad to be the sort of person who would have done so, had he been able to. Virtue and vice are largely a matter of one's beliefs, desires, emotions, and motivations being properly oriented, where I advance action that does not degrade communal nature as the lodestar.

However, Balogun maintains that such action is not the lodestar, which is instead a prescription to promote well-being. At one point he remarks that my notion of communality 'differs from that of the Yoruba thought which defines commonality based on good character and welfarism as the highest good....For Metz, in contrast to Yoruba moral thought, well-being is not the ground of moral rightness' (pp 120).

In reply, first recall that my project is not to represent the beliefs of any African people or group of them about morality (RMT vi, 67-68, 81, 92). I am not trying to describe what the Yoruba or indigenous sub-Saharanans more generally think about right and wrong action. Instead, I am drawing on some of their salient beliefs about that in order to construct a principle about how one ought to behave that is well justified to a multicultural audience. If that principle does not mirror Yoruba culture, it is an open question of how to proceed. Some will think that the mere fact that a view is African automatically means that it merits belief. I am not one of them; it is hard for me to see why one should think that any particular culture has gotten everything correct or otherwise deserves unquestioning support as it

stands.

Second, note that I in fact doubt that African morality is best represented by a welfarist principle. In RMT, I provide a number of cases meant to show that right and wrong are not exhausted by doing what will (or is expected to) make people better off. As per my discussion of Gbadegesin above, I think that many African philosophers would morally prescribe producing wealth in a cooperative manner, greeting others, and upholding customs, even when doing so would not improve people's quality of life. Furthermore, recall some other cases from RMT (86-88) meant to show that right and wrong for many philosophers around the world is implausibly captured by a prescription to promote well-being. There are the cases of the spouse who cheats on her husband, the social scientist who studies others' sexuality without their consent, and the state that does not facilitate interracial marriage. In RMT I point out that such actions could be done in ways that would not cause (or even risk) harm to anyone, and yet they would be wrong all the same, including I presume for many in the Yoruba tradition. A strong explanation of their wrongness appeals to a requirement to respect others' capacity to identify with others or to share a way of life with them (and not just their capacity to be party to caring relationships).

Even if I am correct that right and wrong are not exhausted by avoiding harm and producing benefit, whether for the Yoruba or moral philosophers from a variety of cultures, is not Balogun surely correct that a comprehensive account must include those elements? In one sense, I agree, for the communal ethic is meant to ground some negative duties not to cause harm and some positive duties to aid (e.g., RMT 111-112, 117-120). If another person is capable of being party to a communal relationship, where such a relationship includes (but is not exhausted by) care or solidarity, then respect for his nature includes caring for or acting in solidarity with him (at least when he is innocent).

However, acting in a caring manner does not obviously require doing what in fact promotes beneficial consequences in the long run, and it is doubtful that it should. To see why not, suppose that someone has lost his mind and is attacking people with an axe. Now imagine that, in aiming to

help others, I succeed in taking the man's axe away. However, he now unexpectedly pulls out a gun and ends up causing somewhat more harm than he would have had he used just the axe. Did I act wrongly? I failed to produce the most available good consequences for people's well-being, but my intuition is that I did not act in a way that merits guilt, resentment, censure, punishment, or any of the other characteristically appropriate reactions towards wrongdoing. Again, what appears to be doing the moral work is deontological, viz., having the right purpose along with some reasonable expectation of achieving it, and not, as per teleology, the actual results of one's action, which could be a function of bad luck.

In sum, then, Balogun is correct that the field of African morality is owed an account of virtue, but I contend that it is best grounded on a prior account of right action. In addition, Balogun is correct that right and wrong action must be oriented towards making people better off, but only in part, since sharing a way of life matters too, and it is furthermore doubtful that rightness and wrongness are constituted by actual welfarist results.

Self-regarding Morality

Grivas Kayange is one of the very few African philosophers to have highlighted more individualist dimensions of indigenous moral thought on the continent. In particular, he has for some years argued that the best interpretation of the African tradition must include acknowledgement of self-regarding virtues and duties to oneself. These are, for Kayange, instances of good character and of right action that are not at bottom motivated by consideration for others. Instead, for him, one can be a better person or perform a required action simply in virtue of the way one treats oneself, setting aside what that behaviour might mean for the community or other people. In his contribution to this symposium, Kayange directs this point against my moral theory, which admittedly in RMT is usually packaged in a purely other-regarding form.

I say 'usually' because there are points in the book where I suggest that one could interpret the theory differently, if one believes there are indeed self-regarding virtues or duties to oneself (RMT 110, 120-123). There are

places in the book where my approach is less defensive and more exploratory, noting that the communal ethic could admit of different variants, depending on certain metaphysical or axiological commitments in the background. For instance, if one believes that God would have a dignity but could not be an object of communal relationship with us, one might want a version of the relational moral theory according to which being capable of being a subject of communality is sufficient for dignity, in contrast to my normal phrasing, according to which one must be capable of being both a subject and object of communality to have a dignity (see RMT 153-154). Similarly, if one thinks that a moral life would (at least to some degree) be possible for a person stranded alone on a deserted island, one might prefer a version of the ethic according to which one has a dignity in virtue of being able to relate communally not merely with others, but also with oneself.

I suggest that variant in RMT (122), but Kayange does not engage with it in his contribution to this symposium. What I do in the rest of my comments is point out how promising it is as an alternative to Kayange's Kantian-rationalist approach. Before doing that, I acknowledge that many colleagues in the field of African philosophy, perhaps even a large majority, would deny that morality includes any basic self-regarding virtues or duties to oneself. They will argue that Kayange's example of a person who appears to have a duty to himself not to drink too much alcohol instead has that duty ultimately because he must remain able to carry out his duties to his family and the broader society. See, for instance, Balogun's remark that 'most traditional African societies are depicted by their duties towards others and not by individual rights to themselves...which is contrary to Metz's argument that friendliness is a duty to oneself' (pp 120). However, I am inclined to agree with Kayange that an individual also morally owes it to himself not to drink too much. I do not find that intuition as firm as the others centrally addressed in RMT, and for that reason did not often articulate the communal ethic there in a way that would capture it. However, I now point out how this ethic may be interpreted so that it does explain why one might have such a duty and without an appeal to Kantianism.

In RMT (122) I explore the possibility that, since we have a dignity of the same sort as that of our fellows, we sensibly owe ourselves certain moral treatment of the kind we owe them. In particular, I suggest that we might have obligations to ‘relate’ to ourselves in ways that parallel the ways we ought to relate to others in terms of identity and solidarity. Such an approach would stretch the normal sense of what talk of ‘relationality’ involves, or at least the sense that Kayange aptly fastens on to, but there is reason to take it seriously. To start, consider that it is *prima facie* attractive to think that one has a duty not to be unfriendly or discordant towards oneself. One surely should not exhibit full-blown enmity towards oneself, which captures intuitions that there is something wrong with negative treatment such as hating one’s own company, doing what one knows will undermine one’s long-term goals, intentionally harming oneself, or deeming oneself to be unworthy of support. In addition, there are also plausibly positive obligations in respect of oneself, *viz.*, to be friendly towards or to commune with oneself. That would mean enjoying a sense of cohesion with oneself, carrying out projects coherently over time, doing things that are good for oneself, and being compassionate towards oneself, the correlates of enjoying a sense of togetherness with others, cooperating with them, making them better off, and doing so out of sympathy and for their sake.

It appears that the concept of friendliness, harmony, or communal relation—different terms for the same central idea in RMT (99-101)—promises to unify a variety of respects in which one owes it to oneself to live in certain ways instead of others. Kayange proposes a different way to unify self-regarding virtues and duties to oneself, namely, on the Kantian basis that they are all ways of respecting one’s rational agency. It would be a revealing project to see which explanation is better, something that I lack the space to undertake here. I close merely by pointing out some strategies that merit consideration elsewhere.

For one, I believe it would be difficult for a Kantian ethic to account for a duty to be good to oneself in cases where being good to oneself were not essential to honour one’s rational nature. If you think, for instance, that you owe it to yourself to let yourself be loved by others, it is hard to see how a

prescription to protect and cultivate your rationality could adequately explain this intuition. For another, even some duties not to harm oneself might be difficult for Kantianism to capture. Kayange's example of the duty not to become a drunkard suits Kantianism well, given that such a lifestyle would directly undermine one's rational faculties. However, what about a duty not to cut one's arms and stomach with a razor blade? It does not seem as though cutting would stunt one's ability to deliberate, or, if indeed the pain would do so, that does not seem to be the core explanation of why one should avoid it.

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