Relational Ethics

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Introduction

When we consider long-standing and widely held ethical perspectives, we can identify a strain that is fundamentally relational, that is, that conceives of moral status, right action, or good character as constituted by beneficent ties or other bonds of sharing (*see* BENEVOLENCE). In this essay, we first sketch the basics of such an approach and provide reason to think it is indeed distinct from other, individualist or holist, approaches to ethics. Then, we consider salient instances of relationalism from three major moral traditions that have been particularly influential in recent English-language philosophical literature: Confucianism in East Asia, *ubuntu* in sub-Saharan Africa, and feminist and care perspectives in Anglo-America-Australasia. Upon expounding the essentials of each approach, we indicate some topics that would be suitable for future research.

Nature of and Background to Relationalism

Although relational conceptions of morality have existed for many centuries, indeed probably long before alternative views, it is only lately that relationalism has been articulated as a distinct kind of ethic in English-speaking philosophy (see, e.g., Austin 2008). Recent awareness of it has been occasioned mainly by twentieth-century challenges to characteristically male and Western approaches to normativity. On the one hand, some feminists have argued that girls and women are more likely to adhere to a relational ethic, often one of care (perhaps for reasons of nurture as opposed to nature). On the other hand, greater intercultural exchanges have made English speakers more aware of African and Asian moral philosophies, which tend to place familial bonds at the core of how to live.

Sandra Harding (1987) was one of the first to identify relationality as a common thread among those questioning androcentrism and Eurocentrism. Very broadly speaking, whereas contemporary white male moral philosophers and professional ethicists have tended to maintain that either freedom or happiness is the "mother of all values," in the words of Daniel A. Bell and Yingchuan Mo (2014), non-white and non-male ones have largely been the ones to maintain that it is, instead, either care, community, or harmony.

There have, of course, been exceptions. Those working in the Christian tradition would plausibly deem the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself to be an instance of relationalism; and the writings of the young Karl Marx are naturally read

as expressing the view that human nature *qua* social is something that demands to be developed (see MARX, KARL). For example, Marx writes:

> Since human nature is the true communal nature of man, men create and produce their communal nature by their natural action; they produce their social being which is no abstract, universal power over against single individuals, but the nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own enjoyment, his own wealth … [T]o say that man alienates himself is the same as to say that the society of this alienated man is a caricature of his real communal nature. (2000 [1844]: 125)

Western Marxists in the twentieth century were substantially influenced by this ethic, sometimes characterized as "communitarian" (*see* COMMUNITARIANISM). One could also mention the ethics of Baruch Spinoza, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas (whose work is, however, primarily phenomenological rather than normative) in the Continental philosophical tradition.

To clarify the nature of a relational ethic, contrast it with other, perhaps more familiar perspectives (this and the next few paragraphs borrow from Metz 2012: 389–90). 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 dutiful action is roughly what either promotes or honors these properties. An intrinsic property, as understood here, is a feature 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 and right action are at bottom a function of being in the agent's interests (egoism), being a living organism (biocentrism), exhibiting the capacity for autonomy or rationality (Kantianism), and having the capacity for preference dis/satisfaction or for dis/pleasure (utilitarianism).

At the other extreme is a holist or corporatist account of morality, the view that the bearer of moral status is a group of some kind and that morally appropriate behavior is what develops or respects it. A group, here, is a discrete collection of entities that are close to, similar to, or interdependent with one another. Those who ascribe moral standing to peoples or species are holist in this way, with another clear example being Aldo Leopold's influential land ethic, roughly according to which an act is right insofar as it tends to sustain an ecosystem.

In contrast to both individualism and holism, relationalism is the idea that moral status is constituted by some kind of interactive property between one entity and another, which property warrants being realized or prized. 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. According to a relational theory, something can warrant moral consideration even if it is not a group or a member of one, or 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 entity 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 other-regarding property, one that is typically intensional or causal.

In addition to English-speaking normative ethics of late having been noticeably informed by relational approaches, so too has applied ethics. This is particularly true in healthcare ethics (Bergum and Dossetor 2005; Woods 2012) and environmental ethics (Hourdequin and Wong 2005; Behrens 2014).

In the rest of this essay, we survey three instances of relationalism that are particularly prominent in normative philosophical thought appearing in English. We proceed in largely chronological order, from the earliest to the most recent.

The Confucian Tradition

Confucianism has a complex, 3,000-year-old written history, and remains the dominant ethical worldview in China and some neighboring countries in East Asia (*see* CONFUCIAN ETHICS). According to one major strand of Confucian thought, at least as interpreted lately, (nearly) all key moral values are ultimately a function of harmonious relationships (Fan 2010; Bell and Mo 2014; Li 2014). Aesthetic analogies with making music and cooking food are frequently invoked to explain what harmony is. Basically, it is a matter of different elements coming together, where differences are not merely respected, but also integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out and something new is created (Ihara 2004; Li 2014).

By this construal, for a person to relate harmoniously is essentially neither to become the same as others, nor to agree with them. Doing so instead presupposes the existence of a variety of interests and standpoints, where they are unified – but not made uniform – in such a way that is good for all.

To illustrate the Confucian conception of harmony in more detail, consider the famous "Three Bonds," the human relationships in which, and by which, one is particularly expected to realize harmony, namely, between ruler/minister (sovereign/subjects), father/son (parents/children), and, traditionally, husband/wife. The hierarchical nature of the Three Bonds is palpable; essential to them is the idea of higher and lower positions. Sometimes the thought is that unequal relationships are most likely to produce harmony separately and in the long run, while at other times it is that harmony is to be realized within them.

Although there have been traditional 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 comprising 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 and can include remonstrating. In addition, most contemporary advocates of Confucianism, at least those writing in English, aim to avoid sexism in the family (e.g., Li 2014: 101–16). So, Confucianism does not justify absolute monarchy or patriarchal whim, although it does prescribe a division of labor, with managerial functions going to rulers and heads of households who should be qualified by their age, experience, education, and virtue.

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; as one scholar remarks: "For Confucius, the paramount example of harmonious social order seems to be *xiao* (filial piety)" (Richey, n.d.; *see* CONFUCIUS). The parent/child relationship is expected to be the most intense exemplification of harmony. And it is also meant to serve as a training ground for relating to human beings in general, so that one develops (less intense) benevolent inclinations toward strangers.

Even if contemporary Confucianism aims to leave sexism behind, readers might wonder whether it is sufficiently egalitarian. Although it would permit an elderly woman to serve as the head of a household, its meritocratic orientation would seem to exclude the idea of joint rule among adults on all major issues in a family. And then there appears to be little scope for a democratic polity at the level of government, an alleged bullet that many Confucian political philosophers are interestingly happy to bite (e.g., Bell and Li 2013).

Another concern is whether Confucianism is sufficiently impartial (*see* IMPARTIALITY). Although a common view these days among Confucians is that everyone matters morally insofar as they are capable of virtuous character, there is an irreducible partialism to Confucianism. One is expected to care most for one's family and to extend one's concern in proportion to the strength of one's affective ties. One problem, here, is that this appears to apply to those in charge of governments and businesses as well (but see Fan 2010: 23, 30–2, 34–7), and a second is whether there is enough ground for cosmopolitan concern for the suffering of strangers far away.

The African Tradition

In contrast to Confucianism, the sub-Saharan philosophical tradition has largely been an oral one, with many written texts appearing only after the demise of European colonialism, which began in the late 1950s. Like most self-described "African philosophers" these days, we limit ourselves to recent, literate philosophical expressions grounded on values and norms that have been salient in traditional African ways of life for at least several centuries. In addition, we focus on those texts that take relationality to be fundamental, acknowledging that there are others who deem it to be of merely instrumental value (for the realization of, say, well-being).

For most thinkers inspired by indigenous Africa, one's basic goal in life should be to realize human excellence or what is called "*ubuntu*" in the famous vernacular in South Africa (*see* AFRICAN ETHICS). The familiar idea is that there is a higher, distinctively human part of our nature as well as a lower, animal part, and that we ought to strive to develop the former instead of the latter.

Less familiar is a view common among traditional black African peoples about how to develop humanness or to become a real person, namely, by living communally with others (often the language of "harmony" is also used, but, to avoid conflation with the Confucian use of it, we set that term aside). To begin to understand

what a communal relation amounts to in this tradition, consider remarks from some African thinkers.

The Nigerian philosopher Segun 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). Gessler Muxe Nkondo, a South African public intellectual, says: "If you asked *ubuntu* advocates and philosophers: What principles inform and organise your life? … the answers would express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community" (2007: 91). The Kenyan historian of African philosophy Dismas 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 commune with others suggest two recurrent themes (see Metz 2012: 393–5). On the one hand, there is a relationship of sharing a way of life, a matter of considering oneself a part of the whole, experiencing life as bound up with others, and feeling integrated. On the other, there is reference to a relationship of caring for one another's quality of life, that is, achieving the good of all, being committed to the good of others, and being concerned for others' welfare. The combination of sharing a life with others and caring for them is basically what English speakers mean by "friendliness" or "love" in a broad sense (*see* FRIENDSHIP; LOVE). 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 does by prizing communal – that is, friendly – relationships.

Traditionally speaking, important agents with whom one ought to relate communally are spiritual beings, especially ancestors, wise founders of a clan who are thought to have survived the deaths of their bodies, to have continued to reside on earth, and to provide guidance to human family members (e.g., Paris 1995; Murove 2007). However, many contemporary interpreters of African morality favor a more secular rendition of the proper entities with which to commune.

Like Confucianism, one's own communal 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. However, it is also a salient element of sub-Saharan thinking about morality to deem all human beings to have a dignity or to be part of a human family. It therefore includes an important impartial dimension, with hospitality to visitors from afar being a salient theme in this tradition, unlike in the Confucian.

One issue meriting debate with regard to a characteristically African approach to morality is that it seems to leave little space for individual self-determination. Obligations to help other people, especially family members, are typically deemed to be quite weighty, with more than a few sub-Saharan ethicists doubting that there is a category of the supererogatory.

In addition to a duty to engage in mutual aid, there is also an obligation to participate in the life of one's society, so that remaining isolated would likely be deemed immoral, even if one were not harming others. Still more, innovative behavior on the part of individuals seems to be discouraged by this sort of ethic, insofar as long-standing practices that are central to a people's self-conception have substantial moral weight. And where traditional practices are patriarchal, the requirement to share a way of life becomes even more problematic. Contemporary African philosophers often seek creative ways to avoid sexist implications of their views, with some doing so by suggesting that truly *sharing* a way of life means freely choosing it.

The Feminist and Care Traditions

As a concept, relationalism has found a consistent home in feminist ethics (*see* FEMINIST ETHICS). While within this tradition an ethic understood as relational is most readily identified with care ethics, it is significant for other methodological approaches within feminist philosophy, too. In other words, within feminist philosophy, while central to care ethics, relational ethics is not exclusive to it. Care ethics, however, will be our primary focus in this section (*see* CARE ETHICS).

Care theory can be of a sentimentalist (Slote 2007), virtue ethical (Halwani 2003), or deontological (Miller 2012) variety, with accompanying subtle shifts in their respective take on relational ethics. In this section, the aim is to characterize the moral features typical of care ethics as a whole, with a specific emphasis on the ways in which care ethics is relational.

Historically speaking, the late 1980s saw the rise of relational ethics as a prominent concept within feminist thought, initially in conjunction with the work of psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982), educator Nel Noddings (1984), and philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989). In this context, a relational ethics of care referred to "a feminine view … in the deep classical sense – rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings 2013: 2).

The initial association between relational ethics and the feminine did not stand the test of time, as Noddings's change to the title of her 1984 landmark book, *Caring*, indicates. Heeding objections regarding a latent essentialism in the assumed connection between care and the feminine, *Caring*'s subtitle, *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, became, in 2013, *A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. In explaining the change, Noddings writes: "I think critics are right … to point out that the connotations of 'feminine' are off-putting and do not capture what I intended to convey. Relational is a better word. Virtually all care theorists make the relation more fundamental than the individual" (2013: xiii). Thus, while initially arising from an interest in the previously underappreciated moral insights of women's experiences, care ethics is open to and relevant for all, regardless of gender.

An ethic can be said to be relational in several distinct ways, including its content, its account of right action, and the grounding of its normativity. Here we will consider five such relational features.

First, the subject matter of an ethic can be relational. More so than probably any other ethical philosophy, at least in the West, care ethics concentrates on our relations

with others. Relationships function as legitimate and primary matters of moral inquiry and moral significance. Moreover, while in many moral theories the individual is the ultimate unit of moral concern, in care ethics relationships themselves are taken to be at least the primary, if not the most fundamental, units of moral concern, as Noddings claims (see above). What exactly does such an assertion mean? In the more usual case in which individuals function as the ultimate units of moral concern, they serve as nothing short of the primary point of orientation for a moral theory. For example, many moral theories focus on the well-being of the individual or on the way in which each individual has dignity and is deserving of respect. While not all moral concepts centered on the individual transfer seamlessly to a relational perspective (it is not entirely clear, for example, what it would mean to refrain from violating the rights of a relationship), many do: the *I* becomes *we* as we carefully weigh the consequences of actions for our relationships, consider how to respect our communal bonds, and aim to foster virtuous relationships that are trusting and generous.

This shift in perspective is effected when we take our relationships and relationality as the starting points for moral theory. Doing so transforms our view of the nature of an individual moral agent: the independent, ideally autonomous, and rational agent who stars in much of modern moral philosophy morphs into an interdependent, vulnerable, and emotional agent. The idea of the individual is reconceived as the self-in-relation, a concept that highlights both the fundamentally relational nature of human social ontology, as well as the constitutive importance of relationships for establishing moral agency in the first place.

A second main relational feature of care ethics is its account of right action. This approach to right action arises from a paradigm of personal relationships, that is, the caring relation, making care an ideal, rather than a non-ideal, moral consideration (Mills 2009). The ideally caring relationship forms a basis for answering the question, "What ought I do?" In the caring relation, one person cares for another, who receives care. It is a relationship characterized by attentiveness and empathy (*see* EMPATHY) – a mode of receptivity and openness to another's affective states that allows one to feel with her and understand her emotions, needs, and interests (*see* NEEDS). It is also characterized by sympathetic responsiveness through the actions of the caregiver that support the well-being and interests of the one in need (*see* SYMPATHY) and through the responsiveness of the person in need as she acknowledges receiving care. When done well, care can involve a merging of interests in which the caregiver comes to share the interests of the one in need. Thus, right action is action that demonstrates these various features of caring – action that builds and sustains both the relationship with and the agency and well-being of the cared for. Morally impermissible action is relationship-withering action – action that involves insensitivity to the cared for, "responsiveness" that runs roughshod over her needs and interests, and a general disinterest in preserving and furthering the relationship.

For care ethicists, the emotions play a prominent role in moral relations, thoroughly influencing moral decision-making, which, for many other moral philosophies, is primarily a process of moral reasoning. This centrality of the emotions to moral life

comprises a third feature of care ethics. The emotions – and especially those tied to caring well – instruct our moral decisions, motivate our continuing interest in caring, and guide us in enacting ideal moral relations. The multipronged significance of the emotions is tied to another relational emphasis of care ethics: the moral permissibility of partiality. For many, though not all, care ethicists, it is morally permissible for those to whom we feel special ties, such as family, friends, neighbors, etc., to receive the lion's share of our moral attention. Impartiality, a moral requirement of other leading moral theories, including deontology and consequentialism, is not a requirement for the ethics of care.

Care ethics offers a distinctive approach to moral perception – one that is fully informed by the moral significance of context and particularity – a fourth feature of the ethics of care. The degree of relationalism underlying the closely connected notion of moral salience is notable. Generally speaking, it is through our moral perception that we determine what has moral salience in any given situation, which then ultimately informs our moral judgments. Those with a caring mode of moral perception determine the moral salience of a situation by discerning both the intricate particularity of the moral agents and patients involved, as well as the wider context (relational and otherwise) in which they are situated. Moral perception, thus rendered, influences how we identify what is morally salient in the first place, what information we include in moral decision-making and moral judgment, and even how adeptly we respond to the specific scenario of those in need for whom we care.

The fifth and final relational feature concerns the source of moral responsibility for care ethics, that is, the reason in light of which we must respond to others in the first place. Historically, moral theorists often tied this reason to what they took to be distinctive human capacities, such as rational autonomy, to name one favorite. Care ethicists have been less sanguine about naming a foundational reason why we must care for others, perhaps because in a caring relation to give a reason for caring is to give one reason too many, to evoke Bernard Williams (1976: 214). Thus the answer to the question of what constitutes the normative foundation of care ethics has remained elusive.

The reluctance to address this point, if it can be so characterized, might also stem from the connected notion that in doing so, care ethicists would tread dangerously close to articulating a principle of care. Most care ethicists have a somewhat allergic reaction to moral principles, feeling that the application of such principles could codify the responsive emotional quality of good care into a regimented, cold decision procedure (think of the standard application of Kant's Categorical Imperative or Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle), hence flattening the rich emotional landscape of moral life. This concern is not without merit.

And yet the question remains. There are several possible answers that care ethicists might offer on this point. Some ground moral responsibility in recognition of facets of our shared finitude. More specifically, care ethicists cite our relation with one another as mutually vulnerable and needy, as well as interdependent, as the grounding reasons of moral responsibility (Mackenzie et al. 2014). With this final point in place, we can see that care ethics is a relational ethics the whole way down, so to speak; the very normative foundation of care ethics is relational.

See also: AFRICAN ETHICS; BENEVOLENCE; CARE ETHICS; COMMUNITARIANISM; CONFUCIAN ETHICS; CONFUCIUS; EMPATHY; FEMINIST ETHICS; FRIENDSHIP; IMPARTIALITY; LOVE; MARX, KARL; NEEDS; SYMPATHY

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