

Relational Normative Economics: An African Approach to Justice

Thaddeus Metz
University of Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT. Recent work by comparative philosophers, global ethicists, and cross-cultural value theorists indicates that, unlike most Western thinkers, those in many other parts of the globe, such as indigenous Africa, East Asia, and South America, tend to prize relationality. These relational values include enjoying a sense of togetherness, participating cooperatively, creating something new together, engaging in mutual aid, and being compassionate. Global economic practices and internationally influential theories pertaining to justice, development, and normative economics over the past 50 years have been principally informed by characteristically Western and individualist values such as utility, autonomy, and capability. In this article I consider what economic appropriation, production, distribution, and consumption would look like if they were more influenced by relational values typical of non-Western worldviews, and especially the sub-Saharan ethic of *ubuntu*.

KEYWORDS. African morality, distributive justice, economic justice, relational economics, relational values, sub-Saharan ethics, *ubuntu*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent work by comparative philosophers, global ethicists, and cross-cultural value theorists indicates that, beyond Western¹ philosophy and theory, thinkers in many other parts of the globe tend to prize relationality. Whereas contemporary American-European moral thought tends to value individualist goods such as utility, autonomy, and capability that make no essential reference to others, those in the indigenous African, East Asian, and South American traditions (amongst others) instead rate highly ways of interacting between people, often summed up with talk of ‘harmony’.

Where international economic policies have been informed by moral values, they have been principally ones that are characteristic of the West. Similarly, influential theories of justice, development, and normative economics are largely Western in nature. For just one example, consider development theory, which, even in 21st century incarnations that appeal to capabilities (e.g. United Nations Development Programme 2010), does little to invoke ways of relating that are prized as good for their own sake by many non-Western traditions, such as togetherness, belonging, participating cooperatively, creating something new together, engaging in mutual aid, and being compassionate. What would economics look like if it were guided more often by these kinds of values, and, specifically, in realistic ways that are not utopian?

I seek to answer this question here, articulating concrete forms of appropriation, production, distribution, and consumption that are prescribed by values salient in non-Western traditions. My aim to suggest some feasible and *prima facie* attractive ways in which economics, at both the global and domestic levels, could be infused with more relationality. Although a harmonious relationship with nature is prominent in the worldviews I discuss, I downplay environmental considerations here and focus mainly on interpersonal matters.

The next section of the article analyses the individualist-relational distinction, and makes the case for thinking that contemporary Western theories of justice, development, normative economics, and related fields are by and large individualist (section II). In the following section, I articulate an ethic that includes several relational facets, which is grounded on indigenous African worldviews and practices, while also noting relational values salient in other traditions such as Confucianism in East Asia and *buen vivir* in South America (section III). Then, I apply the relational values, particularly as expressed by the African ethic, to various facets of economics, aiming to provide concrete suggestions about how to ‘relationalize’ them, as *prima facie* attractive ways of tempering their rationalization (section IV). Along the way, I address objections that might be

made, especially by adherents to more individualist perspectives on distributive justice. I conclude by briefly noting some additional topics that merit consideration, supposing the positions advanced here merit consideration (section V).

II. WHAT ARE INDIVIDUALISM AND RELATIONALISM?

At a highly abstract level, normative theories concerning economics, and the ethical principles that underlie economic practices, are usefully characterized according to the basis on which they (implicitly or explicitly) ascribe moral status. By ‘moral status’ I mean the property of being entitled to moral treatment for its own sake or of being able to be wronged. A pen, for example, in principle cannot be wronged, although we could wrong a person by stealing and breaking her pen. Normative approaches differ in terms of what it is about a being that gives it a moral status, with many able to be classified as principally either individualist or relational (or a third category, corporatist).

An individualist normative theory is one that implies that properties intrinsic to an individual are what ground moral status. It is the view that features of a being that make no essential reference to anything outside it are what entitle it to moral treatment. The salient Western theories of economic justice, as well as the broader normative theories that underlie them and various global practices, are individualist in this way, as I now briefly spell out.

Consider, first, the egoist view, of for instance Thomas Hobbes, according to which each agent ought to act in ways that are expected to satisfy his own long-term self-interest. Although interacting with others in various supportive ways, perhaps by exchanging goods on the world market, would usually be likely to improve an individual’s self-interest, such interaction is of mere instrumental value; what matters morally for its own sake, and not merely as a means, is the promotion of one’s own good.

It would be a mistake to think that an individualist theory is necessarily egoist. Instead, egoism is merely one form of individualism, for utilitarianism, too, counts as a form of individualism. According to this theory, held by Adam Smith, a given economic agent, whether a person or institution, ought to do what will maximize expected subjective well-being over the long run, taking everyone potentially affected into account. Subjective wellbeing is normally construed as either the production of pleasure and reduction of pain, or as the satisfaction of desires as opposed to their frustration. Even though the interests of all are to be advanced as an aggregate, what has ultimate moral value from this perspective is an individual's pleasure/pain or satisfaction/frustration, neither of which makes any essential reference to anyone but the individual.²

Natural rights theories are also characteristically individualist. Many political philosophers read John Locke, for example, as maintaining that individuals have basic natural rights of self-ownership. From this perspective, the sole job of the state is to protect people from interference with their bodies and minds and to protect the property they have acquired upon having either laboured on it or been given it by some other rightful owner. Again, the individualism is palpable.

Consider, too, theories inspired by the views of Immanuel Kant, according to which economic behaviour, and decisions generally, should be a function of treating persons with respect, where persons are beings who have the capacity for autonomy or rationality. Normally these capacities make no essential reference to anyone but the individual who has them; they are construed as abilities to direct one's behaviour voluntarily or according to principled deliberation, as opposed to being determined by instinct or conditioning.³

Relatedly, there are desert-oriented theories, by which economic and other allocations of goods ought to be based on what individuals have come to deserve (for recent advocates, see Sher 1987; MacIntyre 2007, 244-252). Normally desert is cashed out in terms of the choices

an individual has made, such as how she has laboured or how she has elected to use her wealth. Those who have squandered their money gambling do not deserve to receive shares, while those who have invested in a prudent, entrepreneurial fashion do deserve them.

Finally, for now, note that even the recent appeal to capabilities is not particularly relational. According to the work of Amartya Sen (2009), for a key instance, the relevant capabilities are whichever ones we have most reason to value, which leaves the content of them open and does not require relating to others in certain ways. Although Sen of course believes that democratic bodies need to specify which capabilities are relevant for a given territory, that renders collective deliberation and decision merely a means by which to discover the right capabilities that are to be realized as ends; relationality does not inherently feature into the content of the capabilities themselves. Similarly, capabilities theorists will often point out that individuals need others in order to flourish, focusing on “[...] how social institutions affect capabilities in an instrumental way [...] and] how they also affect the very choices people make and the things they value, and thereby limit the autonomy of the individual” (Stewart 2013, 15). However, these are again considerations of mere means; none acknowledges that ways of relating between individuals are plausibly viewed as ends in themselves, which would involve an overhaul of the capabilities approach as it has most often been interpreted (cf. Hoffmann and Metz 2017).

From this sketch, one readily sees that individualism cuts across many of the usual ways of classifying theories of economic justice, e.g. egoist versus altruist, consequentialist versus deontological, welfarist versus resourcist, libertarian versus egalitarian, and so on. There is a real kernel of truth in the claim that the Western tradition over the past few hundred years has characteristically been individualist. There have of course been exceptions, with the views of Karl Marx (1844a, 1844b) and those influenced by him (e.g. Cohen 2009) being prominent. One can include here work by Martha Nussbaum, who, inspired by Marx and also

Aristotle, maintains that the human capacity for affiliation ought to ‘organize and pervade’ the other capabilities (2011, 39; see also Nussbaum 2000). That is indeed relationalism, but notice that it has not particularly influenced what have become the large fields of capabilities studies and development theory. As one commentator remarks, the “[...] human development approach [...] has been essentially individualistic, assuming that development is the expansion of individuals’ capabilities or freedoms” (Stewart 2013, 36). The point is that relational approaches to economics have not been the rule in the West, and that the relationalism one does find in it has been much more prominent, and also arguably more rich, in other, non-Western traditions.

The starkest contrast with individualism is corporatism, according to which moral status inheres not in properties internal to an individual, but rather those of a group. From this standpoint, wholes are what ultimately matter and merit moral treatment for their own sake, and not their parts as distinct from them. In the Western tradition, G. W. F. Hegel is sometimes read this way, where he is taken to ascribe moral significance to spirit, a supra-individual agency that realizes its freedom across societies. Also notable here is Aldo Leopold’s (1968) land ethic, which ascribes moral status to ecosystems.⁴

Although there are strains of corporatism in the African (e.g. Ake 1987; Kigongo 2002) and also Confucian (Li 2014, 13-14; 2016, 26-27) traditions, what stands out about them is rather their relationalism. It is the view that moral status is constituted by some kind of interactive property between one entity and another. Relationalism stands ‘in between’ individualism and corporatism. 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 member of a group, or, more carefully (if every individual is necessarily part of a group), for a reason other than the fact that it is a member. Similar to corporatism, though, a relational account accords no moral status to a

being on the basis of its intrinsic properties. A relational theory implies that something warrants moral consideration only if, and because, it exhibits some kind of attitudinal or causal property with regard to another being.

It is tempting to say that, for a relational approach to normativity, ‘relationships are what matter’. However, that way of putting the view is misleading, in two ways. First, one might instead prefer (as I do below) an account according to which moral status inheres not in a relationship between individuals, but rather in an individual’s relational or extrinsic properties. It counts as a relational theory, e.g. to judge a person to have a dignity in virtue of her extrinsic features, specifically her capacity to relate to other persons and animals in certain ways. Second, while a relational theory will naturally tend to instruct agents to form full-blown relationships of the relevant kinds, that does not mean that they alone can obligate within a relational ethical framework. Weaker ways of relating in terms of merely ‘interacting’, or even the mere capacity to interact in certain ways, might also obligate.

In the following section, I work mostly to advance some relational values prominent in the African tradition that I expect those from other indigenous non-Western cultures will find *prima facie* attractive. After that, I indicate what taking them seriously could mean for the global economy.

III. RELATIONAL ETHICS

One salient and philosophically interesting interpretation of African ethics is relational, and, specifically, communal. For many indigenous sub-Saharan societies, one’s basic goal in life should be to realize human excellence or what is called *ubuntu* in the famous vernacular in southern Africa, which one can do if and only if one lives communally (or harmoniously) with other persons or honours communal (harmonious) relationships with them.⁵ After spelling out one philosophical understanding of

African relational values, I briefly indicate how relationality figures in some additional indigenous non-Western worldviews.

An Afro-Relational Morality⁶

To begin to understand what communion (or harmony) amounts to in the African tradition, consider remarks from a variety of African thinkers. For example, the Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin says that for 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-independence era, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye, remarks, “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).

A South African public policy analyst, G. M. Nkondo, points out, “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).

Finally, the Kenyan historian of African philosophy D. A. 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 thinkers from different parts of Africa about what it is to commune or otherwise live morally with others suggest two recurrent themes (on which, see Metz 2013; 2017b).

On the one hand, there is a relationship of *identity*, a matter of considering oneself a part of the whole, being interdependent and sharing a fate, experiencing life as bound up with others, and being integrated with others. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of *solidarity*, achieving the good of all, considering and aiding, being committed to the good of the community, and being concerned for others' welfare.

These two facets of a communal relationship can be distinguished and reconstructed with some precision. For an overview, consider Figure 1:

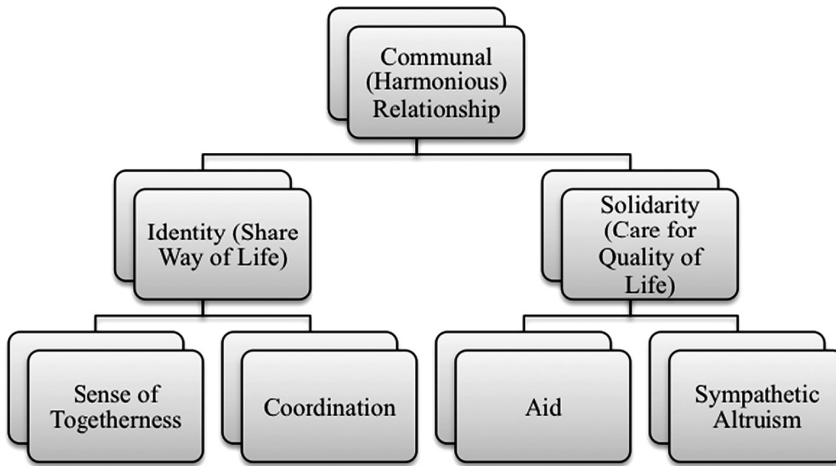


Figure 1 (Schematic Representation of Communion)

It is revealing to understand the relationship of ‘identifying’ with others or ‘sharing a way of life’ with them (i.e. being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of cohesion and cooperative behaviour consequent to them. The attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as a member of a group or relationship with the other and to refer to oneself as a ‘we’ (rather than an ‘I’), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what the other or one’s group does, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of the other’s nature and value. The cooperative behaviours include participating with others as opposed

to remaining isolated, being transparent about the terms of interaction, allowing others to make voluntary choices, acting on the basis of trust, and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that ‘this is who we are’.

What is labelled the relationship of ‘exhibiting solidarity’ with or ‘caring’ for others (i.e. acting for others’ good, etc.) is similarly aptly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behaviour. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented towards the other’s good, and they include an empathetic awareness of the other’s condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is, to improve the other’s state, but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person.

Bringing things together, one can interpret one major swathe of indigenous African thought about ethics by saying that an agent’s foremost goal should be to live a genuinely human way of life, which amounts to prizing communal (or harmonious) relationships, ones of both psychologically and behaviourally identifying with other persons and exhibiting solidarity with them, too. This analysis makes sense of Desmond Tutu’s terse remarks about ethics from a characteristically 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).

Roughly, then, right actions and just policies are those that express respect for communal or harmonious relationships, ones of sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life. Wrong ones will be those failing to honour communion, and particularly those that prize the discordant opposites of acting out of an ‘us versus them’ attitude, subordinating others, harming them, and doing so consequent to indifference to their good or cruelty.

More carefully, consider that the African ethic includes both impartial and partial dimensions, advanced as a philosophically attractive reconstruction of ‘traditional’ sub-Saharan thought. Regarding impartiality, many African philosophers believe that human beings have a dignity (e.g. Gyekye 2010, section 6), while most contemporary ethicists maintain the same, or at least that human persons have a full or at least very high moral status. By the above ethic, all human persons with the capacity to commune with others have a full moral status or a dignity, such that everyone is owed some basic level of moral treatment. Supposing that a person is by nature capable of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them, and that others could so relate with her, she merits respectful treatment. No innocent party may normally be treated negatively, e.g. subordinated or harmed, in serious ways in order to promote some actual or perceived good in the long run, while every innocent party has some (*pro tanto*) claim to aid from others in a position to help at little cost to themselves.

However, the ethic is understood to include a partial dimension, too, both as an interpretation of African thought and as a plausible approach. Traditionally speaking, sub-Saharans have tended to accord priority to blood relatives when it comes to positive duties to aid (e.g. Appiah 1998). However, by the present approach, one has *pro tanto* stronger obligations to allocate one’s labour, wealth, and related resources to family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and compatriots than to those with whom one has not communed. The longer and stronger the communal relating, the more of a duty to protect and develop it. The rationale for this position is that a key way to honour people in virtue of their capacity for relationship is to honour the actual relationships they have constructed. Such a principle accounts well for the intuition that one would be degrading one’s children not to look after them so as to meet the comparable needs of someone else’s children. Other people’s children do matter, and if they, say, could not acquire enough food, I could well have the most reason to buy it for them, if at the cost of not buying my children a video game. However, if I had to choose between providing adequate food to my

children or to someone else’s children who need it to a similar degree, I would have most moral reason to favour mine, probably since my ties with them are established and intimate.

This (roughly stated) combination of ascribing a dignity to everyone, treating all as potential sites of communion, but giving somewhat greater weight to those in actual communion, is, I submit, attractive and also relatively unique. It is different from the individualism that tends to give either moral significance only to oneself, as per egoism, or to require a strict impartiality amongst individuals, as per natural readings of, e.g., utilitarianism and desert theory. And while Kantianism can ground partiality on the voluntary assumption of duties to aid, e.g., by having made a promise to help, a relational ethic, or at least this African one, can ground a category of unassumed duties to particular others, where they arise because one has been in relationship.

Additional Relational Moralities

Some of these values, particularly in respect of solidarity, have also been salient in the Confucian tradition. It, too, is well interpreted as relational, and, indeed, talk of ‘harmony’ is also widely taken to be foundational, with it 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), and the “[...] cardinal cultural value in Chinese society” (Wei and Li 2013, 60).

The Confucian conception of harmony prescribes integrating differences in a way that preserves their distinctness while creating something new or useful (Li 2006, 2014). Think, for example, of a soup composed of water, onions, carrots, other vegetables, and spices. This conception of harmony is different from the African conception in certain ways, especially in that, for Confucianism, roles that include superiors and subordinates are central to the sort of integration that should take place between people. Most salient are the relationships between parents and

children and political elites and the masses, where the more qualified direct the less qualified in ways expected to be good for them.

Note, however, the substantial common ground between them, specifically the fact that Confucian harmony, like the African sort, exalts caring for others' quality of life. Central to Confucian harmony is *ren*, which is roughly human excellence realized through beneficence. To exhibit *ren* involves doing what will improve the quality of others' lives consequent to emotions such as sympathy, and acting in the other supportive ways that family members characteristically do with each other. One influential Confucian scholar remarks that *ren* (or *jen*) is “[...] benevolence, love, altruism, tenderness, charity, compassion, human-heartedness, humaneness, and so on” (Li 1994, 72). These and related values have tended to make the indigenous African and Chinese traditions similar, at least when compared to the West, for putting familial ties first, eschewing retributive punishment in favour of moral reform, and rejecting competitive models of political decision-making and instead seeking out approaches that are good for everyone (see, for example, Metz 2017c).

Relationality, and specifically harmony, is also salient in South American discussions of indigenous values and how they might influence socio-economic practices. Tending to go under the heading of the Spanish phrase *buen vivir* (living well), this ethic “[...] seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between mankind and nature and a social equilibrium within societies” (Agostino and Dübgen 2012, 6). There are two key ideas in this remark and others summing up *buen vivir*, such as that its aim is to achieve “[...] harmony between human beings, and also between human beings and nature” (Gudynas, quoted in Balch 2013).

One is the idea of relating to other people in mutually supportive ways to achieve an objectively decent quality of life, one that is neither consumerist nor competitive. In part *buen vivir* involves “[...] acting in concert with others in a community with reciprocity as key element and the aim of living well, but not necessarily living better than others” (Agostino and Dübgen 2012, 6).

The second idea is of relating to nature in harmonious ways that not merely “[...] take account of the actual social and ecological costs of using its resources for the wellbeing of its members and enable the natural environment to regenerate itself” (Agostino and Dübgen 2012, 6), but also treat it “[...] as having inherent, and thus never merely instrumental, value for humans” (Walldmueller and Rodríguez 2018). Following from an ethic according to which one is to seek out “[...] harmony with Mother Earth”, where “Mother Earth is a sacred, living being” (Plurinational State of Bolivia 2014, 22; 12), for example, has been a Bolivian law prescribing the right of the earth “[...] to support the restoration and regeneration capabilities of all its components that enables the continuity of life cycles” (Plurinational State of Bolivia 2014, 29).

Indeed, two scholars have recently suggested that “harmony is the mother of all values” (Bell and Mo 2014) for most cultures other than ones that are WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). The conceptions of harmony vary amongst societies, as this brief sketch indicates, but the recurrent focus on relational values stands out. The ethic of care has arisen in the North over the past thirty-five years or so, but it is quite a newcomer compared to these other traditions in the Global South that have been around for several centuries (more than 2500 years in the case of Confucianism).

IV. APPLYING THE AFRO-RELATIONAL ETHIC TO ECONOMICS

Having explained what a relational approach to normativity is, and laid out some specific relational ethics, particularly an African one, it is now time to consider what they entail for economic practices. In the following, I consider how international and domestic economic practices should be changed if especially the African account of communion were taken seriously, seeking proposals that indicate a real break from the status quo but that are not unrealistic. I make at least one suggestion for each of four major issues, regarding appropriating objects from nature, producing goods

and services, distributing them between people, and consuming them upon them having been obtained.

Appropriation

Is it possible for an individual to own land, water, minerals, and the like, i.e. for a person to have morally rightful control over large swathes of natural resources? If so, under what conditions can one come to be in ethically permissible possession of them, such that one has the right to destroy them, bequeath them to one's children, or sell them to whomever one likes? The question is not about whether one may drink from a stream or take an apple from a tree, but rather whether, and, if so, how one may acquire substantial parts of nature for oneself.

No plausible ethic would justify conquest and plunder, taking over the best farmland and richest mineral deposits regardless of who had been living on them first and what they were doing with them. So, colonialism of the sort that had been practiced by some European powers, where individuals forcibly took what they wanted and used their superior firepower to hold onto it, cannot be morally justified.

However, there are intellectual resources within the European tradition that are widely taken to justify individual ownership. In particular, a salient approach, grounded on the ideas of John Locke, is to regard nature as unowned, and then to justify appropriating significant amounts for oneself, so long as no other individuals are harmed in the process. By this account, taking an oasis and forbidding others from using it would be unjust, but taking it, ensuring the water is clean, and then charging an affordable fee to access it might not be. If so, then one could permissibly give the oasis business to one's children or sell it to someone else who would charge a higher price (although one probably would not be permitted to destroy the oasis). This approach to acquiring property out of nature has guided much thought and practice in the modern era.

A striking feature of the African tradition, and many other indigenous non-Western value systems, is the view that an individual cannot rightly own large amounts of land and other natural resources (see, for example, Chao 1971; Bell 2003, 224-226; Kelbessa 2005, 22; Plurinational State of Bolivia 2014, 8). Instead, these are invariably deemed to be always already owned, whether by God, the human race as a whole, or a clan as a body that ranges over many generations. The message to the individual from beyond the West is largely: ‘Those minerals, that farmland, this river are not yours’.

Note that denying that an individual can ever own significant parts of nature does not necessarily mean that markets are unjustified. Relational values could prescribe allowing people to have legal control over land and the like for limited periods of time, which would facilitate buying and selling (cf. discussion in the Confucian tradition by Fan 2010, 64-67; and Ho 2016). However, such control would probably not count as full-blown ownership, in that it would be subject to many moral and legal constraints, the overarching one being whether control either impedes or helps to realize relational values such as cooperation and mutual aid. The familiar idea of stewardship is what stands out here; one is entitled to make use of natural resources, so long as one does so in ways that not merely do not involve subordination of and harm to others in the act of appropriation or consequent to it, but also foster coordination and help.

Returning to the oasis case, relevant factors to consider go far beyond whether any current individuals would be made worse off by one’s fencing off the oasis and regulating access to it in search of profit. Has everyone in the society agreed to let one do so, so that taking control of the oasis would be a kind of joint activity? Or would it be reasonable for present and future generations of one’s community (if not of humanity) to agree to that in the light of relational values? Would taking control of the oasis lead to feelings of envy and related kinds of psychological distance between one and others? Or could it instead somehow be done in

a way that enhanced people's sense of togetherness? Would appropriating the oasis mean that wealth would become concentrated to such a degree that people would have to submit to one's directives for most of their daily lives in order to afford the water and other necessities of life? Or could one rather take control of the oasis in such a way as to enhance cooperation between people, say, by giving them votes pertaining to how it would be deployed and sharing profits with them? Would water be quickly sold off for the sake of short-term profit, benefiting only the present generation of humans? Or would it sustainably support many future generations of human beings and also animals, so that becoming owner of the oasis would be a kind of beneficence? These questions are standardly neglected by the Lockean tradition, but they would be central to a communal morality.

Applied to the global economy, a relational approach, typified by African communalism, entails that ownership of natural resources should not necessarily be deemed a function of who lives in the territory where they are to be found. The oil that is under the ground in some parts of the world but not others does not ultimately belong merely to those who live there, even if they used no force to reside there, but instead to the global community. That does not necessarily mean that there should be a single world government that nationalizes all oil, or that states that elect to retain all oil in their territories are invariably liable to military intervention. It does, however, at least mean that those in possession of oil have a duty of some strength to share it with others who need it to live a decent quality of life, and not merely with those who have the strongest purchasing power.

Although Hobbesian egoists and Lockean self-ownership theorists might well reject such a redistributive principle, Millian utilitarians need not. For all that has been said so far, it is not individualism as such that permits appropriating substantial natural resources for oneself.

However, it is of interest that relational values are an independent source of justification for global redistribution, while also justifying a variety of other intuitively plausible approaches to global economics,

considered below. Plus, even though utilitarianism can justify the substantial redistribution of resources found in one territory to people in other ones, note that it still fails to capture intuitions about how to appropriate them properly as well as relational values do. For example, imagine that a state had to choose between allocating oil to its citizens or to foreigners who needed it only marginally more. Then, the state would have most moral reason to favour its own citizens, which a relational theory such as the African or Confucian accounts for well by virtue of partial ties being given some real moral weight, but which the strict impartiality of utilitarianism does not.

For another example, suppose there were a minority of foreigners who badly needed the oil to approach a decent quality of life, and a much larger group of foreigners who did not need the oil for that but who would gain marginally in wellbeing. Utilitarianism would favour the latter if the aggregate sum of welfare were greater, whereas relational values of beneficence would likely prescribe appropriating the oil so as to bring the worst-off up to an adequate level.

Production

Individualist ethics tend to justify competitive approaches to economic production, where business owners seek the greatest share of a market for the least cost of land, capital, and labour-power, workers seek the most income in exchange for the least amount of effort, and consumers seek the most goods and services for the lowest price. By many Western accounts, such approaches best respect people's autonomy-based rights or maximize the general welfare; one scholar has even argued they give individuals what they deserve for being entrepreneurial, investing prudently, contributing to others' wellbeing, and the like (see Kershnar 2005).

As mentioned in the previous sub-section, relational ethics need not eschew markets, particularly when they would be useful in pulling many people out of poverty, as they have been in East Asia over the past few

decades. However, I suspect (with Gbadegesin 1991, 215-261) that in the ideal case relationality prescribes some kind of democratically planned socialism. In many indigenous sub-Saharan societies, instead of those living on a plot of land being solely responsible for gathering up the produce from it and seeking to maximize profit for themselves, all those who had harvesting to do would collectively move from field to field to help one another and the resultant food was often shared (called *letsema* in southern Africa; see, for example, Letseka 2000). The lack of competition in such a production process is probably a direct function of an ethic prescribing a sense of togetherness, cooperative participation, mutual aid, and action for one another's sake.

Setting socialism aside, agents could still seek out participatory projects when producing goods and services. For example, suppose that it would be worth constructing libraries where there are not currently any, and that the choice were between a non-local NGO coming in and doing all the work on its own, on the one hand, or getting a variety of local agents to lend a hand, on the other. There would be substantial reason to favour the latter approach, supposing it were not grossly inefficient compared to the former. For instance, a coordinating agent such as a government might ask: construction companies to build new rooms at no or low cost; wealthier individuals with extra books to donate some to the libraries; student artists to help decorate in ways expressive of the local culture for a reasonable fee; retired persons from the local community to volunteer their time; foreign firms to give some computer equipment; and Western development projects for funds to support such a project in systematic ways. And this agent could widely publicize, on the Internet, radio, and television, a list of who has contributed and how, indicating how far it has come toward the goal of X number of new libraries and how far it has yet to go.

Here are two additional changes to the production process that relationality would likely prescribe. First, a business owner who accepts an Afro-communal ethic, or some similar relational morality, would probably

not deploy labour-saving technology, if it were not necessary for the firm to take in a decent amount of profit for the foreseeable future or to make a qualitatively superior product for consumers. Those influenced by African values tend to prefer what has been called an ‘economy of affection’ (Zein-Elabdin 2011, 224-225), in which intimates are employed (at least by small-scale, private owners) and in which those who have been employed are deemed to be intimates. Where a firm has had a particularly long and strong bond with workers, moral partiality means it must go out its way for them to some real degree (on which see Woermann and Engelbrecht 2019), and so, in part, must be concerned with the lack of income that they, and hence their families, would receive in a society that largely apports wealth to labour.

In addition, setting aside considerations of remuneration, the fact of working at a job also matters. By the African ethic, one important way of communing with others is by labouring in ways that are expected to make them better off. As Augustine Shutte remarks in one of the first books devoted to southern African moral and political ideals,

In an ethic of *ubuntu* ownership and property [...] only get their meaning and purpose from their relation to work as a means to personal growth and community [...]. They are justified insofar as they enable productive work for the common good, unjustified insofar as they prevent it (2001, 159; see also Bujo 1997, 164).

So, losing a job means losing not merely the ability to support one’s family with an income, but also the ability, through one’s labour, to help others achieve their goals and improve their lives, and thereby to realize one’s humanness.

In sum, a relational ethic would likely forbid laying off workers when it would merely mean that profit would be a bit less for shareholders and goods would be a bit more expensive for consumers. One might object that doing whatever it takes to maintain long-standing ties with workers could bankrupt a firm. However, in that event, the cost would indeed be

too high. If a firm is set in a competitive environment, then it is reasonable for it to do what is necessary for it to survive and flourish to a reasonable degree. However, where replacing workers with machines were not necessary for that, it is probably unjustified by at least Afro-communal values.

For another example of how relational values prescribe changes to economic production, consider the current banking system. Much of one's ability to start up a new business is a function of private banks, which lend money in order to maximize profit for shareholders. Although there are financial institutions with a global influence that are not strictly profit driven, they are by and large controlled by those who already have lots of wealth. For example, the World Bank, nominally part of the United Nations system, is ultimately owned by member governments, with votes proportionate to shares. Similarly, votes in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are determined largely by how much money a given country has put into it.

If relational values were more influential in the financial sector, then there would be a much broader ownership of, and even-handed control over, lending institutions. For example, those inspired by indigenous Afro-communal values have tended to favour an arrangement where many different individuals pool their funds and then loan them out either without seeking interest or setting a low interest rate, known as *stokvels* in South Africa (Louw 2001, 24-25), *tontine* in Senegal (Berg 2007, 552), and 'credit unions' in the West. Relatedly, the scheme might charge 'normal' interest but distribute proceeds on a profit-sharing basis to members.

The value of participation would entail that many individuals with varying amounts of wealth should have a stake in the business, and the values of togetherness, cooperation, beneficence, and altruism would mean that there should be a comparable distribution of power in the way decisions are made. Indeed, it is widely thought that African values prescribe consensus in the face of contested decision-making (e.g. Wiredu 1996, 172-190; Gyekye 1997, 124-140) as what would foster the most

intense sort of cooperation and best promote the common good. Requiring unanimous agreement amongst members' representatives about how to lend to potentially productive enterprises might best unify them and ensure that the interests of minorities or the poorest are adequately represented.

How, practically, to change investment patterns around the world? Perhaps the decision-making bodies of the World Bank and IMF could be infused with more communion, or governments could help get highly decentralized *stokvels* started and regulated, or many more state banks could be established, as has been useful in China.

Distribution

Here I discuss two major respects in which relational values typical of *ubuntu* and other non-Western traditions would not allow the market to determine the way goods, services, property, and money are distributed, even with some kind of redistributive taxation that would provide a basic floor of subsistence for everyone. Interestingly, they also differ from familiar utilitarian and prioritarian (Rawlsian) principles of distributive justice.

First off, consider to whom a business manager should sell a good. Both a market orientation and a shareholder theory of duties would direct her to sell to whichever customers would pay the highest price, wherever they might be in the world. Utilitarianism suggests selling to whichever customers most need the item in terms of their wellbeing, while prioritarianism would have her sell to the worst-off, those customers with the fewest resources, where both of these approaches could well recommend selling for less than one could have received from others.

A relational ethic, as mentioned above, normally ascribes full moral status to all persons, or at least those with very widely shared capacities for, say, other-regarding virtue, and so would ground some reason for a manager to pay attention to the worst-off, wherever they might be on the

globe. However, that is not the only morally relevant consideration. In addition, as also mentioned above, the fact of existing communion has some importance, meaning that ties between the firm and certain customers have independent ethical weight for relational ethics such as Afro-communalism and Confucianism.

So, for example, rather than export goods to the global market, African traders, or at least those who prize communion, would often prefer to make goods that would benefit their compatriots. There is something *prima facie* wrong with a situation, evidently such as in Togo, “[...] where in a country with coffee crops it is impossible to drink local coffee (there is only imported instant one)” (Lubieniecka 2013, 11-12). Although all human persons matter insofar as they are by nature capable of communion, there is extra reason to serve those with whom one has actually communed. Therefore, farmers who produce raw coffee beans have a *pro tanto* duty to sell them to those in their own country, as opposed to those far away with whom they have no real ties. Where a country lacks the technological means to process coffee beans, it should go out of its way to acquire them. In addition, other, much wealthier countries should enable it to do so. From the perspective of a relational ethic, that would in many cases constitute a more fitting kind of aid from Western governments and the United Nations than merely assisting farmers to sell on the world market.

Consider, now, a second respect in which a relational ethic entails that the distribution of wealth should not be determined by a world market, even with some kind of basic minimum that enables people to avoid extreme poverty. For both African and Confucian moralities, the inequality of wealth across the world between countries, and also within many countries, is much too extreme. Great inequalities of wealth undermine relational values, which, at least in their African guise, prescribe what I have called a ‘balanced’ distribution.

To see what balancing involves, think about how a family intuitively should distribute its resources. I submit that it should do so as to ensure that everyone receives some substantial and comparable meeting of needs,

but with special consideration going to both the least flourishing and the most promising. When allocating time, money, and whatever else is likely to improve others' lives, a head of household should distribute them so that everyone gets a similar share, but with the particularly talented and the particularly untalented each getting something greater than a strictly equal share.

For example, consider that if only one child were gifted, say at piano, the *bulk* of resources should not go to her. However, she should get more than an average child, as the right way to exhibit solidarity with her. A head of household would be wrong to parcel out resources in a strictly equal manner, because the talented piano player should reasonably get more than that, if necessary to develop an unusually creative ability and thereby promote her good. Although she would normally be expected to exercise her talent in ways that are also good for others, intuitively as a head of household one should act for her sake beyond merely her ability to act for the sake of others.

Another reason to avoid strict equality would be that a particularly untalented child should get more than others. Yet, again, a head of household would be wrong to devote the *bulk* of resources to the worst-off child, particularly if he were handicapped, so that there would be little or nothing left for those able to flourish at a higher level. However, a handicapped child should get somewhat more than an equal share, so as to give him a decent life.

These reflections suggest a kind of balancing, in which there is no great inequality between family members and all receive some real consideration, but those who need more resources either to reach a decent minimum of good or to approximate a maximum should receive a larger share. This sort of scheme is not utilitarian, as it in principle focuses to some degree on those living the worst lives, and it is not prioritarian, as it also implies that those who are not living the worst lives (or who have the least wealth) could have a principled claim to flourish, and it is further not sufficientarian, as people should generally receive a comparable share

without great inequality, and it is, still more, not strictly egalitarian, as the least flourishing and the most talented should get more than others. It is well known that, for much of the African and Confucian traditions, society ought to be modelled on familial relationships. It is worth considering this balancing model at the national level, and perhaps even at the international one, where the respects in which balancing differs from other, more familiar principles in the Western tradition on the face of it count as advantages.

One might object that the balancing model applied domestically or globally would have the counterintuitive implication that the rich should be supported at the expense of those with middle to low incomes. However, here are two reasons why this prescription is unlikely to follow from a balancing principle. For one, the balancing principle prescribes giving somewhat extra consideration to those who are particularly talented, not those who are particularly wealthy. Talent is distributed widely amongst various economic classes. For another, it is probable that attending to the needs of the worst off would require redistribution away from those with large amounts of wealth. Substantial taxation of at least the millionaires and billionaires is on the cards so as to meet people's needs.

Consider the way some specific relational values, particularly those of African communion, support a balanced distribution more than a greatly unequal one. As I have argued elsewhere in some detail (Metz 2015), great inequalities of wealth undermine a sense of togetherness within a society and between nations, enable the rich to subordinate the poor both within the workplace and in government, fail to do what would improve the lives of those with less, and hinder sympathy and related kinds of emotions on the part of the well off.

Friends of prioritarianism, or the Rawlsian difference principle, will object that, in some situations, inequalities can be to the benefit of those with the fewest resources. However, even if it were true that the worst-off would have somewhat less wealth with less inequality, there can be good moral reason to doubt that more inequality would be more just. Why?

Because wealth is not the only morally relevant consideration; so are relational values. Depending on how much wealth those with the least already have, it could be worth trading off some additional wealth in favour of living in a society in which there are more beneficent and otherwise cohesive relationships between people.

Or if the reader is not moved by the prospect of more communion in a society or across the globe, she might be by the opportunity to avoid discord. Inequality is thought by sociologists to foster property crimes and those attended by violence such as armed robbery. Even if people with the least money had somewhat more, the degree of inequality needed to produce that wealth could be such as to foster division and ill-will, the opposites of communion, in the form of other-regarding criminal behaviour. On the global stage, where poorer countries usually lack the ability to forcibly take from richer ones, there is a tendency for those that feel socio-economically dominated by the West to act contrary to it in other ways, e.g., relating more to politics and human rights, probably in order to enjoy some sense of independence.

Ideally, international organizations would adopt policies by which to reduce great inequalities across the world. More pragmatically, however, poor countries can and should find short- to medium-term ways to keep wealth from flowing to richer ones. For one, they might employ protectionist measures. It is of course unjust for African and other economically poor countries to be told to open up their agricultural markets when European countries and the United States notoriously subsidize their farmers. However, note that a more just global order would require more than merely tit-for-tat, that is, a similar lowering of trade barriers. Instead, where Western farmers are by and large well off and African farmers are not, for example, African governments should protect their farmers and Western governments and related bodies such as the European Commission should not protect theirs (on which see Moellendorf 2009). Fair trade sometimes honours communion more than free trade.

Additional strategies include finding ways of making exchanges with foreign capital both productive of real wealth and stable (for an overview of salient options, see Legum 2002, 67-71; 88-90; 102-105). So, for instance, efforts should be made to prevent a poor country's currency from being subjected to speculation, perhaps by adopting the Tobin Tax on foreign exchange transactions, or by pegging the currency at a fixed rate. In addition, countries might place conditions on foreign investment, such as that a firm must employ a certain number of local workers or may not exit until a certain number of years have passed.

The obvious concern with such measures is capital flight, or deterrence where it has not yet set foot, as has notoriously happened in Zimbabwe for two decades. That is reason for countries to adopt such measures *en masse* where possible, say, through regional trade bodies or something like the African Union, so that there are fewer places for capital to run. Where that is not forthcoming, then a nation should take incremental steps and find creative ways to entice investment despite the increased costs to investors.

Consumption

In this last major section I address the question of which sorts of goods and services should be produced by an economy, and, secondarily, what should be given when it comes to foreign aid. Both a market orientation and a shareholder theory of duties would direct a firm to produce whatever would most satisfy demand. Utilitarianism suggests selling or donating whatever would maximize net subjective wellbeing, whether that is pleasure or preference satisfaction, Rawlsian prioritarianism prescribes the allocation of means that are generally useful for the attainment of goals, with money being central, and the capabilities approach characteristically either leaves the content to be determined by democratic deliberation or specifies a list of capabilities, most of which make no essential reference to any other person but the one with the capability.

By a relational ethic, in contrast, the relevant goods and services are those that enable people to do things such as enjoy a sense of togetherness, be tolerant and inclusive, cooperate, create something new together by coordinating different abilities, help each other, and do these sorts of things out of sympathy and compassion. Important, here, is the idea that one way of helping others is not merely to make them better off, but also to make them better people. For the African tradition, and also clearly for the Confucian, what is distributed by an economy should substantially be the sorts of things that foster relational virtue. From this sort of perspective, as one elderly African woman once remarked to me, “[...] the problem with being poor is that I don’t have anything to give to others.” For her, poverty is objectionable in large part not because of something intrinsic to her, such as her inability to avoid suffering or to make an array of choices or to control her environment, but rather because she cannot help others.

Money, food, clothes, housing, and education are relevant goods and services, since they are likely to improve people’s quality of life, and since they can typically share these things with others. However, what should also be distributed are things likely to repair broken relationships, to create new harmonious ones, as well as to protect and enhance ones that already exist. For example, a society would be richer for having the following six benefits, and poorer without them (with several borrowed from Metz 2011, 238-239).

Women’s Shelters. Poor women are often forced to stay with abusive men because they and their children have nowhere else to go. Providing temporary shelter for them, and ideally subsidized housing, would help end unloving relationships, and enable many women and children to seek out more loving ones.

Therapy. Broken families, households headed by orphans, by teenagers, or by grandmothers, alcoholism, and an inability to resolve conflicts with emotional insight and communicative clarity are common problems. Familial relationships, which have the potential to be the most intensely harmonious, would be greatly facilitated by the provision of therapeutic social services such as couples counselling and drug rehabilitation.

Villages within Cities. What if a state designed housing so that a dozen or so units formed a compound reserved for those with children and those interested in supporting them? Perhaps the units form a circle, so that the middle is a play area for children, which all could keep an eye on. Two or three of the residents could stay home to watch over the younger children during the day and be financially supported by others who work in the formal economy. Imagine that residents would share a limited number of tools, cars, and similar resources with each other.

Neighbourhood Parks. The combination of a car-culture and widespread criminal activity makes it difficult for people in urban environments to feel a sense of togetherness and to engage in joint projects. Funding safe, well-kept parks in neighbourhoods, not to mention inclusive activities in them such as fairs and musical events, would help overcome local residents' isolation.

Reconciliatory Projects. Many societies are splintered among dimensions such as young/old, urban/rural, black/white, female/male, rich/poor, locals/foreigners, and criminals/law-abiding residents. Some of these fractures would begin to mend if there were, say, restorative justice programmes in which offenders work off debt to their victims, including the wider community, and youth service programmes in which unemployed matriculants would build houses for the elderly.

Integrating Students. Students should be instructed in a way that would be likely to foster identification with one another, discourage cliques based on wealth and status, fight stigma and alienation, and unite while leading to respect for difference.

The above are six examples of the kinds of goods that a business, state, or NGO would be sensible to market, donate, or otherwise facilitate, if it wants to help others in ways that prize communal or harmonious relationships. They would not merely make people better off in terms of their wellbeing, but also better persons, for participating in positive sorts of relationships, or at least curtailing negative ones.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to provide a comprehensive account of how relational values salient in indigenous non-Western traditions might bear on economic practices. After having sketched an African conception of communal or harmonious relationship, and noting parallels with the East Asian Confucian and South American *buen vivir* traditions, I indicated what such relationality entails for appropriation, production, distribution, and consumption, suggesting that its implications are *prima facie* plausible.

I have tried to avoid utopianism, setting aside larger discussions of, for example, socialism, and focusing on policy changes that appear more realistic. However, readers might still be concerned about how to motivate people to live more relationally, especially where they have been reared in individualist cultures. Would not these proposals require sacrifices from the rich that they will refuse to make, and do they not idealistically presume that we are capable of being sympathetic with more than just our immediate family and friends? These issues of moral psychology need to be taken up in detail, supposing one finds the economic philosophy reasonably attractive.⁷

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NOTES

1 By ‘Western’, ‘African’, and similar geographical labels, I mean features that have been salient in a locale for a long period of time that differentiate it from many other locales. These terms therefore imply neither that these properties are only in a certain locale, nor that they are always in (or throughout) it. So, while the modern Western tradition is fairly labelled ‘individualist’, this is consistent with recognizing a relational strand in it, visible particularly in the young Karl Marx and those inspired by him (on which see section II).

2 The same also goes for many objective conceptions of wellbeing, e.g. in terms of an individual’s physical and psychological needs.

3 Things are a bit more complicated when it comes to Kant himself. According to him, some of the reasons one finds upon *a priori* reflection are moral ones, and so one might think they include essential reference to others. However, they do not. Although one must treat the humanity of others with respect if they exist, one would still have duties to oneself if no one else existed. A stronger case for Kantian relationalism is T. M. Scanlon’s contractualism (1998).

4 Relatedly, there is the strain of Western communitarianism according to which sound moral norms are, at least in large part, those that a certain society has accepted for a long while or that have been central to a people's identity (e.g. Walzer 1983). Such relativism is quite distinct from the relationalism advanced here, according to which individuals matter morally, albeit in virtue of their extrinsic properties.

5 For overviews of this ethic in the context of a variety of sub-Saharan peoples, see Nkulu-N'Sengha (2009).

6 This sub-section borrows from various previously published works, including Metz (2016; 2017a).

7 I am thankful for written comments from two careful and thorough anonymous reviewers for *Ethical Perspectives*.