Harmonizing global ethics in the future: a proposal to add south and east to west

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Harmonizing global ethics in the future: a proposal to add south and east to west

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This article considers how global ethical matters might be approached differently in the English-speaking literature if values salient in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia were taken seriously. Specifically, after pointing out how indigenous values in both of these major parts of the world tend to prescribe honouring harmonious relationships, the article brings out what such an approach to morality entails for political power, foreign relations and criminal justice. For each major issue, it suggests that harmony likely has implications that differ from approaches that currently dominate Western thought, namely those of utility, autonomy and capability. Lacking the space to systematically defend harmony as a fundamental value, it nonetheless urges theorists not to neglect it in future work.

Keywords: African ethics; Confucian ethics; harmony; relationality; *ubuntu*

Introduction

There is a kernel of truth in the claim that Western thought about international justice, development theory and related topics of interest to readers of the *Journal of Global Ethics* is characteristically individualist. By this it is meant that Euro-American-Australasian global ethical reflection typically locates basic moral value in properties intrinsic to a person or an animal. In contrast, ethical thought that is salient amongst sub-Saharan peoples and those in countries such as China, Taiwan, Japan and Korea is relational. This article spells out the intrinsic-relational distinction as it concerns ethics, and suggests that those doing normative work on topics of concern to this journal have strong reason to take ideals about harmonious relationships from the South and the East, comprising about three billion people, more seriously than they have up to now.

The main reason for believing that relational approaches to morality characteristic of many non-Western societies should feature more often in English-speaking work is not mere adherence to multiculturalism or support for comparative philosophy. Instead, the strongest rationale is that there is weighty evidence that non-Western relational approaches to global ethics promise to have something substantial to contribute to contemporary controversies. Specifically, a fundamental good of harmony that is often prized in sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Asia is shown to ground prima facie plausible views about political power as a human right, about foreign relations and about international criminal justice that differ from standard appeals to utility, autonomy and capability.

In addition, even if one does not find harmony ultimately convincing as a normative foundation, those who appreciate the project of seeking overlapping consensus amongst the world's major cultures, namely, the construction of a 'global ethic' in the narrow sense,

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should at least acknowledge that there are approaches to morality quite different from what dominates Western normative theory. Appealing mainly to the golden rule as a fairly ubiquitous norm since the axial age (Küng and Kuschel 1993) leaves out a lot, and it will take some work to find common ground amongst all reasonable ethical philosophies to be found across the globe. Even if, as Masolo (2014) has fairly pointed out, there is widespread commitment to the idea that all human beings matter from a moral point of view, perhaps even equally, the way that sound impartial action gets interpreted varies substantially; to properly treat people as equals, do we advance their well-being, honour their autonomy, promote their self-realization, or, as is explored here, prize them as capable of harmony?

Western global ethics as individualist

Euro-American-Australasian approaches to global ethics are *characteristically* (though neither exhaustively nor exclusively) 'individualist'. That is, the dominant or salient normative theories found in books and journals from the West devoted to global ethical matters appeal, at bottom, to the ideas that moral status is grounded upon something intrinsic to an individual and that right action is a matter of honouring or promoting it. Below, exceptions to this norm are acknowledged, but first it is pointed out that it is indeed the rule.

First off, the most influential Western approach to human dignity, as invoked for purposes of distributive justice across the globe and the like, is Kantian. According to it, a human being has a dignity in so far as she has a capacity for autonomy or rationality of some kind. What makes us more special than anything else in the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, and the subject of human rights and cosmopolitan concern, is our capacity for intelligence of a certain sort, one that makes no essential reference to another being.

Second, while many think of cost–benefit analysis as a more collectivist alternative to Kantianism, one need only recall Robert Nozick's case of the 'utility monster' to remember that the greatest number is not necessarily the aim of utilitarian moral action. More deeply, typical forms of utilitarianism count as individualist since they deem moral status to be a matter of an individual's capacity for pleasure/pain or for preference satisfaction/frustration, neither of which inherently involves anyone else, and since they deem right action to be a function of summing up such states.

Third, consider the relative newcomer on the scene, the capabilities approach, which for many has improved upon the previous two for focusing on people's capacity to live a good life, as opposed to the capacity to choose pretty much any life at all, à la Kantianism, and the actual living of a good life, as per utilitarianism. The capabilities approach, too, is not essentially relational, illustrated most clearly in the case of Sen's (2004) influential version, according to which the relevant capabilities are to be specified consequent to democratic deliberation, a view also more or less supported by other influential capability theorists such as Robeyns (2003) and Alkire (2007). Although the process by which capabilities are to be chosen for Sen (*et alia*) is a collective one, there is nothing guaranteeing that the content of the chosen capabilities will transcend the intrinsic properties of a given person.

These are the most common philosophical approaches to thought about poverty, inequality, development, migration, terms of trade, human rights, military intervention and related topics. Of course, there have been exceptions, the most salient one being Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach to development theory. Unlike Sen (and Robeyns and Alkire), Nussbaum believes that philosophy should take on the role of providing guidance to democratic-deliberative bodies (amongst others), and so she presents a substantive list of the capabilities she believes that they would be most justified in choosing. Recall that Nussbaum's list has 10 capabilities, two of which are affiliation and other species. For a dignity-oriented state to treat a citizen justly,

then, Nussbaum maintains that a person must be assured of the ability to relate positively to other human beings and to animals.

Yet, these elements have not been salient enough to ground innovative approaches to global ethical issues, at least when compared to the more thoroughly relational approaches to morality salient below the Sahara and in the East. What might global ethical issues look like if relationality, exemplified by two elements on Nussbaum's list of 10, were made more central? Or how might they be approached if relationality were even deemed exhaustive of what grounds morality?

Individualism, holism and relationalism[1]

To clarify the nature of a relational ethic, it should be useful to contrast it with more familiar perspectives. First off, an individualist account of morality is the view that properties intrinsic to an entity ground the capacity to be wronged or to be the object of a direct duty, where right action is what promotes or honours these properties. An intrinsic property, as understood here, is a property that is internal to an individual and includes no essential connection to any other being. Influential forms of individualism include the views that moral status is solely a function of being the agent (egoism), being a living organism (biocentrism), exhibiting the capacity for autonomy or rationality (Kantianism) and having the capacity for preference realization/frustration or for pleasure/pain (utilitarianism).

A holist or corporatist account of morality is the view that the bearers of moral status are groups, where a group is a discrete collection of entities that are near, similar to or interdependent with one another. Those who ascribe moral standing to peoples or cultures are holist in this way, with another clear example being the land ethic (Leopold 1968).

In contrast to both of these views, a relational account of morality is the idea that moral status is constituted by some kind of interactive property between one entity and another, which property demands realization or respect. It therefore stands 'in between' individualism and holism. Similar to individualism, a relational account implies that moral status can inhere in beings as they exist apart from their membership in groups. A relational theory implies that something can warrant moral consideration even if it is not a group or a member of one (or, more carefully, for a reason other than the fact that it is a member). Similar to holism, though, a relational account accords no moral status to an organism merely on the basis of its intrinsic properties. A relational theory implies that a being warrants moral consideration only if, and because, it exhibits some kind of intensional or causal property with regard to another being.

The Western ethic of care (Noddings 1984) approximates the sort of relational approach to morality explored in the rest of this article. However, it neither exhausts the ways that indigenous Africans and Chinese have interpreted relationality, which is most often in terms of harmony,[2] nor has grounded novel approaches to global ethical matters in the ways they promise to do.

Harmony in sub-Saharan thought

The most common, and philosophically interesting, interpretation of African ethics is relational. For most traditional sub-Saharan societies, one's basic goal in life should be to realize human excellence, *ubuntu* in the famous vernacular in southern Africa, which one can do if and only if one lives communally with other persons or honours harmonious relationships with them. To begin to understand what community or harmony amounts to in this tradition, consider the remarks from some African thinkers.

The Nigerian philosopher Gbadegesin says that for traditional Yoruba morality, 'Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all' (1991, 65).

One of the most influential African political philosophers in the post-war era, the Ghanaian Gyekye, says,

> A harmonious cooperative social life requires that individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interests of others ... .Communitarian moral theory ... .advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other ..... (1997, 72, 76)

Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Mokgoro remarks of a sub-Saharan ethic, 'Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group' (1998, 17).

Finally, the Kenyan historian of African philosophy Masolo highlights what he calls the 'communitarian values' of 'living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth ... .Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict' (2010, 240).

These and many other construals from different parts of Africa about what it is to live harmoniously or to commune with others suggest two recurrent themes (on which, see Metz 2013). On the one hand, there is a relationship of *identity*, a matter of considering oneself a part of the group, experiencing life as bound up with others, being close and feeling integrated. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of *solidarity*, being committed to the good of others, aiding them, acting consequent to sympathy and being concerned for others' welfare.

The combination of the relationships of identity and solidarity, or of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life, is basically what English speakers mean by 'friendliness' or 'love' in a broad sense. Hence, one can sum up one major swathe of traditional African thought about how to live by saying that one's highest-order end should be to live a genuinely human way of life, which one must do by prizing harmonious or friendly relationships. This analysis makes sense of Tutu's terse remarks about ethics from a typically African standpoint:

> 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'. I participate, I share ... .Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. (1999, 35)

One's own harmonious or friendly relationships matter most for typical African approaches to morality; 'family first' and 'charity begins at home' are commonly expressed, in order to indicate a principled priority going to actual ties of which one is a part (cf. Appiah 1998). However, it is also a salient element of sub-Saharan thinking about morality to deem all human beings to be part of a human family or individuals with whom potentially to commune, meaning that it includes an important impartial dimension.

In a recent article in this journal, Masolo (2014) has discussed the respects in which his Luo-speaking people in Kenya and neighbouring countries have an egalitarian conception of human worth, one that grounds a universal right to life similar to other ethical traditions across the globe. However, as Masolo (2010) has discussed elsewhere, they and most other black peoples in Africa share more about morality than merely commitment to human impartiality. In particular, they tend to think that the point of moral action is to live communally or to honour harmonious relationships, where one's existent relationships typically require more resources such as one's attention, time, labour and economic wealth.

These ideas are fairly uncontroversial when it comes to the way ethics is by and large conceived by indigenous societies below the Sahara and by intellectuals inspired by them. More

contested matters are left out, here.[3] Before indicating how these ideas about morality might plausibly influence one's views about global ethics, consider the way that a concern for harmonious relationship has also figured into East Asian morality.

Harmony in Chinese thought

This article lacks the space to consider the various respects in which harmony is conceived in the East. To obtain focus, it considers what is by far the most influential conception, namely, the one central to Confucianism, which is the dominant ethical worldview in China and some neighbouring countries.

Similar to the way that the relevant sorts of relationships for African ethics were summarized in terms of harmony, Confucian values, or at least the most important ones, also tend to be summed up by the same word.[4] Harmony is variously labelled as 'the highest virtue' for Confucians (Yao 2000, 172), 'the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture' and the 'ultimate goal' (Li 2006, 583, 593), the 'cardinal cultural value in Chinese society' (Wei and Li 2013, 60) and the Confucian 'grand ideal' (Chan 2014, 2).

Aesthetic analogies with music, food and dance are frequently invoked to explain what harmony is, by the Confucian and Chinese tradition. Basically, it is a matter of different elements coming together, where differences are not only merely respected, but also integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out and something new is created (Yao 2000, 170–173; Ihara 2004; Li 2006).

To illustrate the Confucian conception of harmony in more detail, consider the famous 'Three Bonds', where, 'for each relation, certain behaviour principles must be followed to ensure a harmonious society' (Fan 2000, 4). The human relationships in which, and by which, one is particularly expected to realize harmony are between ruler/minister (sovereign/subjects), father/son (parents/children) and husband/wife (Tu 1998).

The hierarchical nature of the Three Bonds is palpable; essential to them is the idea of higher and lower positions, with the governed, the young and the female traditionally occupying the latter. Sometimes the thought is that hierarchical relationships are most likely to *produce* harmony separately and in the long run, while other times it is that harmony is to be realized *within* them. Although there have been strains of Confucianism interpreting the hierarchy in terms of unconditional obedience on the part of the inferiors, most these days instead stress the idea that it should involve reciprocity, a relationship in the interests of both parties to it and hence comprised of action informed by sympathy, compassion, generosity and the like. Those in a superior position, while having more responsibility, are obligated to act for the sake of those in a lower one, while inferiors are expected to show respect for superiors, which need not mean unquestioning deference (Bell 2006, 244–245). So, contemporary Confucianism does not justify absolute monarchy or patriarchal whim, although it does prescribe a division of labour, with managerial functions going to qualified rulers and heads of households.[5]

The most important manifestation of a harmonious relationship, both in itself and as a means to the realization of other virtues, is between parents and their children. The phrase 'filial piety' is used to sum up the virtue of relating to one's parents, with one scholar remarking, 'For Confucius, the paramount example of harmonious social order seems to be *xiao* (filial piety)' (Richey, n.d.). The parent/child relationship is expected to be particularly intense, and to serve as a sort of training ground for relating to human beings in general so that one develops benevolent inclinations towards humanity, even if they are less strong. Confucianism does not therefore reject impartiality and concern for strangers; Mencius' famous parable of the young child at risk of falling into a well, revealing that people are naturally inclined to rescue those unrelated to themselves, has been enormously influential in the Confucian tradition. Instead,

the idea is that the central part of a desirable existence consists of partial relationships, and that they are to serve as models of, and springboards for, other relationships in one's life.

As with the African tradition, there is much more that could be said about the Chinese one. However, this encapsulation of the Confucian value of harmony should serve as a useful and sufficient starting point for reflection about how thoroughly relational approaches to morality might influence global ethics.

Some implications of harmonizing global ethics

For the mainstream variants of both non-Western traditions sketched above, one's basic aim in life should be to honour positive relationships with others, ones that include kindness, benevolence, tolerance and related dispositions. Hence, those few scholars who have compared characteristic indigenous African and Chinese values have called both 'collectivist' (Hofstede et al. 2010), 'communitarian' (Bell and Metz 2011) or focused on 'mutuality' (Unah 2014). Although there are important differences between the two traditions (Bell and Metz 2011; Metz, forthcoming), this article focuses on the commonalities, so as to indicate how a fundamental interest in harmonious relationships, contrasting with Western individualism, might affect thought about global ethical matters.

What would global ethics look like if harmony, and not autonomy or utility, were the 'mother of all values', as two scholars have recently suggested about global thought about morality (Bell and Mo 2013), or at least if harmonious relationships of certain kinds constituted a much larger part of morality than is usually deemed to be the case in the West? In the following, just three apparent implications are sketched; may they stimulate the field to consider more in the future.

Political power as a human right

A concern for harmony, even though understood differently in Africa and China, has tended to support non-competitive models of decision-making that are quite distinct from typically Euro-American-Australasian forms of political power. In the African case, unanimous rather than majoritarian agreement is thought to be ideal, whereas, in the Chinese, rule by the most qualified is considered best.

Recall that harmonious relationships, as characteristically understood by Africans, amount to sharing a way life in combination with caring for others' quality of life. This value has tended to support a consensus-oriented approach to decision-making in a wide array of pre-colonial sub-Saharan societies. Although many of them featured monarchs, it was customary for policy not to be determined unilaterally by them. Instead, a king would usually defer to consensus achieved either amongst a group of elders who had been popularly appointed, or amongst all adult members of the community, each of whom had had the opportunity to speak and had talked the matter through until they had reached a unanimous agreement about how to proceed.

In fact, appealing to the value of harmony (community), most prominent African political philosophers and theorists in the post-war era have prescribed a democratic polity for contemporary states of a kind richer than a multi-party, competitive system. Specifically, they have often recommended that Parliamentarians, upon having been elected by majority vote (such being practically necessary in a mass society), require a unanimous agreement amongst themselves about how to do what is best for the public as a whole (Wiredu 1996, 172–190; Bujo 1997, 157–180; Gyekye 1997, 121–140).

In contrast, the Confucian conception of harmony, as mutually beneficial unity in diversity, and as something often to be promoted by, and realized within, hierarchical relationships of age and achievement, has been part of what has led the Chinese people to accept the lack of

a multi-party system. Indeed, there is no shortage of Confucian intellectuals who, while not thrilled with the Chinese Communist Party, nonetheless favour a substantially meritocratic system over one in which the populace has the final authority to determine policy (see many of the contributions to Bell and Li 2013). Many of them point out, for instance, that harmony with future generations is unlikely to be realized by any system that is strongly determined by the interests of a current majority.

In light of the value of harmony, it is not obvious that international human rights advocates should enshrine multi-party democracy as the norm. Given the prima facie attractiveness of various conceptions of harmonious relationship, there is real debate to be had about the ideal form of how to distribute political power, not only with regard to domestic lawmaking, but also, say, at the level of the United Nations.

Foreign relations

Which principles should guide the way that states and other groups relate to one another across the globe? It is plausible to think that an interest in harmony, whether that in the African or Chinese traditions, recommends a path that is neither strictly impartial (cosmopolitan) nor partial when it comes to aid, as well as neither strictly pacifist (neutral) nor realist with respect to intervention.

The Chinese have been the ones to emphasize the respect in which harmony, as construed in the Confucian tradition, forbids not only treating other societies merely as a means, but also failing to engage positively with them. Respect for the ability of a state to do things differently from others can be viewed as a valuation of diversity, essential to the Confucian conception of harmonious relationships, which are expressly not ones of sameness. Non-aggression, too, is a core element of harmonious relationships, which above all are to avoid conflict of a sort that fails to bring different elements together into a whole. Finally, mutual advantage stands out as a key element of harmony as understood by the Chinese, who routinely proclaim to want 'win-win' solutions. When China's President visited the USA some years ago, he was explicit about the respects in which harmony is to guide Chinese foreign policy:

> Harmony promotes co-existence and co-prosperity; whereas differences foster mutual complementation and mutual support. Harmony without sameness is an important principle in the development of all social affairs . . . .We believe that the world's civilizations, social systems and development models can come together for exchanges and emulation. They can learn from one another, benefit from their respective strengths in a peaceful competition and achieve common development. (Jiang 2002)

Of course, one can debate whether principles have informed practice in China, but there is at least some clear theoretical ground for a country to take a supportive interest in other ones, here.

Turning to African harmony, South Africa's President, for one, recently indicated that it is to guide the country's foreign policy (South African Government News Agency 2012), systematic adherence to which would roughly mean that the state seeks out friendly relationships with foreign groups and is unfriendly only as necessary to combat an initial unfriendliness on their part. The President emphasized that South Africa will contribute to peacekeeping missions, seek the non-violent resolution of conflicts and work for mutually beneficial partnerships.

Notice that such harmony-based approaches to international affairs tell against not only the idea of engaging in military or other conflict for the sake of self-interest, but also the notion of isolationism, avoiding other countries' problems altogether. For both the African and Chinese conceptions of harmony, conflict is justified pretty much only so as to rebut a greater conflict, while there is also some positive obligation to aid others as a key way to manifest a harmonious relationship. Yet, since existing ties have a greater moral weight than merely possible ones,

a state has clear grounds to favour its own people first, when it comes to the allocation of goods. Such a comprehensive approach to foreign relations, particularly as it concerns interference and beneficence, merits engagement from normative theorists.

International criminal justice

For a third example of a respect in which prizing harmonious relationships is likely to influence thought about global ethical matters, consider how such a principle would determine responses to grave wrongdoing such as a crime against humanity. Appealing to dominant Western principles, there have been two main rationales for the punishment of adult offenders in English-speaking literature: deterrence and desert. In contrast, rather than intentionally creating a climate of fear or imposing harm retributively for its own sake, harmony in the first instance recommends responding to serious injustice with an eye towards reform and restoration.

It is well known that in the African tradition, reconciliation, i.e. the reparation of broken relationships, has frequently been deemed the primary function of criminal justice. Often in small-scale societies below the Sahara, punishment has been either eschewed altogether in favour of apology and compensation, or imposed with the aim of resolving conflict between the offender and his victims (or, more carefully, between his family and the families of those whom he has wronged). A concern to restore harmony, bringing the offender back into relationships of identity and solidarity, is what led to not only merely South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Tutu 1999; Krog 2008), but also similar approaches to crimes against humanity in places such as Sierra Leone and Rwanda. Indeed, the movement towards what is called 'restorative justice' in the West is patently grounded substantially on traditional African practices and ideals (Louw 2006).

And when it comes to Chinese thought about how to deal with infraction, Confucian harmony has typically been understood to recommend dealing with potential wrongdoers in the first instance by setting a good example, as opposed to making threats (Little and Reed 1989, 5, who quote Confucius himself), and with actual wrongdoers by prompting them to feel shame and to willingly reform their character.

Once again, a prescription to prize harmony appears to counsel approaches that differ from mainstream Western thinking. Rather than responding to crimes against humanity by punishing offenders so as to give them what they deserve or to deter potential ones, perhaps the aim should be to foster the good of harmonious social relationships, where that includes those who have offended.

If the reader has found the implications of a relational ethic prima facie attractive, or at least not to be dismissed, when it comes to political power, foreign relations and criminal justice, then it is worth considering what other facets of global ethics might look like in light of it. The aim of this article has not been to convince the reader that a harmony-based ethic is most justified, only that it must not be ignored when theorizing about normative issues facing the world.

Notes on contributor

Thaddeus Metz is Humanities Research Professor at the University of Johannesburg. Some recent papers include: 'Gross National Happiness: A Philosophical Appraisal', *Ethics and Social Welfare* (2014) and 'Climate Change in Africa and the Middle East in Light of Health and Salient Regional Values' in C. Macpherson (ed.) *Climate Change and Health* (Springer 2014).

Notes

1. Some of this section borrows phrasings from Metz (2012, 389–390).

2. For systematic discussion of the difference between an ethic of harmony, as conceived in the African tradition, and the ethic of care, see Metz (2013).
3. There is substantial controversy among sub-Saharan philosophers about precisely with whom (or what) to commune, and about the fundamental reason for doing so.
4. Anedo (2012) notes that African and Chinese values tend to prize harmony, though he does not reflect on the (differing) ways it is understood.
5. Note that this sort of inequality in power is often tied with an egalitarianism when it comes to the distribution of property and wealth.

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