

Sentience, communal relations and moral status

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Forthcoming in *Environmental Ethics*

Abstract

Thaddeus Metz has developed and defended a “modal-relational” account of moral status based on his interpretation of salient Sub-Saharan African values. Roughly, on this account, a being has moral status to the degree that it can enter into friendly or communal relationships with characteristic human beings. In this paper, it is argued that this theory’s true significance for environmental ethics has thus far not been recognized. Metz’s own view is that the theory entails that only sentient beings have moral status. It is argued here that this is a mistake, and that, once this error is corrected, the view can be used to synthesize major, competing accounts of moral status into a novel, unified account of the moral status of human beings, sentient animals, non-sentient organisms, and inanimate members of the “web of life”. The result is a new framework for thinking about the moral status of various natural entities, which ought to be of great interest to environmental ethicists.

1) Introduction

Thaddeus Metz (2012, 2022) has developed and defended a novel “modal-relational” account of moral status based on his understanding of the ethical significance of friendly or communal relationships in Sub-Saharan African thought and philosophy. The basic idea behind the view is that a being has moral status to the degree that it can enter into friendly or communal relationships with characteristic human beings. On the face of it, this theory has some attractive features. For instance, Metz argues that the theory does a better job than influential alternatives of capturing strong

intuitions about the relative moral status of human beings and animals. Whereas Kantianism implausibly implies that animals lack moral status and welfarism implausibly implies that human beings and sentient animals have equal moral status, Metz claims that his theory captures the strong intuition that human beings have full moral status and sentient animals have partial moral status.

The modal-relational theory, then, is noteworthy for being a novel and seemingly promising account of moral status that is based on salient aspects of Sub-Saharan African thought. However, I think that the view's potential significance for environmental ethics has thus far not been realized. Metz's own view is that the modal-relational view entails that only sentient beings have moral status. I think that this is a significant error that obscures the highly significant contribution that the theory can make to environmental ethics.

My primary goal here is, first, to clear away this error and then, on that basis, to develop the theory in a novel way that demonstrates its full significance for environmental ethics. The result, I argue, is a novel, integrated account of the moral status of human beings, sentient animals, non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of "the web of life". I argue that this account accommodates and unifies important, yet seemingly disparate, intuitions and views about the moral status of each of these entities, while avoiding major drawbacks of existing positions. Although I do not attempt to give an all-things-considered judgement on the account, I do aim to show that it has significant virtues that make it deserving of substantial further attention. The major takeaway from the paper, then, is a novel framework for understanding the moral status of an array of natural entities, which ought to be of considerable interest to environmental ethicists.

In the next section, I explain the key aspects of Metz's theory and how he applies it to the relative moral status of humans and sentient animals. In section 3, I argue that Metz's reasons for thinking that the theory entails that only sentient beings have moral status fail. In section 4, I draw on African environmental ethics, biocentrism and ecocentrism to argue that, by the standards of the modal-relational theory, non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life possess moral

status. Finally, in section 5, I explain how the resulting view synthesizes major existing approaches to moral status into a novel account of the moral status of human beings, sentient animals, non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life. The resulting account provides an intuitively graded view of moral status that integrates insights of major existing approaches, while avoiding some of their most significant problems.

2) The modal-relational theory

I begin in this section by giving an account of Metz's modal-relational theory of moral status. In the first subsection, I unpack his account of the relevant sorts of communal or friendly relationships. In the next subsection, I explain how he uses these sorts of relationships to develop a theory of moral status.

2.1) Communal or friendly relationships

Metz's aim is to develop a theory of moral status based on what he takes to be a distinctively or saliently Sub-Saharan African emphasis on the ethical significance of a certain kind of communal or friendly relationship.¹ An important part of Metz's view is his account of this sort of relationship. Metz claims that the relationship, as standardly described in the Sub-Saharan African literature on ethics, can be analyzed in terms of a pair of attitudes, which he terms "identity" and "solidarity" (Metz 2022: Sect. 6.2). Roughly, identifying with someone involves taking them to be co-members

¹ Metz cites various examples of this emphasis, including Desmond Tutu's claim that "Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*" (Tutu 1999: 35), and Murove's claim that "At the heart of these [Shona and Zulu] proverbs lies a motif of an ethical reminder that one should always live and behave in a way that maximises harmonious existence at present as well as in the future" (Murove 2007: 181).

with oneself in some sort of corporate entity, whereas exhibiting solidarity with someone involves being concerned for their good or flourishing.

In a bit more detail, identifying with someone involves regarding oneself as forming a “we” with them, feeling a sense of belonging with them, coordinating behavior to allow the other to achieve their goals and doing so for the sake of the other or one’s relationship with them (Metz 2022: Sect. 6.2.2). The members of a club or a sports team are good examples of people who often identify with each other in the relevant way. Such people ordinarily regard themselves as forming a “we”, feel a sense of belonging with each other and coordinate their behavior to allow each other to achieve certain goals.

Exhibiting solidarity with someone, in turn, involves attending closely to their condition, being emotionally invested in their flourishing, acting “to improve another's condition” and doing so out of a concern for their good and not simply for self-regarding reasons (Metz 2022: Sect. 6.2.3). Potential examples of this sort of solidarity include the attitude that parents often take toward their children and that philanthropic organizations sometimes take toward the objects of their philanthropy. Both relations, at least ideally, involve attending closely to the other person’s condition, being emotionally invested in their flourishing, acting to improve their condition and doing so out of a concern for their good.

Importantly, neither solidarity nor identity are individually sufficient for the kind of communal or friendly relationship that Metz is trying to capture (Metz 2022: Sect. 6.2.5). For instance, the members of a corporation could regard themselves as a “we” and coordinate their behavior without being concerned with each other’s good (Metz 2022: 97). In this case, even though the relationships between members of the corporation involve identity, the lack of solidarity appears to mean that they are not communal or friendly relationships. On the other hand, relationships that involve solidarity without identity appear to be paternal rather than communal or friendly (Metz 2022: 97). For example, acts of philanthropy that involve no genuine identity between the subject and object of

the act are not aptly regarded as communal or friendly. Instead, the relevant sort of communal or friendly relationship requires a combination of some degree of both identity, a sense of belonging and co-membership in a “we”, and solidarity, a genuine concern for the good of the other. The resulting friendly or communal relationship is exemplified by the sort of relationships that family members ideally have with each other (Metz 2022: 98–99). In the ideal case, family members both view each other as part of a “we” and are genuinely invested in each other’s good for its own sake.

The point that communal relationships involve “some degree” of solidarity and identity is important, as it indicates that solidarity and identity, and the kind of communal relationship that they constitute, are not all or nothing but rather come in degrees. It is possible, for instance, to identify more or less fully with someone by having a greater or lesser sense of belonging with them. As a consequence, it is possible to enter more or less fully into the relevant communal or friendly relationship. I will say more about this aspect of the view below, because it plays an important role in Metz’s theory of moral status.

I have thus far been referring to the relationship in question as a “friendly” or “communal” relationship. It is important to note, though, that Metz’s goal is not to analyze these English-language terms but rather to capture a kind of relationship that is salient in the literature on ethical thought and practice in Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, Metz (2022: 99–101) does not appear to think that any English-language term perfectly picks out this relationship. Talk of “loving” or “friendly” relations is apt to mislead an English speaker into assuming that the relationship must be intimate or ongoing. Talk of “harmonious” relationships, in turn, might misleadingly imply that these relationships are incompatible with coercion or force, and talk of “communal” relations might misleadingly imply that the collective takes precedence over the individual. Although Metz ultimately settles on “friendliness” as the best term for communicating to Western readers the relationship that is at stake, he also says that “[h]armony’, ‘communal relationship’ and ‘friendliness’ are ultimately equivalent” for his purposes (Metz 2022: 100). I will return to this issue in

section 3.2, but for now I will use both “friendly” and “communal” to refer to the relevant sort of relationship.

To sum up, then, Metz’s account of moral status is given in terms of a kind of relationship that he takes to occupy an important place in Sub-Saharan African ethical thought and practice. On Metz’s account, standing in this relationship with someone involves both identifying with them by taking oneself to form a “we” with them, and exhibiting solidarity for them by showing concern for their good. Although it is not clear that this sort of relationship maps naturally onto any English-language term, it can be usefully glossed as a loving, friendly, communal or harmonious relationship, as long as one bears in mind the respects in which these glosses might be misleading.

2.2) The modal-relational view and moral status

Metz (2022: 149) understands the concept of something having moral status as “the idea of us having direct duties towards something for its own sake, i.e., it being owed a duty in its own right” and “the idea of something that can be wronged by us”. People, for instance, have moral status because we owe them duties in their own right, and they can be wronged by our actions. On the other hand, things like tables or chairs do not have moral status, because we do not owe them any duties in themselves and we cannot wrong them. Instead, any duties that I have regarding my use of tables and chairs are indirect duties to their owner. If someone or something is wronged when I damage a table, it is the owner of the table and not the table itself. The core idea, then, is that a bearer of moral status is morally considerable in itself or for its own sake.

Although Metz aims to give an account of moral status in terms of the sort of relationship discussed in the previous section, he does not claim that a being’s moral status is determined by the degree to which it actually enters into such relationships. The problem with such a view is that it would seemingly entail that someone who fails to stand in communal relations for purely accidental or contingent reasons lacks moral status. Robinson Crusoe, for instance, would seemingly lack moral

status simply in virtue of being stranded on a desert island, which looks like a bad result (Metz 2012: 392).

Instead, Metz proposes a *modal* relational account on which a being has moral status to the degree that it is in principle *capable*, in virtue of its nature, of entering into friendly relations with characteristic human beings. So, a being's moral status is not determined by the relations in which it actually stands, but rather by its capacity, in principle and in virtue of its nature, to stand in certain relations (2022: 152, 155). The phrases "in principle" and "in virtue of its nature" are important here. Even though Robinson Crusoe cannot, for contingent and accidental reasons, currently enter into communal relationships with other human beings, in virtue of his nature he is capable in principle of entering into such relationships. So, the idea is that a being has moral status to the degree that, in virtue of its nature and abstracting from contingent barriers like being isolated or hidden, it can in principle enter into communal or friendly relations with characteristic human beings.

This theory produces a graded account of moral status, as beings have moral status *to the degree* that they are capable of entering into friendly relationships with characteristic human beings (2022: Sect. 8.3.1). On Metz's account, though, only large differences in this capacity matter to a being's moral status. So, two beings will differ in moral status if, and only if, there is a substantial difference in their capacity for friendly relations with people.

Metz (2022: Sect. 8.4) argues that this modal-relational account of moral status delivers a particularly attractive and intuitive account of the moral statuses of human beings and animals. Mature human beings without severe mental disabilities have the highest moral status, because, in virtue of their nature, they are capable of being both the subject and object of friendly relations with characteristic human beings. Metz also grants that some higher animals may be capable of being, to a lesser degree, both subjects and objects in this sort of relation. These animals have the next highest degree of moral status after "normal" mature humans.

Other sentient animals, according to Metz, cannot be the subjects of friendly relations with characteristic humans, but they can be the objects of such relations. Although these animals lack the capacities to identify with and exhibit solidarity with humans, characteristic human beings can, and often do, identify with and exhibit solidarity with sentient animals. So, these animals have moral status, because they are capable of entering into friendly relations with characteristic human beings as the objects of such relationships. However, because they can only enter into these relations to a lesser degree than beings that can be both the subject and the object of the relations, they have lower moral status than the latter beings.

Even among animals that can only be the objects of friendly relations, we can grade their moral status by the degree to which they can be the objects of such relations. Characteristic human beings find it much easier to identify with, and exhibit solidarity with, dogs than with worms. This large difference in the degree to which these animals can be the objects of friendly relations with characteristic human beings means that there is also a difference in moral status between these beings.

Metz also argues that his theory can accommodate the widespread intuition that human beings, such as those with severe mental disabilities, who have the same mental capacities as certain animals still have higher moral status. The idea is that characteristic human beings find it much easier to identify with, and exhibit solidarity with, human beings with severe mental disabilities than with animals with equal mental capacities. So, the human beings in these cases have higher moral status than the animals due to their significantly greater capacity to be the objects of friendly relations with characteristic human beings.

The upshot, Metz claims, is that his theory delivers a particularly plausible account of moral status that captures our intuitions better than standard Western theories. In particular, he thinks that his theory delivers the intuitive results that characteristic human beings have full moral status, that sentient animals have partial moral status, that the degree of moral status varies among animals,

and that humans who have the same capacities as animals still have higher moral status than those animals. Moreover, the theory not only delivers the intuitively right results, but also provides a unified, coherent explanation for these results. Metz's theory implies that each of the above intuitions about moral status is explained by the fact that a being's moral status is determined by the degree to which it can enter into communal or friendly relationships with characteristic human beings. Although there is much to say on these topics, my focus is going to be on another aspect of Metz's theory.²

3) The sentience condition

Metz claims that the modal-relational theory entails that moral status is restricted to sentient beings. This is a highly significant implication of the theory, as it entails that non-sentient animals, plants, ecosystems, species and embryos, among other entities, lack moral status. Given the significance of this claim, Metz's defense of it is surprisingly thin. In text his most direct comment on the issue is, "there are some animals that, by the relational approach, lack a moral status altogether since, for all we can tell, they utterly lack both intentionality and a (welfarist) good, presumably mosquitos and bacteria" (2022: 160).

A being's welfarist good consists in its well-being or quality of life, which, on standard interpretations, is determined by its experiences of pain and pleasure or by the satisfaction of its preferences or interests. So, a being's welfarist good could be increased by reducing its suffering, increasing its pleasure or advancing its interests. "Intentionality", in turn, refers to the capacity of certain mental states to represent aspects of external reality. For instance, someone's belief that the Earth is round represents the state of affairs of the Earth's being round, and someone's desire for chocolate represents their (potentially purely imagined) act of eating chocolate.

² See Molefe (2017) and Moellendorf (2023) for critical discussion of some of these aspects of Metz's view.

The capacity for intentionality and for having a welfarist good are both clearly relevant to the capacity to enter into friendly or communal relationships. Because identity and solidarity are intentional attitudes that are *about* others and our relationships with them, the capacity for intentionality appears to be a necessary condition for being the subject of these relationships. Similarly, being the *full* object of such relationships plausibly requires having a well-being or quality of life. In the present context, however, which concerns the capacity to enter into these relationships *at all*, I take it that the key criterion is the possession of a welfarist good. Intentionality is a relatively high-level mental capacity that is not likely possessed in any significant way by “lower animals”, such as worms and mollusks, that Metz says do have some moral status. Moreover, I think it clear that ordinary human beings have the capacity to identify and exhibit solidarity to some extent with any being that possesses a welfarist good, irrespective of its capacities for intentionality. So, intentionality cannot be a necessary condition for having moral status.

The key criterion that Metz wields against the inclusion of non-sentient beings, then, is that possession of a welfarist good is necessary for the possession of moral status. Given Metz’s theory, this must mean that having a welfarist good is necessary for having the capacity to be the object of communal or friendly relations with characteristic human beings. In the rest of this section, I consider and reject two potential lines of argument in support of this claim. In subsection 3.1, I argue against the idea, inspired by Metz’s comments on the topic, that this claim is necessary to avoid the absurd result that things like cancers or knives can be the objects of friendly or communal relationships. In subsection 3.2, I argue against the idea, which may be in the background of Metz’s discussion, that it is in the nature of the relevant sort of relationship that its objects possess a welfarist good.

3.1) Is the sentience condition necessary to rule out absurd results?

In a footnote (2022: Ch. 8 Footnote 5), Metz briefly motivates the claim that having a welfarist good is a necessary condition for being the object of a friendly or communal relationship:

I suggest that exhibiting solidarity with a being can involve acting for its perfectionist good, particularly as an other-regarding being, but if and only if it also has a welfarist good. Such a qualification most easily enables one to exclude, say, knives and cancers from being objects of moral status.

Metz, then, does not claim that solidarity for a being must consist in acting for that being's welfarist good but rather allows that it might involve acting for its perfectionist good. A being's perfectionist good is determined by the degree to which it is a good or flourishing member of its kind. For instance, the perfectionist good of a cheetah consists partly in its speed, and the perfectionist good of a knife consists partly in its sharpness. So, Metz allows that showing solidarity need not always involve concern for the welfare or well-being of a being but can also involve concern for its being a good member of its kind.

It seems that Metz must accept this point as he elsewhere claims that, "Acting in solidarity [for human beings] means not merely striving to make people better off or to advance their self-interest, but also to make others better people or to advance their self-realization" (2022: 96). This seems right as an account of communal or friendly relationships. Concern for the good of others in such relationships standardly involves concern for their flourishing as people and not simply for their welfarist good.

Nonetheless, Metz claims that solidarity can be exhibited in this way only toward beings that also have a welfarist good. He supports this claim on the grounds that it "most easily enables one to exclude, say, knives and cancers from being objects of moral status". The idea is apparently that, if one could exhibit solidarity toward beings that only possess a perfectionist good, one could exhibit solidarity toward knives and cancers. However, the modal-relational account would then entail that cancers and knives have moral status, which is surely the wrong result. So, the modal-relational account must be combined with the requirement that solidarity can only be exhibited for beings with a welfarist good.

As stated, this motivation for the requirement appears to amount to an ad hoc stipulation designed to ensure that the theory gives the right result about moral status by excluding knives and cancers. It does not show us that the requirement follows in any principled way from the theory itself. It does not, for instance, show that a proper understanding of solidarity demonstrates that solidarity can only be exhibited toward beings with a welfarist good.

It is possible, though, to interpret Metz's line of reasoning in this more plausible way. His concern is that, if having a perfectionist good is sufficient for being an object of solidarity, then knives and cancers would wrongly come out as having moral status. This concern is clearly based on the idea that, if having a perfectionist good were sufficient to be an object of solidarity, then knives and cancers could be the object of friendly relations with characteristic human beings. However, it seems highly plausible that knives and cancers are, by their natures, not the sorts of things that can be the objects of communal or friendly relations. If this is right, then it seems that getting the account of friendly relations right requires denying that having a perfectionist good could be sufficient for being an object of human solidarity. This line of reasoning recasts Metz's concern as a principled argument that, to get the account of communal relations right on their own terms, we need the requirement that any object of solidarity have a welfarist good.

Nonetheless, I am going to argue that this argument fails. Firstly, even if it is possible for characteristic human beings to exhibit solidarity with *some* entities that have a perfectionist but not a welfarist good, it does not follow that characteristic human beings can exhibit solidarity with *all* entities with a perfectionist good. This point is directly relevant to the case of cancer. Even if cancers have a perfectionist good and it is possible, in principle, for things that have a perfectionist good to be objects of the solidarity relation, I doubt that cancers can be an object of solidarity for characteristic human beings. Standing in this sort of relationship with cancers appears to be psychologically impossible for characteristic human beings.

On the other hand, it does seem possible for characteristic human beings to be concerned with the perfectionist good of knives, or other artefacts, for their own sake. Plausibly, a knife connoisseur or collector can be invested in the perfectionist good of knives for their own sake, can attend carefully to that good, and can work to promote and protect it. Without the requirement that any object of solidarity must have a welfarist good, then, it seems that knives can be objects of solidarity as defined by Metz. Moreover, there is no obvious reason to regard knife connoisseurs as abnormal or non-characteristic people. So, unless solidarity is restricted to beings with a welfarist good, Metz's account does seem to allow that knives can be the object of solidarity for characteristic people.

As I pointed out earlier, however, Metz is explicit that neither identity nor solidarity on their own suffice for friendly relationships. Instead, a friendly relationship exists only where *both* identity *and* solidarity exist. It does not seem, though, that a knife could be an object of the identity relationship for a characteristic human being. Although collectors of knives may value knives for their own sake, they surely do not regard themselves as forming a "we" with their knives. So, on Metz's own account, knives, and other artefacts, are excluded as the objects of friendly or communal relationships without adding the requirement that any object of such a relationship must have a welfarist good.

Moreover, this account seems to provide a perfectly good, principled explanation for why it sounds entirely wrong to say that knife collectors stand in a communal or friendly relationship with their knives. No matter how much a knife collector values their knives, such valuing is only sufficient for a friendly relationship in conjunction with a relationship of identity. Because identifying with knives is psychologically impossible for characteristic human beings, knife collectors do not stand in friendly or communal relationships with their knives irrespective of how much they value them.

So, ruling out the absurd possibility that things like cancers or knives can be objects of friendly or communal relations does not require accepting that any object of solidarity must have a welfarist good. Instead, Metz's account of these relationships independently excludes such beings, as they are

not capable of being objects of the identity relation, and in the case of cancers the solidarity relation, with characteristic human beings.

3.2) The sentience condition and the nature of friendly or communal relationships

Plausibly, though, another idea might be working in the background of Metz's discussion.³ At one point Metz (2022: 154) writes, "Both a tree and a human embryo lack the capacity for friendliness; they cannot by their nature share a life with others or care for others' quality of life, and nor can others do so with them." Implicit here seems to be the idea that friendliness, by its nature, involves care for another's quality of life and, so, anything that lacks a quality of life cannot be the object of a friendly relation. This idea might also explain why Metz spends little time explicitly arguing that the modal-relational theory entails that only sentient beings have moral status. Metz may assume that, given the nature of friendly relationships, beings that lack a welfarist good obviously cannot be the objects of these relationships. Thinking otherwise would involve a kind of category mistake or conceptual confusion.⁴

I think, however, that this line of thought goes wrong by forgetting that "friendliness" in this context is simply a useful but imperfect gloss of the relationship that is Metz's real target. Recall from section 2.1 that Metz's goal in defining a relationship involving solidarity and identity is not to analyze what it is to be a friendly relationship. Instead, his goal is to capture a kind of relationship present in the Sub-Saharan African literature on ethics that can, with some caveats, be informatively glossed by a variety of English terms including "loving", "communal", "harmonious" and "friendly".

³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to discuss this point.

⁴ Admittedly, this interpretation makes it a bit puzzling that, when—in the footnote discussed in the previous section—Metz explicitly motivates the claim that we can show solidarity only for beings with a welfarist good, he does not mention the idea that this result follows straightforwardly from the nature or concept of friendliness. Nonetheless, I think the idea is suggested by some of what Metz does say and is sufficiently plausible in its own right to merit discussion.

Talk of standing in harmonious, communal or loving relationships with non-sentient nature, though, seems to me neither particularly unusual nor, in any clear way, confused.⁵ So, of the potential English descriptions of the target relationship, only “friendly” seems to strongly imply that any object of the relationship must have a quality of life. The key question then is whether “friendly” is in this regard a particularly apt term or a particularly misleading term.

The Sub-Saharan African literature on environmental ethics provides strong support for the latter conclusion, as authors in this literature often claim that human beings stand in the relevant relationship with the natural world as a whole. Behrens (2014) provides a helpful synopsis and synthesis of this tendency in African environmental ethics. As Behrens describes it, this approach begins with a sense of the deep interconnectedness and interdependence between human beings and the natural world and moves to the conclusion that humans are co-members in a community with natural entities.

As Behrens (2014: 66) puts it:

According to many African theorists...belief in the interdependence of natural entities underlies a requirement that people should respect and live in harmony with the community of nature. The robustly communitarian character of much African ethics informs this moral requirement to live in harmony. Individual members of the community of nature can be fulfilled only in and through their relationships with others. These relationships are often characterized in familial terms, emphasizing the need for mutual support, solidarity, care and nurturing.

The relationship in question here is clearly the relationship that Metz aims to capture in terms of identity and solidarity. It is a morally significant communal or harmonious relationship prevalent in

⁵ See the rest of this section and the next section for examples of environmental ethicists talking about people standing in communal relations with non-sentient nature.

the Sub-Saharan African literature on ethics that involves solidarity and care and is often understood in familial terms.

The tendency in Sub-Saharan environmental ethics that Behrens describes, then, involves taking natural entities to be the objects of this relationship just in virtue of the deep interconnectedness of human beings and nature. Moreover, at least in many cases, the natural entities here are explicitly intended to include non-sentient organisms and inanimate natural entities.⁶ Behrens's (2010: 66) own view, partly on the basis of his survey of the Sub-Saharan literature, is that it should include all members of the "web of life", which includes not only non-sentient organisms but also inanimate objects that play a role in the ecological systems that sustain organisms.

So, the Sub-Saharan African literature on environmental ethics involves widespread expression of the idea that non-sentient natural entities can be the objects of the relevant relationship. I see no reason to think that the participants in this literature, who are generally "cultural insiders", are in this respect conceptually confused or are making some other basic category error. Consequently, I think this literature provides compelling evidence that there is no conceptual confusion or category error in allowing that non-sentient natural entities, which lack a welfarist good, can be the objects of the relevant relation.

The upshot is that an account of the nature of this relationship should leave open the possibility that non-sentient entities can be objects of the relationship. Consequently, for Metz's account of the relationship in terms of identity and solidarity to work, the account must allow that it is possible to exhibit solidarity for a being with a perfectionist good, or some other non-welfarist good, even if that

⁶ Behrens's examples include the following clear versions of this idea. Tangwa (2004: 389) alludes to the "recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans." Sindima (1990: 137) talks about "the bondedness, the interconnectedness, of all living beings". Bujo (1998: 23) says that "human beings can live in harmony only *in* and *with* the whole of nature".

being entirely lacks a welfarist good. This result appears to fit better with a description of the relevant relationship as “harmonious” or “communal” rather than “friendly”. I take this result to provide some grounds, at least in the present context, to favor the former descriptions over the latter. So, I will generally refer to “communal relationships” in the rest of this paper.

4) Non-sentient natural entities and communal relationships

My conclusion at the end of the previous section was that the relevant sort of communal relation ought to be defined in a way that leaves open the possibility that non-sentient natural entities can be the objects of these relationships. Doing so does not lead to absurd results, such as that knives or cancers might be the objects of the relationship and is in line with widespread usage in the Sub-Saharan African literature on environmental ethics. Although this conclusion removes a potential barrier to the claim that characteristic human beings can stand in this relationship with non-sentient beings, it does not immediately follow that we should accept the claim. For instance, it might turn out to be psychologically impossible for characteristic human beings to stand in this sort of relationship, even if the relationship itself does not rule out the possibility.

I am now going to consider whether there is, all-things-considered, positive reason to think that characteristic human beings can stand in this relationship with non-sentient natural entities. There are two clear sorts of evidence that might support this claim. Firstly, evidence that characteristic human beings sometimes *do*, in fact, enter these sorts of relationships is compelling evidence that characteristic human beings *can* enter these relationships. For instance, credible reports of characteristic people entering these relationships would constitute evidence of this sort. Secondly, plausible accounts of how characteristic human beings might enter such relationships is evidence that they can do so. If we are presented with a plausible mechanism or process through which a characteristic human being might enter such a relationship, then we have some good evidence that it is possible for characteristic human beings to enter such relationships.

The immediate point to make is that the discussion of the Sub-Saharan African literature on environmental ethics in the previous section provides significant evidence of both kinds. Firstly, and most obviously, it provides a rich stock of seemingly characteristic human beings reporting that they *actually* stand in these kinds of relations with non-sentient natural entities. In the absence of any reason to doubt their reports, this is strong evidence that characteristic human beings *can* stand in these relations with non-sentient natural entities.

Secondly, this literature indicates a plausible mechanism via which people might enter into these sorts of relations, despite the fact that non-sentient natural entities lack a welfarist good. The thought is that a clear awareness of the very deep and thoroughgoing connections and interdependencies between human beings and natural entities generates within characteristic human beings a sense of identity and solidarity with those entities. It seems to me that this is a perfectly plausible account of how characteristic human beings might enter into communal relations with natural entities, irrespective of their sentience. Consequently, it provides further evidence that characteristic human beings *can* stand in such relations with non-sentient natural beings.

So, the discussion of the literature in the previous section not only shows that there is nothing conceptually confused about allowing that the objects of communal relationships might be non-sentient, but also provides significant evidence that characteristic human beings can stand in these relationships with non-sentient natural entities. In the next couple of subsections, I will provide two further sources of evidence for this conclusion from the extant literature on environmental ethics. In the next subsection (4.1), I discuss Paul Taylor and J. Baird Callicott's discussions of our evolutionary and ecological connections to non-sentient natural entities, and in the following section (4.2) I discuss Taylor's discussion of organisms as "teleological centres of life."

4.1) Evolutionary theory and ecology

Paul Taylor (2002: 75), in developing his biocentric approach to environmental ethics, explicitly endorses a view of “humans as members of the community of life” along with other organisms.

According to Taylor (Ibid.), this picture of our relation to other living things follows when:

we take the fact of our being an animal species to be a fundamental feature of our existence...We do not deny the differences between ourselves and other species, but we keep in the forefront of our consciousness the fact that in relation to our planet’s ecosystems we are but one species population among many.

So, in seeing ourselves fundamentally as one animal species among many, we are able to experience a deep sense of identity with other living things.

This sense of identity with other living things is enhanced by considering our evolutionary and ecological connections with them. Evolution presents us with a picture on which “[t]he laws of genetics, of natural selection, and of adaptation apply equally to all of us as biological creatures” (Ibid.). Ecology ties the well-being and flourishing of humans to “the ecological soundness and health of many plant and animal communities” (2002: 76). In both respects, we find that our natures, identities, well-being, and lives are deeply intertwined with those of all other living things. The result, for Taylor, is a conception of ourselves as co-members in the community of life along with all organisms, irrespective of whether they are sentient.

J. Baird Callicott (2003), in developing and defending an ecocentric environmental ethics built on Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic”, makes similar points. Callicott, though, holds that human beings stand in communal relations not only with other organisms but also with inanimate natural entities like “soils and waters”. Quoting Leopold, Callicott (2002: 107) says that evolutionary theory “provides a sense of ‘kinship with fellow-creatures’... ‘fellow-voyagers’ with us in the ‘odyssey of evolution’”. Ecology, in turn, provides “a sense of social integration of human and nonhuman nature. Human beings, plants, animals, soils and waters are ‘all interlocked in one humming community of cooperations and competitions, one biota’” (Ibid.). Callicott (2002: 108) also adds that Copernican astronomy gives us

a conception of the Earth as home and its inhabitants as a community of life within “an immense and utterly hostile universe”.

Callicott also argues that this social or communal picture of nature will trigger in any “psychologically normal” (2002: 110) human being evolved dispositions to respond to co-members of their social groups with benevolence and sympathy. So:

A land ethic...is not only an “ecological necessity”, but an “evolutionary possibility” because a moral response to the natural environment—Darwin’s social sympathies, sentiments, and instincts translated and codified into a body of principles and precepts—would be automatically triggered in human beings by ecology’s social representation of nature.

Therefore, the key to the emergence of a land ethic is simply universal ecological literacy.

(2002: 107)

The picture that emerges is not only one on which non-sentient natural beings can be the objects of communal relationships with people but also one that is in line with Metz’s account of these relations in terms of identity and solidarity. Regarding identity, the idea is clearly that a proper grasp of our place in the natural world would lead people to identify deeply with other members of the community of life. Regarding solidarity, the idea is that our understanding of our place in the natural world will automatically trigger reactions of sympathy and benevolence toward all other members of the web of life.

We have here further evidence that characteristic human beings can view both non-sentient organisms and inanimate parts of the web of life as objects of communal relationships. Firstly, it seems clear that Taylor views non-sentient organisms in this way, and Callicott views all members of the web of life in this way. So, we have here further reports of characteristic human beings actually taking these sorts of attitudes to non-sentient natural entities.

Secondly, we have another seemingly plausible account of how characteristic human beings might come to view non-sentient natural entities in this way. As with the position in African environmental ethics outlined above, a recognition of our deep interconnectedness with other natural entities will trigger our recognition of those entities as co-members in a community of life. In this case, though, both Taylor and Callicott argue that this recognition and reaction follows from a contemporary scientific account of our place in the natural world and, especially, from evolutionary theory and ecology. By my lights, this is again a plausible and conceivable way for characteristic human beings to enter into communal relationships with non-sentient natural beings.

4.2) Teleological centers of life

In the previous sub-section, I alluded to Paul Taylor's idea that humans are members of the Earth's community of life. In developing his biocentric view, Taylor also outlines another way people sometimes come to be invested in and identify with particular organisms. His account is worth quoting at some length:

Sometimes a scientist may come to take a special interest in a particular animal or plant, all the while remaining strictly objective in the gathering and recording of data. Nonscientists may likewise experience this development of interest when, as amateur naturalists, they make accurate observations over sustained periods of close acquaintance with an individual organism. As one becomes more and more familiar with the organism and its behavior, one becomes fully sensitive to the particular way it is living out its life cycle. One may become fascinated by it and even experience some involvement with its good and bad fortunes (that is, with the occurrence of environmental conditions favorable or unfavorable to the realization of its good). The organism comes to mean something to one as a unique, irreplaceable individual. The final culmination of this process is the achievement of a genuine understanding of its point of view and, with that understanding, an ability to "take"

that point of view. *Conceiving of it as a center of life, one is able to look at the world from its perspective.* (Taylor 2003: 78 emphasis in the original)

Taylor (ibid.) is, moreover, explicit that in these cases the organism in question need not be conscious. Instead, the key point is that “conscious or not, all are equally teleological centers of life in the sense that each is a unified system of goal-oriented activities directed toward their preservation and well-being”.

I take it that what Taylor describes here is clearly a process in which people come to take certain organisms to be objects of both identity and solidarity. People identify with the organism as a teleological center of life, coming to view the world from its perspective in terms of its teleological activities. People exhibit solidarity with the organism by becoming concerned with and invested in its flourishing. The process described, then, is one in which people come to take non-sentient organisms to be objects in just the sort of relationship that concerns Metz.

The result is again that we have both sorts of evidence that people are capable of standing in this relationship with non-sentient organisms. Firstly, Taylor provides testimony, which I have no reason to doubt, that characteristic human beings sometimes do enter these sorts of relationships.

Secondly, the account he gives of how people might enter into such relationships is, by my lights, entirely plausible. I can easily conceive of a characteristic human being, who spends an extended period of time studying a particular organism, coming to identify with, and exhibit solidarity with, the organism as a teleological center of life. So, we again have evidence that people can take non-sentient organisms to be objects of the relevant sort of relationship both in the form of a credible report that they sometimes, *in fact*, do so, and in the form of a seemingly plausible account of *how* they might do so.

5) A unified account of moral status

Thus far, I have argued that, contra Metz, the modal-relational theory entails that non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life possess moral status. In section 3, I argued that there is nothing in the concept or nature of the relevant sort of communal relationships that excludes non-sentient beings from being the objects of these relationships. In section 4, I argued that extant work in environmental ethics provides strong evidence that both non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life can be objects of the relevant kind of communal relationship with characteristic human beings. Given that the modal-relational theory extends moral status to any beings that can be the objects of such relationships, it follows that, on the theory, these non-sentient natural entities have moral status.

Where this result leaves the modal-relational theory depends partly on what one thinks about the claim that non-sentient natural entities have moral status. If one thinks this claim is independently implausible, then the result might undermine the plausibility of the modal-relational view. This consequence seems especially likely given that, as I explained in section 2.2, Metz motivates the theory largely by appealing to its ability to explain our pre-theoretic intuitions about moral status. Metz thinks that the theory provides a unified explanation of the seemingly widespread intuitions that characteristic human beings have full moral status, that sentient animals have varying degrees of lower moral status and that human beings who have the same mental capacities as certain animals still have higher moral status than those animals. If it turns out that the theory has a counterintuitive implication concerning the moral status of non-sentient natural entities, then this explanatory case for the theory would seem to be significantly undermined.

One option for someone who had this reaction would be to re-develop the theory specifically in terms of friendly relationships. I allowed earlier that it might be possible to make the case that non-sentient beings are necessarily excluded from being the objects of friendly relationships. If this case could, in fact, be made, then this approach would appear to leave Metz's hierarchy of moral status, along with its apparent explanatory power, in place. Given my earlier arguments, this approach

would not accurately capture the target relationship in the Sub-Saharan literature on ethics and, so, would require a significant re-orientation of Metz's theory. Nonetheless, nothing clearly rules out re-orienting the view in this way.

On the other hand, if one starts out with the sense that there is some plausibility to the kind of biocentric and ecocentric views outlined in the previous section, as they appear in either the African or the Western literature, then the situation looks quite different. For someone who begins with that sort of view, I think the result reached in this paper significantly expands and enhances the explanatory power of the modal-relational account.

To see this, we can begin by noting that my discussion in the previous section not only indicates that non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life have moral status on the modal-relational view but also indicates the degree of moral status that they have. Both kinds of entity have the capacity to be objects of communal relations in virtue of being members of the web of life. Non-sentient organisms, though, can also be the objects of such relations due to their being co-products with us of evolutionary processes, organic species like ourselves and "teleological centers of life". It appears, then, that non-sentient organisms have a significantly greater capacity than inanimate natural entities to be the objects of the relevant relations and, so, will have higher moral status than inanimate natural entities. Moreover, sentient organisms share all the relevant characteristics with non-sentient organisms but, in virtue of their sentience, also have a significant additional capacity to be the object of communal relationships. So, it appears that they will have greater moral status than non-sentient organisms. The upshot is that Metz's hierarchy of moral status, described in section 2, remains in place, but non-sentient organisms now slot in below sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life slot in below non-sentient organisms.

The result is a novel graded account of moral status that unifies and explains seemingly disparate intuitions and views concerning moral status. In Metz's treatment, the modal-relational theory unifies the Kantian view that high-level mental capacities bestow a high-level of moral status with

the welfarist intuition that sentience is important to moral status. Both intuitions are explained by the way that these capacities enable their bearers to engage in communal or friendly relations. Moreover, the manner in which these views are unified gives rise to the intuitively graded view on which characteristic mature human beings have full moral status, and sentient animals have varying degrees of moral status depending on their mental faculties.

The result of this paper extends this unifying and explanatory power of the modal-relational theory to biocentric and holist views in environmental ethics. The theory accommodates core ideas behind these views by allowing that certain non-sentient natural entities have moral status in virtue of their place in the web of life or of being teleological centers of life. It also coherently unifies these ideas both with each other and with the key Kantian and welfarist ideas outlined above. Specifically, it indicates that the plausibility of each view stems from the fact that it identifies an attribute that makes its bearer, to varying degrees, a potential participant in communal relations with human beings. By incorporating these ideas into a unified, graded account of moral status, it also accommodates their potential insights while avoiding their most implausible implications. In particular, it avoids biocentrism's implication that all organisms have equal moral status and ecocentrism's implication that individuals, including human beings, have moral status only as components of the web of life.

The result is a new synthesis of major competing accounts of moral status in the literature on environmental ethics, which produces a novel graded account of the moral status of human beings, sentient animals, non-sentient organisms and inanimate members of the web of life. This account's capacity to unify and explain key intuitions and commitments behind major competing approaches to moral status, while avoiding some of their most important drawbacks, ought to make it of substantial interest for environmental ethics. Minimally, I hope that my discussion here demonstrates that this account deserves substantial further attention.

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