

# Relational Moral Philosophy Needs Relational Moral Psychology

*A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent*

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## Précis

Well written, tightly argued, provocative, and original, Metz's book is a must-read contribution. In addition to skillfully and judiciously bringing African moral philosophy into conversation with Western analytic philosophy, Metz has done the field a service by putting social and interpersonal relationships at the heart of his theory -- and encouraging others to do the same. Going forward, especially given his explicit desire to accommodate or explain common moral intuitions, it might be that more direct engagement with the empirical literatures in relationship science and experimental moral psychology would further strengthen his theory.

## Introduction

'Western' moral thought is often stereotyped as being (too) individualistic, Thatcher-like; communities are treated as mere assemblages of individuals, each of whom must look after their own welfare. 'African' moral thought, by contrast, is stereotyped as being (too) communitarian: the individual is subsumed within a corporate body; 'culture' or 'tradition' reign supreme. But as Thaddeus Metz argues in *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent*, both traditions also recognize, and give nontrivial weight to, social and interpersonal relationships. In other words, stereotypes aside, they do incorporate the idea – perhaps most strongly associated with 'Asian' moral philosophy, through Confucius – that morality is, on some level, a “function of relational properties” (Metz, 2021, p. 1).

In addition to Confucianism, Metz is quick to acknowledge that care ethics, an outgrowth of Western feminism, gives pride of place to relationships (see Held, 2006). But, he suggests, this has not been the principal approach to moral philosophy in the West. Instead, “the major moral theories of the past 200 years in the Western tradition, ranging from egoism to utilitarianism to Lockean natural rights to respect for autonomy to respect for human life” share a chiefly *individualist* foundation (Metz, 2021, p. 1). Metz’s pioneering work stands as a corrective. He argues that, by centering *communal* moral intuitions more commonly articulated in the African<sup>1</sup> tradition, and developing a robust relational moral theory to account for them, significant explanatory gaps left open by those Western theories can be filled.

Metz's book is divided into three parts, the latter two of which will concern us in this review. Briefly, Part I is focused primarily on questions of methodology and debates in meta-ethics and moral ontology. In these chapters, Metz proposes to reject contentious metaphysical assumptions, such as a belief in ancestors (that is, “wise forefathers who have survived the deaths of their bodies [and] continue to live on Earth in an imperceptible form”) and—broadly—what he takes to be violations of Hume’s Law (that is, attempts to deduce claims about how we *ought* to act morally from facts about the universe, or claims about what *is*). Instead, he commits to using “publicly accessible argumentation” to ground his theory, where the relevant “public” consists of fellow philosophers “from a variety of intellectual traditions” including those with naturalist sympathies (Metz, 2021, pp. 46 and 47).

Part II then focuses on normative ethics, laying out Metz’s substantive account, which we will introduce shortly. Part III extends his theory to topics in applied ethics. Although we will ultimately suggest that Metz’s theory could be strengthened by engaging more directly the moral and relational psychology literatures (and will also raise questions about some normative assumptions and practical-ethical conclusions implied by his views), we find that there is much to admire and unpack in this impressively slim volume, and we hope and expect it will be widely read and influential.

### **Metz’s normative theory**

Metz’s overarching claim in Part II of his book is that *communality* is the ground of African morality. By ‘African’ he means to pick out “features recurrent in much of the sub-Saharan region of the continent over several hundred years,” including, more specifically, moral intuitions or judgments “that have been long-standing and more

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<sup>1</sup> Terms like ‘African’, ‘Asian’, and ‘Western’ obviously require some justification. Metz uses them to refer to qualities that “have been salient in a locale over a substantial amount of time” or “have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere.” Hence: “long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions” (Metz, 2021, p. 7). For simplicity, we’ll follow Metz’s usage.

widespread in [that] part of the continent than at least in Europe, the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia.” Even more specifically, he claims to draw on intuitions and judgments “that recur more often in the post-independence, English-speaking social scientific and philosophical literature on African ethics than in that on Western ethics” (pp. 52-53).

Inspired by, but also critiquing and going beyond said literature (e.g., Gyekye 1997), Metz puts forward a theory according to which moral status or standing -- that is, mattering morally for one’s own sake -- inheres in “any being capable of relating communally” (Metz, 2021, p. 107). Communality, in turn, is understood as a combination of *identity* and *solidarity*. Identity involves “identifying with” or “sharing a way of life” with others (Metz, 2021, p 93); solidarity requires actively caring for their quality of life (more on these two notions below). Metz points to the family as an exemplar that (often) embodies both ideals. Throughout the book, Metz uses the term “friendliness” to describe this sense of sharing and caring for others’ quality of life, infusing the word with a new significance.

To Metz, something has moral status proportional to its capacity to engage in this “friendliness” with humans. In various philosophical perspectives, the concept of moral status is approached as a simple either-or proposition – entities are either granted moral consideration or excluded from it altogether (however see, e.g., Kagan, 2019). Often, these determinations are rooted in characteristically individualistic attributes like autonomy or rationality (but see, e.g., Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, for feminist perspectives on relational autonomy). Metz takes a different approach, proposing that entities lie along a continuum of moral worth, with their relative worth determined by the extent to which they are capable of being either subjects or objects of communal relationships.

To be a *subject* of a communal relationship, one must have two capacities: the ability to identify with others and to exhibit solidarity toward them. Identifying with others is, roughly, taking oneself and the relevant others to constitute a ‘we’ relationship, within which joint activities will characteristically be pursued and parties moved to cooperatively advance each other’s ends (Metz, 2021, p. 96; for a related notion in psychology, see Clark et al. 2020). Exhibiting solidarity is, roughly, empathizing with and striving to truly understand the other, so as to be able to meet their needs, help them become the best version of themselves, and improve their overall condition for its own sake (see below for a similar construct in psychology). For something to be the *object* of a communal relationship, by contrast, it needs only to be the case that “characteristic human beings” could commune or be friendly with it: that is, “could think of it as part of a ‘we’, advance its goals, benefit it, and act for its sake out of sympathy” (Metz, 2021, p. 107).

Metz assigns “full” moral status to those entities that are capable of being both subjects and objects of a communal relationship in this sense, namely, “characteristic” adult human beings. To those capable only of being *objects* of such a relationship -- including, as he sees it, many non-human animals -- he assigns a “partial” moral status, where this status is itself a matter of degree: that is, the easier it is for a characteristic adult human to commune with it, the more moral worth an entity has (and vice versa). Finally, to those capable of being neither subjects nor objects of communal relationships, Metz assigns no moral status: rocks, for example, do not matter morally in their own right (and perhaps more controversially, in Metz’s view, neither do plants; see pp. 165-167).

To drum up intuitive support for these distinctions, Metz relies on a thought experiment. For most people, he says, given a forced choice to run over a mouse or a human being, one would choose to hit the mouse. Given a similar choice between a mouse and a blade of grass, most would choose to run over the grass (and so forth). Metz cashes out this intuition by positing a *scaled* theory of moral value (see pp. 149). Again, this means that different types of beings have different degrees of moral standing; it isn’t simply “all or nothing.”

Before proceeding, let us clarify something: Metz grounds an entity's moral status in its *capacity* (rather than potential) for friendliness. This prioritization stems (in part) from Metz’s own intuition that while the morning after pill is permissible—despite frustrating the *potential* of a fertilized egg to become something capable friendliness—infanticide is morally wrong (Metz, 2021, p 155). This “modal” or capacity-focused theory of moral worth entails that, while a sleeping person retains their capacities and thus their moral status, a fetus’s moral status is much more tenuous, with implications for current debates about abortion.

### **Some implications of Metz’s view**

Although Metz acknowledges that at least some characteristic human persons, “particularly pregnant women,” can enjoy a sense of togetherness -- a sense of ‘we’ -- with an early-stage fetus, or perhaps even an embryo, he argues in a footnote that this is “not sufficient for a moral status or at least for a moral status robust enough to rule out abortion” (p. 183). Mid- to late-stage fetuses, in his view, “acquire a partial moral status,” while newborn babies -- being typically even easier for most humans to commune with -- have a higher moral status, but still only “partial” rather than “full” (i.e., due to their purported inability to “identify with” or exhibit solidarity toward others).

Metz’s conclusion that a newborn baby has only “partial” moral status -- albeit enough to render infanticide, or “after-birth abortion” (Giubilini & Minerva, 2013), impermissible -- will strike some readers as the basis for a *modus tollens*: basically, if this is what Metz’s theory implies, so much the worse for Metz’s theory. A disability

rights advocate, too, might take issue with Metz's emphasis on a "capacity for friendliness" as the ultimate grounding of moral worth. Recall that, on Metz's account, moral status scales with something akin to sociability, or the propensity to associate with others, care about them, and actively take part in their lives. According to Metz, then, while "most people" have a "full" moral status, the "extremely autistic" individual who cannot engage in "other-regarding propositional attitudes such as 'witness' or sympathy" may have a lesser moral status. So too may some "mentally incapacitated" individuals lack full moral status, according to Metz – along with psychopaths (p. 164).

### **Methods and intuitions: the need for empirical research**

As in the case of infanticide versus contraception, Metz shapes his theory based on what he believes are not just his own, possibly idiosyncratic intuitions, but rather "widely spread intuitions" (p. 8). Indeed, insofar as reasonably common moral intuitions are (among) the data a given philosophical theory should aim to accommodate or explain (see, e.g., Kagan, 2001), Metz argues that including intuitions more often found in African traditions is a necessary step towards a more complete picture of morality.

But how does one seek out a comprehensive set of (relevant) intuitions? Metz suggests that one reason why the relational approach has been given less airtime than more individualistic frameworks may be that "seeking out the best moral theory has usually been done by a philosopher sitting alone in his armchair" (Metz, 2021, p. 203). Skeptical that any one philosopher has access to the requisite diversity of intuition, Metz recommends an emphasis on dialogue—particularly with those most affected by the given issue.

That is sound advice as far it goes. However, one might also look to psychological science, where many of the same intuitions Metz appeals to in developing his own theory have been identified (and more or less systematically mapped out, including in majority Western populations), with their social and cognitive underpinnings carefully theorized. As we will argue, classic and recent findings in empirical psychology do provide support for Metz's claim that his preferred theory "[accounts] for a wide array of uncontroversial moral judgements that Westerners themselves (amongst others) hold" (p. 2). However, this literature also underscores common intuitions which Metz's relational theory has yet to address and which it might benefit from engaging with directly.

### **Relational moral psychology**

Metz's relational moral philosophy can be situated in the emerging landscape of relational moral psychology, which is itself the offspring of experimental moral psychology and the long-established field of relationship science (see Earp, 2021, for

an overview). In the 1970s, Margaret S. Clark and her colleagues, including the late Judson Mills, began work on what would later be known as the “Theory of Communal (and Exchange) Relationships” (see Clark & Mills, 2012). Like Metz, Clark drew inspiration from common intuitions, emotions, and behaviors, such as the inclination to remove price tags on a gift purchased for a friend, or feelings of frustration with a service provider who attempts to elicit sympathy for a botched job by bringing up their marital difficulties.

In Clark's view, some relationships — which, strikingly, she terms “communal” — are governed by a norm of care: that is, they adhere to a rule according to which benefits are appropriately given (or received) in response to need, rather than in anticipation of receiving similar benefits in the future – or, alternatively, as a way of “paying someone back” for a benefit received in the past (see Clark & Mills, 1979; 2012). In other words, benefits are given non-contingently in support of the other’s welfare, where the magnitude of the benefit (or the cost to oneself, in terms of time, energy, or money) varies as a function of communal strength (that is, “a person’s degree of motivation to respond to a communal partner’s need,” Mills, Clark et al., 2004, p. 214).

Roughly, what Metz terms “solidarity,” Clark calls “care”— being moved to perform actions expected to “enhance others’ well-being, liveliness, or virtue; and do so for their sake” (Metz, 2021, p. 97). In either case, what is required is a certain degree of “social closeness,” according to which relationship partners (aim to) “deeply understand each other,” “accept and validate each other’s natures,” and “strive to care for and promote each other’s overall well-being” (Earp et al., 2021, p. 9; based on Reis & Clark, 2013).

### **Similarities and differences**

More broadly, Clark’s descriptive theory of communal relationships coheres with Metz’s relational moral theory in some areas and departs from it in others. For example, both see care obligations as proportional to social closeness (“communal strength” for Clark; “communal intensity” for Metz), suggesting that those with whom we have the strongest communal bonds are most deserving of our time and consideration. But Clark’s work also suggests that some communal relationships call for asymmetric degrees of care, even amongst parties equally able to commune with one another. For instance, in the case of the parent-child relationship, one might fault a parent for failing to pack a sandwich for their pre-school child, but would not reprimand the child for failing to perform the same task for their parent because the child has less ability and fewer resources than the adult to do so (see Clark & Mills, 2012 for discussion).

But on the flip side of the “communal” relationships coin, we find “exchange” relationships: relationships in which a benefit is normatively given with the expectation that a comparable benefit will be received in return. These are not just “weak communal” relationships, but rather, relationships that operate by their own distinctive logic, leading to distinctive “intuitions” about appropriate or moral behavior.

For example, according to classic experimental findings (Clark and Mills, 1979) “the receipt of a benefit after the person has been benefited leads to greater attraction when an *exchange* relationship is preferred [but] decreases attraction when a communal relationship is desired” (p. 12, emphasis added). In communal relationships, interaction partners normatively track one another’s needs (and also take note of the extent to which the other is concerned with meeting their own needs), but may *not* keep track of specific benefits given or received (Clark et al., 1986). If an exchange relationship is desired, by contrast, the logic flips: partners track benefits rather than needs, and pay attention to who has contributed precisely what to joint tasks, especially if there is to be a reward for completing it (e.g., Clark, Mills & Corcoran, 1989).

Metz’s prescription of friendliness towards exchange partners as well as to close others may seem desirable, but Clark’s theory and findings suggest that certain expressions of communal care in the wrong context (for example, when one desires an exchange relationship) may often be unwelcome, may sometimes be regarded as wrong or unseemly, and may be ignored or may cause drops in liking (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Lemay, 2023). For example, one might expect a teammate to take an interest in one’s personal life, but most people wouldn’t want their plumber to offer unsolicited romantic advice, or to surprise them with expensive gifts.

If we take intuition to be the building block of Metz’s theory, this empirical work documents characteristic moral intuitions regarding appropriate (and inappropriate) behavior in the context of exchange-based relationships that currently are undertheorized in Metz’s account. In short, while friendliness (in the form of non-contingent care) is what is called for in certain relationships, a quite different form of cooperation is called for in exchange relationships: such things as explicitly keeping track of who has contributed what, or how much, to joint tasks, or who is indebted to whom, and following through on corresponding obligations.

### **Implications for applied ethics**

Now that we’ve outlined the key theoretical components of Metz’s work and teased out some normative implications, we will turn to the content which occupies the second half of the book: applications of his relational moral theory. Metz lays out not only how we should engage with one another in the abstract (e.g., in terms of a conceptual analysis of identity and solidarity), but how we should relate to non-human

animals, fetuses and embryos (covered above), and the environment, as well as issues in politics.

On the subject of animal ethics, Metz suggests that an animal's moral status is derived from its friendliness vis-à-vis humans (p. 139). The friendliness of dolphins amongst themselves or bees in their communal hives count for little on this view. Metz suggests that animals matter morally, but they do so relative to their capacity for fruitful, friendly engagement with *us*. Given this, animals have a “partial moral status” and matter for their own sake—just not as much as humans do.

This may seem to align with common intuitions: many cultures certainly treat cows, chickens, or pigs as though they have a lesser moral status than humans. But consider the case of the octopus, or a highly intelligent, advanced form of alien life—entities that might exhibit self-awareness, have the capacity for thought and pain, and care for and commune with one another—and yet who would be denied full moral status (or “dignity” in Metz's lingo) on the grounds that they can't fully commune with what Metz regards as “normal” or “characteristic” humans (e.g., non-cognitively disabled adults). While views on the moral worth of animals—or indeed aliens—differ, it seems a shame to foreclose on the moral status of all creatures or beings who fall short in this one respect.

And what about applying Metz's view to artificial intelligence (AI)? As we lurch toward a future in which AI systems intellectually match — or outdo — humans on various dimensions (Suleyman, 2023), we may find ourselves reaching for a moral theory that grounds human distinctiveness or dignity in something other than our rationality or intelligence. Perhaps Metz has given us the answer. But as the release of ChatGPT and its aftermath have shown, human-AI relationships will not long be confined to “cognitive” competition (Porsdam Mann et al., 2023).

Consider personified chatbots like Replika (Pentina et al., 2023), or the emerging phenomenon of “AI girlfriends” (Titcomb, 2023). On one interpretation, AIs have already become the object of friendliness (at least for some), even if their capacity to serve as its subject remains an open question. AI agents can be “communed with” by millions simultaneously and actively participate in more human lives than any human ever could. But the psychologist Anat Perry argues (Perry, 2023) that it's the finitude of human attention that infuses empathy—a central component of Metz's solidarity—with value. Perry proposes that since human empathy is a finite resource, the act of choosing with whom to empathize and to what extent becomes a fundamental aspect of expressing empathy.

If Perry's assertion holds true, the act of devoting this kind of limited, relational resource to others may undergird the value of the qualities Metz emphasizes, such solidarity and identity. Our human empathy with its inherent boundedness—not the boundless capabilities of AI—might continue to serve as our unique moral marker,

potentially outlining the limits of friendliness between humans and the limitless machines we create.

## **Future ethics**

We will conclude with another “futuristic” topic that may not be so futuristic: namely, the use of drugs or other technologies for purposes of human (moral) enhancement (Douglas, 2008). Throughout Part II of his book, Metz seeks ways to increase and prioritize friendliness. He focuses on interventions at the institutional and environmental levels, treating individuals’ “capacity for friendliness” as a fixed parameter.

But why not enhance friendliness itself? Metz questions the validity of some enhancements, arguing that technological enhancement would be morally impermissible to the extent that it would “put distance between people” and make it harder to share a communal way of life. This concern holds water—some forms of enhancement may well threaten to place individuals on siloed planes of capacity and experience. When considering genetic enhancements, for instance, many peoples’ minds may flicker to *Gattaca* and other narratives in which technology has stratified humanity beyond recognition.

But other potential enhancements, such as the use of MDMA or psychedelics in a safe, supervised setting, might produce the opposite effect, allowing people to engage more deeply in one another's lives (for discussions, see Earp, 2018; Earp & Savulescu, 2020; Kähkönen, 2023; Rakić, 2023). In other words, some biomedical interventions may offer the chance to enhance friendliness itself. On the view that “friendliness is rightness,” there may be thus a moral argument for increasing access to such drug-facilitated transformations (but see, e.g., Pace and Devenot, 2021, for a cautionary note; see also Arrell, 2020, for theoretical concerns).

## **Conclusion**

Well written, tightly argued, provocative, and original, Metz’s book is a must-read contribution. In addition to skillfully and judiciously bringing African moral philosophy into conversation with Western analytic philosophy, Metz has done the field a service by putting social and interpersonal relationships at the heart of his theory -- and encouraging others to do the same. Going forward, especially given his explicit desire to accommodate or explain common moral intuitions, it might be that more direct engagement with the empirical literatures in relationship science and experimental moral psychology would further strengthen his theory.

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