COMMENTARY

Two Steps Forward: An African Relational Account of Moral Standing

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Abstract

This paper replies to a commentary by John-Stewart Gordon on our paper, "The Moral Standing of Social Robots: Untapped Insights from Africa." In the original paper, we set forth an African relational view of personhood and show its implications for the moral standing of social robots. This reply clarifies our position and answers three objections. The objections concern (1) the ethical significance of intelligence, (2) the meaning of 'pro-social,' and (3) the justification for prioritizing humans over pro-social robots.

1 Introduction

In "The Moral Standing of Social Robots: Untapped Insights From Africa" (Jecker, et al., 2022), we set forth an African relational account of the moral status of social robots. The original paper draws on fictional narratives that portray robots within the context of robot-human relationships, which allows us to shift the question about robots' moral status from one focused on abstract innate properties, to one responsive to robots' relational possibilities. In a commentary on our paper, Gordon argues that the proposal we offer is "a step back" and introduces a series of objections against it (Gordon, 2022, p. *). In this commentary, we reply to Gordon's objections, after first commenting on Gordon's characterization of our view. We conclude that

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the African relational account we offer represents two steps forward: it challenges biases inherent in Western accounts of personhood and it presents a compelling analysis of personhood in its own right.

2 Characterization of the African Relational Account

Gordon begins the commentary with a threefold mischaracterization of our position, which later informs the objections raised against it. First, Gordon asserts we define 'person' vis-a-vis two necessary and sufficient conditions, based on the ontological and normative features of *ubuntu*. However, our definition of 'person' (stated in the original paper's introduction)is purely formal, leaving open substantive necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood. What we offer is an ethical argument in support of a particular substantive account of personhood. Second, Gordon states that our position is "human-centered (i.e., anthropocentric by nature)" (Gordon, 2022, p. *). Yet we do not place moral weight on species membership per se, but on the relationship humans stand in with respect to other humans. Third, Gordon characterizes the African relational account we introduce as based on Menkiti's 'ontological progression.' However, the relational view we set forth stands on the shoulders of many African scholars, who we cite throughout the paper. *Ubuntu* captures some of the seminal features that their diverse positions share, especially attunement to social relations and ideals, and pro-social behavior.

3 Objections to the African Relational Account

We turn next to Gordon's objections.

1. *The ethical significance of intelligence.* Gordon first objects to our claim that intelligence has moral significance when used in the service of sociality but is not itself a ground for personhood. Gordon puts the point this way: "once it is made part of a machine, intelligence is not restricted to a single domain but is always holistically applied to maximize the machine's functionality, general capabilities, and connectivity between different component" (Gordon, 2022, p. *).

   In reply, we do not take issue with Gordon's description of the effects of introducing intelligence into machines. However, we fail to see how it undermines our view that using intelligence in the service of sociality is the basis for its ethical significance.

2. *The meaning of 'prosocial.'* Gordon's next objection concerns the moral status of Adam, a robot in Ian McKewan's novel, *Machines Like Me* (McKewan, 2019). Gordon asserts that Adam's conduct was morally praiseworthy and that he clearly qualified as a person. If he does not qualify within an *ubuntu* framework, Gordon thinks this shows that an *ubuntu* framework is "deeply wrong" (Gordon, 2022, p. *).

As Gordon sees it, Adam did the right thing to turn his adoptive parent (Miranda) over to the police for lying under oath, even if this had "unfortunate practical consequences for the family" (Gordon, 2022, p. *). Adam's conduct was socially disruptive only because his adoptive family failed to grasp the moral basis for his actions. According to Gordon, Adam behaved morally "from an impersonal moral standpoint" because lying is wrong (Gordon, 2022, p. *).

In reply, we note first, that Gordon omits mention of the fact that Miranda's lie was itself morally grounded. She judged it necessary to convict the man who had brutally raped and killed her best friend. Her lie was told both out of loyalty to her closest friend and concern that a man who had murdered and raped would do so again. Second, Adam's actions had consequences that were deliberate, not 'unfortunate,' and devastating, not just 'practically' difficult: they left his family penniless and unable to follow through with adopting the young boy (Mark) they loved. This caused an innocent child to suffer and broke the hearts of the child's would-be parents. It was a betrayal by Adam of the family that had adopted and raised him. In our estimation, these actions disqualified Adam from being a person in the *ubuntu* sense, by deliberately bringing his family to grief and despair without enabling the possibility of deliberating with them on the moral content of their actions. Overall, Adam lacked the capacity to form close ties with anyone or participate in human community. While Adam was certainly portrayed as an intelligent robot, this does not suffice to show Adam was a person. A chess-playing computer might be highly intelligent but is not thereby a person.

3. *The justification for prioritizing humans over pro-social robots*. A third objection Gordon raises concerns our claim that in certain conceivable cases, robots should be preferred over humans in forced choice situations. We give as examples preferring Klara, the highly pro-social robot in Ishiguro's novel, *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro, 2021) and KlaraQ+, a robot even more pro-social than Klara, over a human who destroys communities and commits genocide and war crimes, citing Hitler and Milošević. Gordon considers it arbitrary to prefer robots over humans only in these instances, but not in other cases where a human takes others' lives but fewer lives are at stake. Gordon also questions whether we would judge African warlords as harshly as we do Hitler and Milošević.

In reply, the reason for preferring highly prosocial robots over humans who commit genocide and war crimes is that the former are persons and the latter are not. This is not based on the number of victims alone. After all, Adam, the robot in McKewan's novel, did not kill anyone; yet his conduct disqualified him for personhood.

We draw the same conclusion about African warlords who commit war crimes and genocide, such as Charles Taylor and Joseph Kony, as we do about Hitler and Milošević, preferring highly pro-social robots over them in forced choice situations. Our judgment is based on the moral egregiousness of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity; it has nothing to do with the race or ethnicity of the perpetrator. We chose Hitler and Milošević as examples because they are well known to a global audience and there is widespread, legally sanctioned condemnation of their actions.

A related objection Gordon levies against us is that our view is speciesist in cases where a human and social robot score equally high on the personhood scale of the African relational account. According to Gordon, in these cases, we are using species membership as a basis for choosing the human, which is morally arbitrary.

In reply, the reason we prefer humans over robots, other things being equal, is that *we are human*; this fact connects us to other human beings in morally significant ways. If we were aliens from another planet without any relation to humans, we would lack this moral reason for preferring humans over machines and might reasonably judge differently.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it matters morally if a social robot is deeply entwined in relationships with human beings. This is human-centered in the sense that we do not place value on robots relationships with other robots or with nonhuman animals. Prominent moral philosophers from Africa (Gyekye, 2011; Menkiti, 2006) and the West (Coeckelbergh, 2014; Gunkel, 2020) share our view, and for good reason. Assuming that only standalone qualities can constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood is morally arbitrary.

Gordon expresses interest in further discussion of African views, but for the wrong reason—understanding how such views are similar to and different from Western ones. This would be analogous to claiming that we welcome further discussion of Western views in order to clarify how they are similar to or different from African views. Such a stance is partial and one-sided, neglecting the value of viewing the object of comparison in its own right.

In our estimation, African relational views move debates about personhood *two steps forward.* Not only do they reveal flaws in Western approaches, they offer a compelling view of what it means to be a person.

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Declarations

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