

## Virtue in African Ethics as Living Harmoniously

THADDEUS METZ

### 9.1. INTRODUCING AFRICAN HARMONY

As two scholars have noted, for much of the non-Western world, harmony is “the mother of all values” (Bell and Mo 2014; cf Li 2020), as opposed to either happiness or freedom. I believe that is clearly true for at least indigenous East Asian, Latin American, and African moral-philosophies,<sup>1</sup> in which harmony is often taken to be a central—even foundational—value. Relational concepts such as compassion, generosity, reciprocity, solidarity, balancing, integration, and cooperation feature prominently in these ethical traditions and differ markedly from characteristically Western values of cost-benefit analysis, authenticity, self-governance, and individual rights.

Although the ethical traditions from the Global South are closer to each other than they are to the West (or Global North) for focusing

1. For some discussion of them in relation to each other, see Metz (2014, 2016, 2017a, 2020a); Waldmüller (2014).

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on harmonious relationships, their conceptions of harmony differ.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I expound and defend a philosophical interpretation of the way harmony bears on virtue and vice in the African tradition, addressing myself to an international readership. By “African” I mean philosophy informed by beliefs and practices that have been salient for several centuries in many parts of the continent, particularly in the sub-Saharan region, and that are distinct from Christian and Islamic influences. African conceptions of virtue/vice are still relatively unknown to a global audience of moral philosophers and related inquirers, with my aims in this chapter being to familiarize them with one such conception and to argue that it merits serious consideration.

I begin by surveying various interpretations of harmony that have been given by African philosophers, to give readers a broad sense of the field (section 9.2). In the following section I draw on some of them in order to provide a philosophical interpretation of “A person is a person through other persons,” which is often taken to capture indigenous African morality (section 9.3). According to the initial formulation of this theory of moral virtue, human excellence is constituted by respect for other people’s capacity to relate harmoniously, where vice is a failure to do so and especially a matter of being discordant toward innocent parties. I next evaluate this virtue theory, first by showing that it accounts well for many widely shared intuitions about virtue and vice, and then by considering how it might be revised to deal with criticisms, according to which virtue can be exhibited upon engaging with beings in addition to other persons,

2. For two examples, the most influential East Asian approach to harmony, which is Confucian, is essentially hierarchical in ways that the Latin American and African typically are not, whereas the Latin American conception of harmony includes nature as a whole as a *relatum* in ways the East Asian and African characteristically do not (Metz 2020a). A systematic exploration of the similarities and differences between the various non-Western understandings of harmony has yet to be undertaken.



such as oneself and non-human animals (section 9.4). I conclude by indicating what comparative and evaluative work might be done elsewhere with respect to the African harmony-based virtue ethic (section 9.5).

## 9.2. HARMONY IN AFRICAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Written African philosophy is new, having emerged only in the 1960s, upon the demise of colonialism and the rise of literacy. Despite only three generations of African moral philosophers having published their work, there is a striking diversity in their thought. One swathe of it—not all of it—focuses on harmony, which, in turn, has been conceived in a variety of ways. In this section, I canvass an array of views from African ethicists about the nature and value of harmony, which should help introduce the global reader to the field. Specifically, I note different perspectives about how much of ethical life harmony is meant to capture, whether it is to be valued as a means or an end, whether it is composed of imperceptible (“spiritual”) forces and beings, and how the nature of the concord is understood. In the following section, appealing to some of these African perspectives on harmony and not others, I articulate a theory of virtue and vice.

Those not intimately familiar with African ideas about normativity might nonetheless be aware that reconciliation is a salient theme in it. Instead of retribution or deterrence being the primary response to wrongdoing, many African philosophers prescribe a process that would ultimately see the wrongdoer reintegrated into the community. Speaking of his people from Nigeria, but intending his point to have a wider implication, one philosopher remarks,

[J]ust as a stone thrown into a pond breaks up the reflections you could previously see in the water, so any criminal act can disrupt the existential harmony in the traditional Igbo society. . . . [E]very crime or offense attracts commensurate punishment aimed at reinstating the community’s ontological equilibrium. This, in the main, constituted justice in the indigenous Igbo culture. (Aja 1997, 356, 366; see also Ramose 2001; Mkhize 2008, 38-39)

Some thinkers maintain that one should seek out harmony in merely some spheres of life or that it accounts for only part of morality, such as criminal justice.

However, more common has been the view that harmony should be sought out in every domain and is a criterion of morality generally. Peter Paris, a theologian who produced a study of the moral beliefs of indigenous sub-Saharan societies, posits that for them “all human activity was justifiable only in so far as it contributed to the preservation of order and harmony. . . . Harmony is the paramount goal within and among all the possible relationships within the cosmological order, and herein lies its ethical significance” (Paris 1995, 43, 56; see also Murove 2007, 181; Mkhize 2008).

Among those who share the views that harmony is to be pursued throughout one’s day-to-day life and that it is essential to morality, there is nonetheless disagreement about whether it is valuable merely as a reliable means or as an end in itself. One of the most influential African ethicists, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye, has held that harmony is to be consistently sought out ultimately as a mere means to the end of fostering the common good:

[M]oral norms and virtues can be said to include. . . . any action or behavior conducive to the promotion of the well-being of others. . . . A harmonious cooperative social life requires that



individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interests of others, if that society is to be a moral society. . . . If social arrangement is to maximize the good for all, then that arrangement will have to include rules the pursuit of which will conduce to the attainment of communal welfare. (Gyekye 1997, 50, 72)

Similarly, other African ethicists have maintained that harmonious ways of relating are to be regularly pursued as ways of fostering vitality, which alone is to be valued for its own sake. A Nigerian theologian remarks,

The promotion of life is therefore the determinant principle of African traditional morality and this promotion is guaranteed only in the community. Living harmoniously within a community is therefore a moral obligation ordained by God for the promotion of life. . . . Of all the breaches of social and cosmic harmony in traditional Africa, interrupting human life (whether one's own or another's), which the harmony is meant to enable and promote, is about the most serious. (Onah n.d.)

In contrast to deeming harmony to be valuable merely as a means to the promotion of well-being or life, others in the African tradition think of it as the highest intrinsic value or the sole final end. In addition to the remark from Paris above (and from Desmond Tutu below), there is the claim that "in the indigenous Igbo society the perfect person was the person with a good heart, that is, a person who has learned the art of living and promoting the essential harmonies in life" (Aja 1997, 354).

Yet another distinction concerns the metaphysical status of what is held to constitute harmony. Traditionally speaking, the world is thought to be composed of a variety of forces, some of which are perceptible and others of which in principle are not. The imperceptible

(or "spiritual" or "supernatural") realm is characteristically thought to include God, lesser spiritual beings, and ancestors, understood to be wise founders of a clan who have long survived the deaths of their bodies and continue not only to live on earth but also to guide the clan. Appealing to this ontology, some maintain, "Sustaining the universe by maintaining harmony or balance between its two spheres and among all beings is the most important ethical responsibility for humanity, and it forms the basis of any individual's moral character" (Magesa 1997, 73; see also Paris 1995, 43; Murove 2007; Mkhize 2008).

These days, however, it is also common to encounter purely perceptible ("physical" or "naturalist") accounts of what harmony involves. For example, in contemporary South Africa, it is common for what is known as an *ubuntu* (humanness) ethic to be interpreted as prescribing harmony merely among human beings (where they are not necessarily deemed to have an imperceptible or spiritual nature). A former Constitutional Court justice there, who appealed to an *ubuntu* ethic in some of her legal decisions, says that "harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group" (Mokgoro 1998, 3), while two other intellectuals maintain that *ubuntu* is "an inner state, an orientation, and a good disposition that motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel, and act in a humane way towards others. It is a way of life that. . . is best realized or evident in harmonious relations in society" (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 218).

Finally, African philosophers differ over how to understand the concord or integration that is constitutive of harmony. Focusing on harmony as a way that human persons can interrelate, another one of the most influential African philosophers, the Ghanaian Kwasi Wiredu, maintains that "the rationale of a moral rule is the harmonization of the interests of the individual with the interests of others in society, and its motivation is the sympathetic appreciation of those



interests" (Wiredu 1995, 393). By Wiredu's approach, living harmoniously is roughly the disposition to act for the sake of other people's well-being consequent to having impartially imagined what it would be like to be in their shoes.

Other philosophers, while not disregarding helpful behavior, mention additional ways in which one can harmonize with other human beings. For example, Gyekye speaks of "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. . . . a life free from hostility and confrontation" (1997, 75–76; see also Nkondo 2007, 81; Masolo 2010, 240). The emphasis is not merely on caring for others' quality of life, but also on sharing a way of life with them. One does not isolate oneself from others, but participates, and one does not subordinate others, but coordinates.

Instead of arguing that some of these interpretations are philosophically more attractive than others, in what follows I simply draw on some to the exclusion of others in a way that ethicists around the world are likely to find interesting and *prima facie* attractive.<sup>3</sup> Roughly, according to the theory I advance, all moral virtue, which is valuable as an end in itself, consists of human persons both caring for the quality of life of other human persons and sharing a way of life with them.

### 9.3. AN AFRICAN HARMONY-BASED VIRTUE ETHIC

In this section I expound a theory of virtue and vice grounded on some of the perspectives surveyed in the previous section and

3. I set aside entirely the matter of which interpretations of harmony are "more African" than others. My aim is to draw on views with a clearly African pedigree and to interpret them in a way that would be of philosophical interest to scholars from a variety of backgrounds.

contrast it with some influential Western accounts. I address arguments in its favor, as well as criticisms of it, only in the following section.

One of the most prominent sayings in sub-Saharan Africa meant to capture morality is "A person is a person through other persons," an overly literal translation of indigenous phrasings.<sup>4</sup> Although not readily apparent to those unfamiliar with African cultures, the first part of the phrase is often used to connote something prescriptive and not merely descriptive. It is saying that one ought to become a real person, or, in the influential talk of *ubuntu* from southern Africa, one should become a genuine human being. The thought is that personhood or humanness—plausibly identified as virtue—comes in degrees and that one's foremost aim in life should be to develop it in oneself. The second part of the maxim indicates how to become a real person or exhibit human excellence, where "through other persons" is shorthand for something like "by relating to others positively." Those who are antisocial by virtue of remaining aloof, or, worse, being discordant, would be labeled "non-persons," "zero-persons," or even "animals," indications of vice (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009, 144; Gyekye 2010; Murove 2016, 185).

So far, no mention has been made of harmony, but that concept is the natural one to invoke to spell out the nature of a positive relationship between persons. A promising philosophical interpretation of the African moral maxim is that one ought to develop one's personhood by prizing harmonious ways of relating with other human persons, or, more carefully, by respecting other human persons by virtue of their capacity to relate harmoniously.

Often talk of "respect" has been used by Western philosophers to signify which decisions are morally right. In the present context,

4. For the maxim in two South African languages, see Mkhize (2008, 40), and for discussion in the context of a variety of sub-Saharan peoples, see Nkulu-N'Sengha (2009).



however, it has a richer meaning, pertaining to the agent's beliefs, emotions, desires, and motivations, beyond merely her intentional actions. One is not merely to treat others in permissible ways, but also to demonstrate the attitude that the other person has a high final value, a dignity, by virtue of her ability to relate harmoniously. For instance, virtue includes believing the other is good for her own sake to a superlative degree and expressing that belief in one's behavior.

An absence of personhood or the presence of vice, then, would be constituted by a lack of respect for others. That could come in the form of failing to acknowledge another's worth by being indifferent to it, or, worse, expressing the judgment that she has less than the worth she does, say, that she is good merely as a means.

By the present virtue theory, what gives people dignity is their capacity to relate harmoniously, which I construe as the combination of sharing a way of life, or identifying with others, on the one hand, and caring for their quality of life, or exhibiting solidarity with them, on the other. Here is a graphic characterization of my interpretation of African harmony:

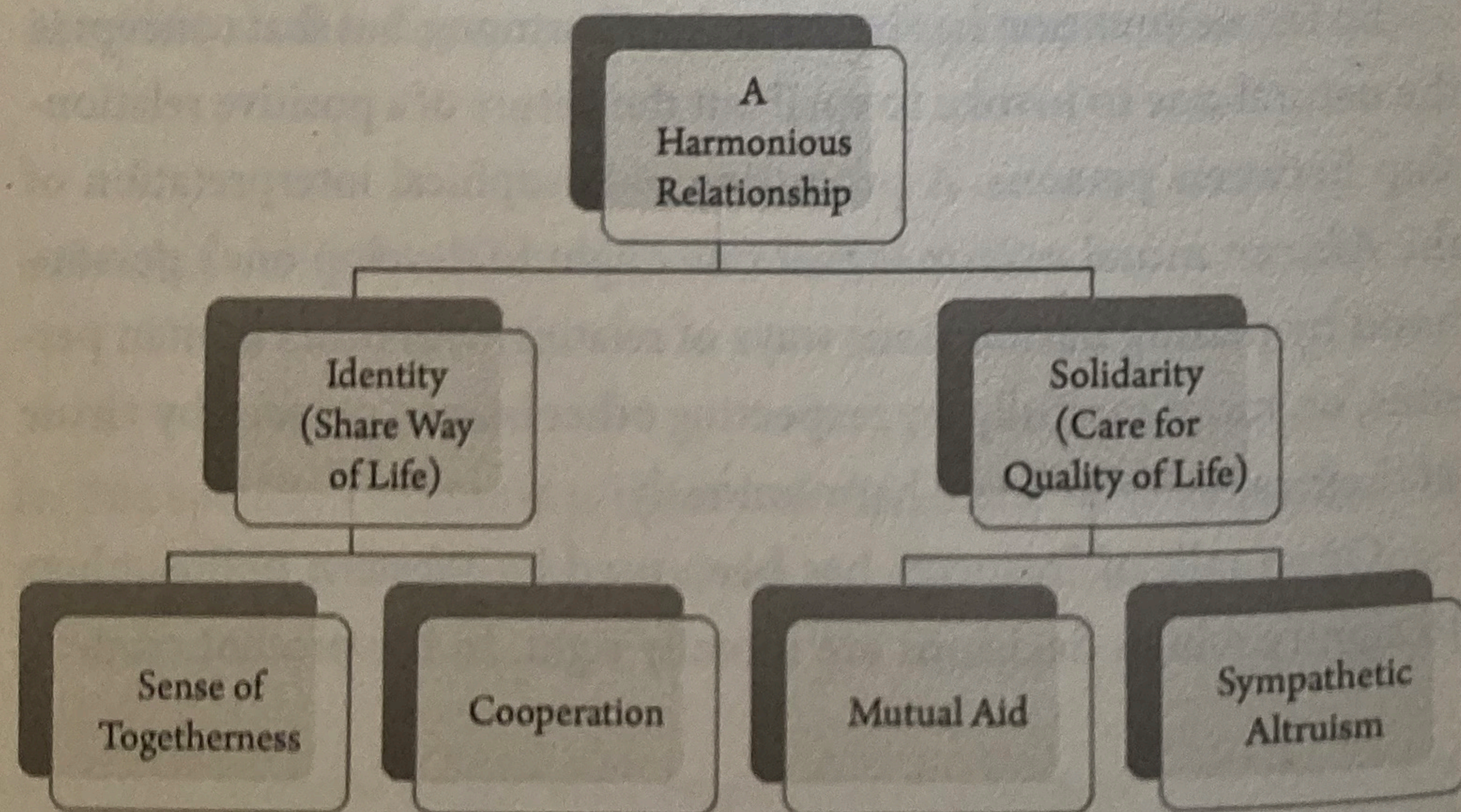


Figure 9.1 Schematic Representation of Harmony

This conception has been informed by comments from a variety of African thinkers as well as by ways of life salient among indigenous people below the Sahara Desert,<sup>5</sup> abstracting from any appeals to what is in principle imperceptible or spiritual.

Identifying with others or sharing a way of life with them is the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of cohesion and cooperative behavior 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 think of oneself as a "we" (and not so much an "I"), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what the other in relation to oneself does, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of the other's nature and value. The cooperative behaviors 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."

Exhibiting solidarity with or caring for others is similarly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in certain behavior. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented toward 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 those likely to be objectively beneficial, that is, to meet the other's needs, and further 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, I interpret one major swathe of traditional African thought about ethics by saying that an agent's foremost goal should be to become a real person or develop her humanness,

5. I lack the space to reveal these sources, on which see, e.g., Metz (2017b). However, consider Mkgoro's mention of "close and sympathetic social relations" above and Tutu's mention of "I participate, I share" below.



which amounts to expressing respect for other people as capable of harmonious relationships, ones of both psychologically and behaviorally identifying with other persons and exhibiting solidarity with them. This analysis fills out some comments from Desmond Tutu, renowned Chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, about morality 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. (Tutu 1999, 35)

Concretely, if what makes people special is their ability to share a way of life and care for others' quality of life, both as those who can harmonize and can be harmonized with, then showing respect for that capacity will mean relating to them in precisely that way, at least when they are innocent of wrongdoing and vice.<sup>6</sup> Relating harmoniously, then, is to be pursued as an end, that is, as a way of showing respect for others and hence as constitutive of virtue, where vice is roughly either the absence of harmony or, worse, the presence of discord, its opposite. That is, one would be living more like an animal, as opposed to exhibiting human excellence, if one acted on an "us versus them" mentality, where people are deemed to be inferior or "other," sought to undermine other people's projects, did what is likely to make their lives go worse, and were motivated by cruelty, *Schadenfreude*, or the like.

6. Where others have done wrong or exhibited vice, respect for their ability to act otherwise could prescribe discordant responses, an issue I abstract from here.

Before considering what there is to be said in favor of this conception of virtue and vice, I compare and contrast it with views likely to be familiar to global, and particularly Western, readers. First off, note that the African theory is obviously a *eudaimonist* or self-realization ethic, one that conceives of virtue in terms of our higher, human nature. Not all virtue ethics do so; for example, there is nothing essential about the view that virtue consists (roughly) of loving the good and hating the bad, advanced with sophistication by Thomas Hurka (2001) and Robert Adams (2006), that appeals to a distinction between higher and lower natures or human and animal selves.

Being a broadly *eudaimonist* approach, the present African virtue ethic is reminiscent of ancient Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle's analysis of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in terms of the human essence. However, it is unlike Aristotle's view for being a purely other-regarding account. While Aristotle believes that virtue is constituted by friendship and justice, he is well-known for holding that it is also constituted by some self-regarding conditions, such as temperance and theoretical wisdom. By the same token, the African ethic's strict focus on relationality differs from the influential contemporary account of virtue from Rosalind Hursthouse (1999, 197–216), according to which it is constituted by settled dispositions of human persons that advance, among other things, individual survival and characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain.

Finally, in taking a theoretical form, the present interpretation of African virtue differs from accounts that are robustly pluralist or particularist, in the way that, for one example, Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) is commonly read. That is, although MacIntyre and some other virtue ethicists doubt that it is possible to indicate what all virtues (and, conversely, vices) have in common, I advance a principle that aims to capture precisely that. To be sure, the principle does not purport to provide a formula for decision-making, let alone for living more generally. However, it does entail that there is a substantial



unity in the content of the virtues, as all being forms of harmony, or, more carefully, instances of respect for other persons insofar as they can be party to harmonious relationships.

Having spelled out a philosophical interpretation of characteristically African views of harmony and virtue, it is time to appraise it. In the following section I give it a sympathetic hearing.

#### 9.4. EVALUATING THE AFRICAN HARMONY-BASED VIRTUE ETHIC

Here, I first consider what there is to be said in favor of the virtue theory articulated in the previous section, and I argue that it plausibly entails and explains a wide array of intuitive virtues and vices. Then, I address two powerful objections to the theory, and consider ways of responding, including by revising it. According to the first objection, personhood or virtue does not necessarily come through *other* persons, but can be self-regarding, while according to the second objection, personhood or virtue is other-regarding but does not come merely through *other persons*, but also, for instance, through certain members of the animal kingdom.

In terms of what is going for (roughly) conceiving of virtue in terms of harmony *qua* identity and solidarity, first off, the view easily captures the myriad welfarist virtues and vices that are most prominent in the African philosophical tradition and that are also central to East Asian and Western conceptions of virtue. Consider the virtues that African philosophers have tended to highlight:

[T]here are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behavior of an individual, *if he is a person*, ought to conform. . . .

[T]hese moral norms and virtues can be said to include kindness,

generosity, compassion, benevolence, and respect and concern for others. (Gyekye 1997, 50)

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”; “Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*.” This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. (Tutu 1999, 34)

*Ubuntu* is inclusive and is best realized and manifested in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity, and sacrifice. . . . The idea that one *ungumntu* (is a person) shows that to have full humanity is to have managed to live out and demonstrated positive qualities which are beneficial to good neighborliness and to have matured in positive human relations. (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 227)

*Charity* and other virtues of altruism such as *politeness* and *benevolence* to others are perhaps the most celebrated aspects of African communitarian practices and ideals. . . . Not being charitable to others or sheer disregard of others especially in their times of need is condemned as antisocial. (Masolo 2010, 251, 252)<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as harmony includes caring for others’ quality of life, living harmoniously easily makes sense of generosity, hospitality, care, compassion, sharing, sacrifice, kindness, benevolence, and similar virtues. By the same token, insofar as a failure to be harmonious means being indifferent or exhibiting ill will, the ethic easily makes sense of the vices of insensitivity, hard-heartedness, selfishness, cruelty, and the like.

Second, conceiving of virtue in terms of harmony can account for many virtues and vices that are not exclusively about welfare or

7. See also Murove (2016, 180).



people's quality of life more broadly construed. Consider the virtues of tolerance, peacefulness, honesty, fairness, humility, gratitude, and being polite (several of which are mentioned in Gyekye 2010), as well as the corresponding vices of intolerance, aggression, dishonesty, bias, arrogance, ingratitude, and being impolite. To be sure, such vices can indeed reduce people's quality of life (Masolo above suggests that politeness is a form of altruism), but there is intuitively something bad about them beyond that: they often are discordant ways of flouting a prescription to identify with others.

Specifically, some of the vices are failures to enjoy a sense of togetherness and instead evince an "us versus them" attitude in which others are deemed separate or lower (bias, arrogance). In addition, some of the vices are failures to cooperate and instead involve the suppression or manipulation of other people's agency (intolerance, aggression, dishonesty). Still other vices are neatly captured by the respect-oriented nature of the ethic demanding that one not fail to appreciate other people's superlative final value (ingratitude, being impolite).

For a third sort of advantage, there are certain practices that are not as commonly recognized as admitting of virtue but that, upon reflection, plausibly do and that the African ethic captures well. For example, it is a virtue to prioritize aid to one's family (and more generally to associates). Parents should give more to their son than to someone else's son (at least if both would comparably benefit), whereas a son should go out of his way to aid his parents when they cannot take care of themselves (even if other aged people are similarly in need of help). A relational ethic promises to make good sense of the idea that one is a better person for being partial in these specific ways; for respecting others by virtue of their ability to relate harmoniously plausibly means giving extra weight to those with whom one has already harmonized. Respecting the capacity for harmony means respecting actualizations of that capacity in the form of prioritizing extant harmonious relationships.

For another example, consider survivor's guilt, the disposition to feel bad because associates have died or suffered, when one has not and was not at all responsible for their fate. Basically, feeling bad upon the dumb luck of survival when one's companions or compatriots have perished is arguably a virtuous instance of one's attitudes harmonizing with others. As noted above, forms of harmony include feeling bad for people when their quality of life is low (sympathy) and feeling ashamed when they act wrongly or exhibit vice (sense of togetherness). Survivor's guilt is analogous to these emotional states for being another way in which one's emotions can track or mirror the condition of others; specifically, one feels very bad because one's associates have undergone the great harm of death or suffering. One is a better person for being disposed to share some of the fate of loved ones. "*Ubuntu* calls on us to believe and feel that: Your pain is My pain, My wealth is Your wealth" (Nussbaum 2003, 21).

Let us turn now to two major respects in which the African virtue ethic appears to be less than ideal.<sup>8</sup> For one, it is a purely relational or other-regarding conception of virtue and vice, but there are some virtues and vices that appear to be individualist or self-regarding. Setting aside theoretical or epistemic matters and focusing strictly on practical virtues, these plausibly include courage, determination, temperance, autonomy, and self-respect. The corresponding vices are cowardice, indecision, overindulgence, addiction, and self-denigration. Surely one wants to exhibit the former qualities and not the latter, a good explanation of which is that the former are self-regarding virtues and the latter are self-regarding vices.

One straightforward point to make in reply is that often there are other-regarding dimensions to these virtues and vices. For instance, courage and determination particularly clearly count as virtues when

8. For reply to another sort of objection, that an appeal to harmony is overly traditionalist or insufficiently able to account for difference, see Metz (2013, 282–283; 2020b).



exhibited in the course of fighting to protect other innocent parties. Similarly, failing to look after one's physical health by overindulging is plausibly a vice at least partially insofar as it would threaten to make oneself a burden on others.

However, it is implausible to think that these count as virtues and vices solely with respect to other-regard. Courage exhibited in the course of standing up for oneself and showing determination in overcoming an addiction are ways of displaying virtue, where self-regard plays a key explanatory role of why.

A second point to make, then, is that the African ethic is not meant to capture all virtues and vices, and not even all practical ones. It is best understood as focused on the moral virtues and vices, and not, say, those concerned with prudence. In the light of this distinction, it would be reasonable to suggest that, insofar as these virtues and vices include self-regard, they are not so clearly concerned with morality. To the extent that courageously exhibiting self-respect advances one's interests and doggedly overcoming addiction is for one's long-term good, there are elements of prudence.

However, I am inclined to accept that a moral dimension to these virtues and vices remains, even acknowledging the non-moral elements. It could well be guilt that one aptly feels upon failing to do right by oneself, whether by letting fear of public speaking get the best of one, making poor progress on one's research, eating way too much chocolate, being hooked on cocaine, or encouraging others to take pleasure in disparaging one.

I therefore suspect that the African ethic needs to be revised to capture the present intuitions about virtue and vice. Instead of "A person is a person through other persons," a first revision would be this: "A person is a person through persons." To retain continuity with the relationality of the traditional African view that the "project of being or becoming persons. . . stretches beyond the raw capacities of the isolated individual" (Menkiti 2004, 326; see also Murove

2016, 184), one might plausibly suggest that while *some* self-regarding moral virtue is possible, one cannot count as a real person *on balance* unless one has exhibited much of the other-regarding sort.

There are two ways one might conceive of moral self-regard, given an ethic that fundamentally prizes the capacity for harmony. First, one might suggest that the agent's own capacity to exhibit harmony with others as a subject is what must be treated with respect. The problem with this approach is that it would be difficult to capture enough self-regard—it is not merely one's *own* ability to relate to *others* harmoniously that is intuitively at stake. Second, then, and more promising, moral self-regard could be a matter of harmonizing with oneself as an object. By this approach, just as one should exhibit identity and solidarity with others, so one can and should with oneself. Roughly, there would be some virtue in "cooperating" with oneself by adopting goals that cohere and doing what one can to realize them, and in "aiding" oneself by doing what one expects to meet one's needs. Does this move adequately capture the self-regarding virtues and vices considered above?

There is a second large problem facing the African harmony-based virtue ethic that also probably requires making some revision to it. Even if one accepts that virtue can come from a person "relating" to herself in certain ways, and not merely to other persons, there would still be a person-centric focus of the ethic (emphasized in Horsthemke 2015, 11, 82–83, 93). Intuitively, though, virtue and vice are possible upon relating to some non-persons. There would be vice in being the sort of person disposed to use a human being with a severe case of Alzheimer's as target practice with a crossbow, whereas there would be virtue in going out of one's way to help him avoid such a fate. There would also be vice in torturing a cat for the fun of it, say, by putting it in a microwave oven just to watch it squirm, whereas there would be virtue in working to prevent cruelty to animals. These days, most readers will find indirect explanations of these intuitions



unconvincing. For instance, the vice of being cruel to an animal is not fully explained by any effects or meaning with respect to human persons, such as making one hard-hearted in such a way that one is less able to treat persons morally. Such vice clearly has something at bottom to do with the unnecessary harm one has done to the animal.<sup>9</sup>

Supposing that is true, then “A person is a person through (other) persons” again cannot be read too strictly and needs to be adjusted in order to account fully for how to become a real person. My suggestion is something like this: “One becomes a real person by prizing harmonious relationships with beings capable of harmonizing, whether as subjects or objects” (first suggested in Metz 2012). Characteristic persons can be party to harmonious relationships as subjects, that is, as those who can harmonize with others. However, some beings can be party to harmonious relationships merely as objects, meaning that we can harmonize with them but they cannot with us. When it comes to severely mentally incapacitated human beings and many kinds of animals, we can enjoy a sense of togetherness with them, interact with them in trusting ways that further their goals, aid them, and do so consequent to sympathy and for their sake. Such a harmonious way of relating toward them plausibly captures the virtues involved, whereas discordance toward them, that is, othering, subordinating, doing what is likely to reduce their quality of life, and being cruel, captures the vices.<sup>10</sup>

There will be readers who believe that virtue and vice can obtain with respect to entities that cannot harmonize at all, as neither subjects nor objects. For example, trees and ecosystems utterly lack these

9. *Contra* the predominant way that African philosophers tend to account for the moral value of nature, which is by arguing, for instance, that ancestors or spirits live in it, or that protecting it is essential in order to protect human beings. For some exposition, see Oduwole and Fayemi (2018, 74–79), while for criticism see Horsthemke (2015).

10. For different ways that those working in the African tradition have conceived of harmony between us and (parts of) nature, see Behrens (2014), Mweshi (2019).

capacities. However, indirect considerations with regard to beings capable of harmony might capture the intuitive moral virtues and vices here (Metz 2012, 400–401). If one were to cut down a tree gratuitously, for instance, one would probably not feel guilt with respect to the tree itself, but rather the people and animals that would have benefited from it—although shame could be apt, if the tree had been very old or beautiful. Is this a defensible approach, or could and should we instead broaden the African conception of harmony still more to account for the vice of unnecessarily killing a tree?

### 9.5. FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE AFRICAN HARMONY-BASED VIRTUE ETHIC

In this chapter I have sought to provide a philosophical interpretation of “A person is a person through other persons,” a maxim commonly taken to encapsulate African moral ideals. It is a way of saying that one develops human excellence or virtue insofar as one relates harmoniously with other persons, where I have provided a specification of what is involved in relating harmoniously and sought to defend a theory of virtue based on it. I have argued that the theory captures many intuitions about virtue and vice prominent not merely in the African tradition, but also in global ethical thought more broadly. I also addressed two strong objections to the theory, namely that it is overly narrow for focusing on *others* and then *persons*, and I suggested revising it so that virtue is also conceived as relating harmoniously to oneself and some non-persons such as animals.

In future work it would be worth considering whether these revisions adequately resolve the problems. It would further be worth weighing up the African theory against accounts of moral virtue prominent in the West as well as other parts of the Global South. It



is time not merely to note similarities and differences between conceptions of virtue from around the world, but also to evaluate them. How strong does the African conception of harmonious relationship look compared to the Confucian appeal to hierarchical roles or the Western appeal to rationality? Such fascinating cross-cultural philosophical enquiry has yet to be done, and my hope is that this chapter will help to facilitate it.<sup>11</sup>

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11. For comments that have improved this essay, I thank Dascha Düring and participants at the Conference on Philosophical Perspectives on Harmony, held at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.



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## Harmony as a Virtue in Christianity

ROBERT CUMMINGS NEVILLE

The English word *harmony* has four main meanings, according to standard dictionary accounts. The archaic meaning is that a harmony is a melody. The second is that a harmony is a musical chord, or structure of a progression of chords. The third meaning is a pleasing arrangement of parts, or congruence, as in a painting's harmony of color and line, or the agreement of people with one another, or inner tranquility. The fourth is an interweaving of different accounts into a single narrative, or the systematic arrangement of parallel literary passages to show agreement, as in the harmony of the synoptic gospels. (These definitions come from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.) The modern word *harmony* derives from the Middle English *armony* (no *h*) and Anglo-French *armonie*, both of which also gave rise to meanings surrounding "to arm," as with weapons or arms, armor, armory. Those medieval words derive from the ancient Latin *harmonia* and the Greek *harmos*, the root meaning of which is "joint," like a shoulder or elbow. The two lines of development from the Greek *harmos* or joint, the musical and the military, have become almost wholly divergent in our time, with *harmony* seeming almost an antonym of the well-armed soldier. Our word *harmony* is almost wholly associated with the musical.



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