

SPECIAL THEME (2):
CROSS-TRADITION ENGAGEMENT ON PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE
AND WORLDVIEW: PERSPECTIVES FROM AFRICAN, ASIAN, ISLAMIC,
LATIN-AMERICAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

THE MALAGASY IDEAL OF *FIHAVANANA* AND WESTERN ETHICS

CASEY WOODLING

ABSTRACT: *This essay explores various ethical dimensions of the important concept of fihavanana and its role in Malagasy ethics. As a first pass, we can say that fihavanana is a state of peace or harmony that people can achieve with others within their communities; it is modeled on the peace, harmony, solidarity, love, and closeness that is often seen in family ties. Understanding the role that fihavanana plays in the traditional ethics of the people of Madagascar does not come close to providing a complete picture of Malagasy ethics, but fihavanana is arguably the most crucial ethical concept for Malagasy. After using Malagasy proverbs (ohabolana) to sketch various ethical dimensions of fihavanana, these dimensions are compared to certain themes from Western ethics. The essay also comments on the state of fihavanana today in Madagascar and draws some lessons to be learned from this important ethical ideal. Directions for further research are sketched throughout the essay.*

Keywords: *fihavanana, Madagascar, Malagasy ethics, Malagasy philosophy, ohabolana, proverbs, Western ethics*

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay discusses the role that the concept *FIHAVANANA* plays in the Malagasy ethical tradition. ‘Fihavanana’ is an extremely well-known term to those familiar with Madagascar. Nearly everyone in the know says that it cannot be properly translated into other languages. Etymologically, it is built from the root ‘havana’ which is usually translated as *friend* or *family* in English. It is a substantive, so it literally means the state of friendship or the state of being a family. *Friendship* and *family* are rightly seen as inadequate translations for conveying the complete meaning of ‘fihavanana’. Even if

WOODLING, CASEY: Senior Lecturer of Philosophy, Coastal Carolina University, South Carolina, USA. Email: cwoodling@coastal.edu

there is no adequate word-for-word translation, we should not fear that its sense cannot be fully conveyed in another language given enough background and context. For now, let the following be offered. *Fihavanana* is a state of peace or harmony that people can achieve with others within their communities; it is modeled on the peace, harmony, solidarity, love, and closeness that is often seen in family ties.¹ So, in this sense it is a state to be achieved, an ideal. Living in light of this ideal also creates feelings for others. These feelings motivate action. Understood in a more prescriptive sense, it is the idea that we should treat others as we treat our family out of a sense of love or warm feeling for others. We ought to try to achieve a state of peace and social harmony in our interactions with others. When people live in light of the ideal of *fihavanana*, it functions as a bond between members of a community that encourages them to treat others as family, to help others, and to strengthen the larger community. To understand *fihavanana* better, we will look at the role of the concept *FIHAVANANA* in traditional Malagasy ethics and its various dimensions. Given the lack of agreed upon word-for-word translation, the term ‘fihavanana’ is left untranslated in the proverbs that form most of the corpus.²

Even though it is very well-known as an idea, this essay contributes something new to discussions of *fihavanana* through a deeper dive that outlines various ethical dimensions of the idea. The source material here is primarily *ohabolana* (Malagasy proverbs) but also lived experience in Madagascar. In section 2, I lay out key *ohabolana* that articulate various dimensions of *fihavanana*, analyzing the major themes that emerge. In section 3, I discuss some worries about the coherence of the proverbial wisdom expressed by *ohabolana*. The discussion of *fihavanana* here is no substitute for a complete discussion of traditional Malagasy ethics, but it is the most central notion, so a solid understanding of *fihavanana* is crucial to understanding the larger ethical system in the tradition.³ In section 4, I explain how the role that *fihavanana* plays in traditional Malagasy ethics distinguishes it from some of the main themes in the Western tradition. Last, in section 5, I offer some comments on the state of *fihavanana* today, and some lessons are offered that outsiders can take away from an understanding of the idea of *fihavanana*.

¹ Clint Akins, a missionary who worked in Madagascar for many years, translates it very simply as *oneness*. Mareike Späth (2016) offers a nice description of how *fihavanana* extends beyond the family: “*Fihavanana* is imagined as something individuals owe to the members of their group or that individuals can demand from members of their group. In either case, the choice of beneficiaries always postulates some sort of bonding prior to the sharing of *fihavanana*. This can be through parental or familial relations, regional bonds (where one comes from, where one resides), a connection through common interest, or the shared affiliation to a national or global community. Controversely [sic] to express solidarity with someone on the name of *fihavanana* is a performance of sameness” (123).

² J.A. Houlter’s collection and translation of proverbs forms the corpus here (Houlter 1916a, 1916b). I use many of his translations, but I also do make changes here and there.

³ I plan to discuss the larger system of Malagasy elsewhere. See (Masindrazana, Rakotoniera, and Woodling 2018, 357-358) for a brief discussion of the uniqueness of Malagasy ethics. In addition to further work needed to articulate the system itself, more work needs to be done to connect Malagasy ethics with other traditions.

2. FIHAVANANA

There are many Malagasy proverbs (*ohabolana*) that either directly use the term ‘fihavanana’ or talk about it without using its name. In the charts below, there are columns for literal translation and interpretation. Sometimes the entries are the same, but sometimes there is a good deal of metaphorical expression at work, so there is often divergence. The proverbs are organized along the following dimensions:

- 2.1: The value of *fihavanana*
- 2.2: Advice on the cultivation of *fihavanana*
- 2.3: The negative effects of disturbing *fihavanana*
- 2.4: The ethical scope of *fihavanana*
- 2.5: Guidance on how to live
- 2.6: The limits of *fihavanana*

2.1 Proverbs that compare *fihavanana* to other things of value to show its importance

Proverb	Literal Translation	Interpretation
Aleo very tsikalakalan-karena, toy izay very tsikalakalam-pihavanana.	It’s better to lose the basis of wealth than the basis of <i>fihavanana</i> .	<i>Fihavanana</i> is harder to restore than wealth.
Tsy ny varotra no taloha, fa ny fihavanana.	Selling was not first, it was <i>fihavanana</i> .	<i>Fihavanana</i> is more important than selling or commerce.
Tsy ny fanambadiana no taloha, fa ny fihavanana.	Marriage was not first, it was <i>fihavanana</i> .	<i>Fihavanana</i> is more important than marriage.
Ny vola tsy lany hamamianafa ny fihavanana mahavonjy amin’ny sarotra.	Money is sweet but it is <i>fihavanana</i> that saves you from trouble.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is stronger than money when it comes to getting oneself out of trouble.
Ny tsikalakalan-karenamanam-pahalaniana, fa ny tsikalakalam-pihavanana tsy manam-pahalaniana.	The basis of wealth can be used up but the basis of <i>fihavanana</i> cannot be.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is stronger than money.
Ny fihavanana tsy azo vidina.	<i>Fihavanana</i> cannot be bought.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is so valuable that it has no price.
Aza tsy tia olona, fa ny olona no harena.	Don’t dislike people because people are wealth.	Don’t dislike people because people are wealth.
Asa vadi-drano tsy vita tsy ifanakonana.	The work of tilling the fields is not finished if it is not done together.	Friendship helps one accomplish more than one otherwise would.
Raha olona iray no tsy tia ahy, mitoto koba aho hatavy; fa raha ny be sy ny	If one person doesn’t like me, then I will eat peanut bread and get fat. If many	Not being liked is worse than death. Friendship is as valuable as life.

maro no tsy tia ahy, hisotro tsingala aho ho faty.	don't like me, then I will drink poison and die.	
Ny be no basy.	The many are guns.	There is strength in numbers.
Ny roa no tsara noho ny iray; raha lavo, misy mpanarina.	Two are better than one. If one falls, there is someone to raise the fallen.	Friends make us stronger.
Ny hevitra tsy azo tsy amin'olombelona	Knowledge is not attained without the help of others.	Knowledge is not attained without the help of others.
Toy ny famaky mijinja hazo: ka ny ahy momba ny azy.	Like the ax cutting wood: mine goes with it.	There is harmony and balance in working together.

One of the most common proverbs to hear Malagasy cite in discussions of *fihavanana* is: *Aleo very tsikalakalan-karena, toy izay very tsikalakalam-pihavanana*. This is one of the very first proverbs Malagasy themselves cite in explaining *fihavanana*. The frequency of citation shows how central and weighty this proverb is to Malagasy thinking. Of course, it is a universal truth that material wealth is valuable. But not even it is more valuable than *fihavanana*. One theme that emerges clearly from the proverbs in this subsection is that *fihavanana* is a more primitive and basic relationship between people than anything else—or at least it ought to be. The state of peace and harmony between people living together is more basic and important than any financial institutions (even simple selling) or other social ones (marriage). Not only is it of more fundamental value than other institutions that might arise from social bonds, it is also useful. It helps one complete tasks that could otherwise not get done as expressed in: *Asa vadi-drano tsy vita tsy ifanakonana*. Having friends and family to rely on and work with helps to get things done. In broad outline, a group of people who hold *fihavanana* as a deep value will be one in which the interests of all are advanced along together. For instance, knowledge is only possible when one works with others. This is surely a plausible idea. History has its geniuses, but nearly all of them had teachers and responded to the work of others. United people are powerful. The proverbs clearly pass down the idea that *fihavanana* is more important than anything else, and without it, society would be harder on individuals.

2.2 Proverbs that discuss how one ought to cultivate *fihavanana*

Proverb	Literal Translation	Interpretation
Ny fihavanana aza ataonao toy ny jiafotsy: intelo asampina ka mievotra ihany.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is not to be treated like clothing made from raffia: once it is worn on the shoulder three times, it falls away.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is not a short-term affair. People should not make friends for merely expedient purposes.
Ny fihavanana hoatra ny jiafotsy: raha vao,	<i>Fihavanana</i> is like a stiff cloth: when new, it rustles	Houlder claims this is pessimistic. However, it is possible to interpret it

mikasosaoka; raha tonta, misy romoromony.	(nicely) but when old it is full of rents.	to mean that <i>fihavanana</i> goes through stages and bears the marks of life but, even so, in the end people remain connected.
Ny fivahanana tahaka ny volon-kotona: hatonina, manalavitra; halavirina, manatona.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is like the pond-weed: if you come near, it goes away; if you go away, it comes near.	Be sensitive to the ebbs and flows of relationships. Sometimes you need to back off. Sometimes you need to actively work on a friendship.
Ny vola no mosavin 'ny fihavanana indrindra.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is poisoned by money.	Don't put money before <i>fihavanana</i> .
Ny fihavanana hoatra ny landy: maty isika, ifonosana; velona itafiana ka ny madilana arahim-panondro.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is like silk: if we are dead, it is wrapped around us living, we wear it; and the thin part is followed by the forefinger.	<i>Fihavanana</i> protects us even after death and ought to be nurtured in life.
Ny fihavanana toy ny raty: raja henjanina, tapaka; ary raha ketrarina, miboraka.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is like a bad rope: if pulled tightly, it breaks; if pulled lightly, it comes undone.	Be cautious in dealing with others. You should strive for balance. Don't be too firm or too lax.
Fihavanana' ny Mamoladahy: tsy mihavana roa taona.	Like the <i>fihavanana</i> of the Mamoladahy [Hen-pecked]: not friends more than two years.	Don't be overly critical with your friends or it will strain <i>fihavanana</i> .
Ny ahiahy tsy ihavanana.	Distrust hinders <i>fihavanana</i> .	Being trusting of others allows <i>fihavanana</i> to strengthen.
Toy ny jaka: tsy hanin-kahavoky, fa nofon-kena mitam-pihavanana.	It is like the jaka [piece of meat presented on New Year's Day]: not enough to satisfy, but enough to retain <i>fihavanana</i> .	Sometimes, little contacts here and there can sustain <i>fihavanana</i> .
Ny voky tsy mahaleo ny tsaroana.	A full bellied person doesn't always mean one is remembered well.	Share your wealth if you have it; it will help you be remembered well by others.
Fitia mifamaly mahatsara ny fihavanana.	Love returned promotes <i>fihavanana</i> .	You should show affection to others to grow <i>fihavanana</i> .
Fitia tsy mivaly mahafohifohy saina.	Love not answered harms friendship.	Not showing affection can harm <i>fihavanana</i> .
Ataovy fitia landihazo: ka ny madilana tentenana, ary ny maito tohiana.	Love me as you do cotton: add to the thing and re-join the broken.	Be patient and careful with friendships. Mend what is broken.

Ataovy fihavanam-bava sy tanana: koa raha marary ny tanana, dia mitsoka ny vava; ary raha marary ny vava, dia misafo ny tanana.	Let your friendship be like that of the mouth and hand: if the hand is hurt, then the mouth blows on it, and if the mouth is hurt, the hand strokes it.	Be kind in your friendships and help your friends and also let them help you in times of need.
Ny havana ataovy toy ny andry ombin'ilay mora: ny aloha voasafosafo, ary ny aoriana voatehatehaka.	Treat your friends as the kind herdsman does his oxen: the foremost are stroked, and the hindmost patted.	Treat your all of your friends well.
Aza mandala tanana misy havana.	Don't pass by a place where there is a friend.	Check in on your friends periodically.
Aza manao fitia mifono avona.	Don't let your love be wrapped up in pride.	Don't be too prideful in relations of <i>fhavanana</i> .
Aza manao an-tohim-bato amin-kavana.	Don't be an unwieldy rock with friends.	Don't be an imposition on friends or be inflexible.
Aza atao fihavanam-bato, ka raha tapaka, tsy azo atohy; fa ataovy fihavandandy, ka raha madilana, azo tohizana.	Don't have friendship like a rock because if it breaks, you can't rejoin it. Have friendship like silk, so that if it becomes too slender, you can add to it.	Don't be overly hard and firm in your dealings with friends. Allow for some slack and room for forgiveness.
Aza mila lolotr'amalona amin-kavana.	Don't be like an eel and its confusing movement with friends.	Don't bring disorder into friendships.
Aza atao fitia varavarana, tiana ihany fa atositosika.	Don't love me like a door only that is pushed back and forth.	Love me but don't abuse the friendship.
Havako raha misy patsa; fa raha lany ny patsa, havantetozina.	He is a friend of mine when there are shrimp but when the shrimp are gone, then he is a distant relative.	Don't be a fair-weather friend.

Because *fhavanana* is so important, it should be no surprise that there are a great many proverbs that provide guidance on its cultivation. One theme that emerges is that maintaining *fhavanana* is a long-term process. Moreover, it is a state that is not even ended by death. The bonds of *fhavanana* cover both the living and the dead. Since it is a long-term affair, one should expect that one's relationships will age with time: *Ny fhavanana hoatra ny jiafotsy: raha vao, mikasosaoka; raha tonta, misy romoromony*. As with cloth, relationships wear but the overall fabric of both hangs together. As long as the basic structure is held together, then tears can be mended here and there. So, *fhavanana* is not to be used as merely a short-term solution to problems.

Many of the proverbs in this section offer very practical and concrete advice on how one can maintain *fhavanana* in one's dealings. One of the major pieces of advice is to be flexible in one's dealings with others. Three proverbs above compare

fihavanana to fabric: ① *Ny fihavanana hoatra ny landy: maty isika, ifonosana; velona itafiana ka ny madilana arahim-panondro*; ② *Ataovy fitia landihazo: ka ny madilana tentenana, ary ny maito tohiana*, and ③ *Aza atao fihavanam-bato, ka raha tapaka, tsy azo atohy; fa ataovy fihavan-dandy, ka raha madilana, azo tohizana*. In life, problems inevitably arise, and relationships get strained. If relationships are too firm or too rigid, then they will crack or break. However, if they are like the fabric of cloth, they can bend and stretch. If there is a tear, they can be mended. This is a very powerful metaphor. It contains the idea of seeing our relationships as stretching out, as being closely united to others as life changes. It also contains the idea of the ties of friendship being stretchable like fabric. We should not be too firm in our dealings with others, as this could sever or disturb *fihavanana*. The proverbs caution patience. They tell us that we should check in on friends periodically, show affection for them, trust them, and share our wealth with them. It is stressed that money should not override *fihavanana* and spoil friendships. It has a real power to do that: *Ny vola no mosavin 'ny fihavanana indrindra*. You should not be overly critical with friends. In sum, one should cultivate their friendships and keep them in tact (in general) in order to maintain the desirable state of *fihavanana*.

2.3 Proverbs that warn about disturbing the state of *fihavanana*

Proverb	Literal Translation	Interpretation
Ny fihavanana toy ny fasam-bazimba, ka izay mandrava aloha no kely ilay.	<i>Fihavanana</i> is like a Vazimba's tomb, and the first who destroys it gets small on one side.	Do not break the bonds of <i>fihavanana</i> .
Longo ratsy tsy menatra izay hitsoriaka.	A bad friend is not ashamed of slipping away from his friendship.	Those who do not respect their friendships are bad friends.

It should also be no surprise that there are proverbs that warn of disturbing *fihavanana*. There are some general practical benefits expressed by the proverbs (see 2.1), but it is also helpful to express some consequences for those who break the bonds of *fihavanana*. Perhaps most menacing of all is: *Ny fihavanana toy ny fasam-bazimba, ka izay mandrava aloha no kely ilay*. The first one to disrupt the tomb of a “vazimba” will be deformed on one side of his or her body.⁴ The proverbs also clearly say that breaking the bonds of friendship make one a bad friend. There are also more general proverbs that caution against misdeeds. *Ny tody tsy misy fa ny atao no miverina* says that there is no cosmic retribution for what you do, but your actions return to you. As a result of these kinds of messages, Malagasy are wary of doing something that will disturb the state of *fihavanana*.

⁴ The *vazimba* are believed by some to be the first Malagasy. They are said to have been very short in stature and to have lived in the central highlands.

2.4 Proverbs that discuss the scope of *fihavanana*

Proverb	Literal Translation	Interpretation
Ny havan-dratsy tsy mahaleo ny sakaiza tiana.	A bad relative doesn't always beat out a good friend.	The bounds of <i>fihavanana</i> are not limited to one's immediate family.
Mpisakaiza toa mpiombon-dravy; mpifankatia toa mpiombon-dreny.	Friends like those who share a father, lovers like those who share a mother.	The bonds of friendship are like the bonds of family.
Lafin'bato, vato; lafin-kazo, hazo; lafin-kavana, havana.	The side of a stone is a stone, the side of wood is wood the side of a friend is a friend.	Even distant relatives are still considered to be friends. Friendship appears to be a transitive property.
Izao isika izao maty iray fasana, velona iray trano.	We will share the same tomb as we share the same house.	We are united even after death by the bonds of family and friendship.
Tsihibelambana ny olona.	People are a great mat.	People are united to each other as are strands in a great mat.

Moral philosophers in the West often ponder how we should think of the moral community, the group of individuals to whom we owe something in terms of having moral obligations to them. The utilitarian has a straightforward enough view. All human beings and sentient creatures are equal members of the moral community. The scope of the utilitarian moral community, then, is very wide.⁵ Wider—it is nearly always thought—than Kant's famous moral theory, which held that only rational beings, beings capable of forming, evaluating, and acting on maxims or rules can be properly said to be members of the moral community. If we think of *fihavanana* as an ethical ideal, more specifically as an ethical ideal that an individual follows, then over whom should we think of it as ranging from that person's perspective? It is easy to see that *fihavanana* is not limited to the immediate family (*akohonana*) but that it is thought to extend to a wider range of family (*fianakaviana*). In fact, it is clear that *fihavanana* extends over friends as well: *Ny havan-dratsy tsy mahaleo ny sakaiza tiana*. Bad family members should not be prioritized over well-liked friends. There is also the following proverb: *Lafin'bato, vato; lafin-kazo, hazo; lafin-kavana, havana*. It could mean that being friends requires accepting the entirety of who someone is. It could also express the idea that friendship is like a transitive property. A friend of a friend is a friend. That could be the default assumption expressed by this proverb.

⁵ Note that the moral community for a utilitarian may be delimited relative to specific contexts focused on individual actions. That is, in moments of deliberation, I have to aim to maximize net happiness for all who are likely to be affected by my specific action. It's not that I must always consider how my actions will affect every single sentient creature in the world all the time.

With that said, the bonds of *fihavanana* are the strongest in the immediate family: *Izao isika izao maty iray fasana, velona iray trano*. Those of us who will share the same tomb now share the same house. This is an eternal commitment to one's family. In fact, one wonders how a greater commitment to one's family could be expressed. To say that one will be bonded to another for all eternity appears to be the highest form of commitment there is. One of the key ideas of this essay is that *fihavanana* is modelled on the kind of state of harmony one tries to achieve in the immediate family out of a sense of love for the others one is close to. The move is from the particular to the universal. Take the image of humanity as a *tsihy* as expressed above. A *tsihy* is a mat made from rushes woven together. We are each in some way bound to others who are themselves bound to others. And the bonds between people tie us each together in some way, however distant. Living in light of *fihavanana* asks us to extend the family relation to others. This is by no means an easy thing to do, but it is part of the ideal of *fihavanana*.

2.5 Proverbs that express moral guidance related to *fihavanana*

PROVERB	LITERAL TRANSLATION	INTERPRETATION
Raha revom-potaka, rano no manala; raha revon-teny, vava no manala; raha revon'alahelo, havana no itarainana.	If you are covered with mud, water will remove it; if you get into a war of words, the mouth can fix it; if you are overtaken by sorrow, you can appeal to your friends.	Friends are there to help when we are in states of sadness.
Tsy mety raha fony tsimbotry niaraka ihany, ka adrisa vao hifanary.	It's not okay to be together as young grasshoppers but then abandon each other when we are mature.	Don't be a fair-weather friend.
Misy rony, miaramisotro; misy ventiny, miara-mitsako.	If there is juice to the thing, then we drink together; if there is meat to it, then we chew together.	Share with others.
Ny valala iray no ifanapahana.	The cricket is what we split together.	Even the smallest things are shared between friends.
Ny iray tsy tia mafana, ary ny iray tsy tia mangatsiaka; ka ataovy marimaritra hiraiana.	One doesn't like the heat and one doesn't like the cold: find a consensus.	Find a middle ground when dealing with friends.
Ny teny ierana tsy mba loza.	An agreement brings no harm.	Look for agreement in friendships.
Aza asiana anga-potsy sy anga-mainty, fa ataovy angana iray ihany.	Don't put in a white dye and black dye, but let there be one dye only.	Be unified and seek harmony in relationships and society at large.

Trano atsimo sy avaratra: izay tsy mahalena ialofana.	Houses north and south: we shelter in the ones that do not leak.	Provide for others if they are in need and seek out the help of others if you are in need.
Ny havana ataovy toy ny andry ombin'ily mora: ny aloha voasafosafa, ary ny aoriana voatehatehaka.	Treat your friends like the herdsman does his oxen: the foremost are stroked, and the hindmost patted.	Make sure that you keep track of all your friends and work on the friendships.
Aza manao toy ny tandindona: miaraka ihany, fa tsy azo ho namana.	Don't be a shadow: always there but not a friend.	Be engaged in your friendships with others.

Many of these proverbs stress sharing with friends. If a friend needs help, then you should help them. And if you need help, then you should seek it out and accept it. The proverbs tell us to be engaged in our friendships and be true friends and not only “friends” when it is convenient. There is also a strong imperative to seek harmony and agreement in friendships. One should not be too firm; one should be willing to compromise. To maintain friendships one ought to be flexible. This includes primarily how we interact with our friends. We should seek compromise and not always search to satisfy our own interests. The search for a middle ground and for compromise is essential for maintaining and promoting *fihavanana*. It is also a large piece of Malagasy ethics in general.⁶ As noted before, the ideal of *fihavanana* is that we treat all people as friends and family, as *havana*. Therefore, the advice to share with others, to be engaged in our relationships at all times and not merely when convenient, and to seek compromise, agreement, and middle ground ought to be extended to our interactions with all people. Obviously, this is not always practically possible, but it serves as an ethical ideal for which one can certainly strive.

2.6 Proverbs that discuss the limits of *fihavanana*

Proverb	Literal Translation	Interpretation
Aza mifonoka ambanin' ny maimbo.	Don't keep company with any one in bad odor.	Know when to leave a friendship when it is bad for you.
Raha tsy marary, aza miray ondana amin'ny marary.	If you aren't sick, then don't share a pillow with someone who is sick.	Don't let people of bad character cause problems for you for the sake of friendship.

⁶ This is related to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Properly comparing Malagasy ethics with virtue ethics is an important direction for future research. On the search for balance and harmony in Malagasy ethics, see also Masindrazana, Rakotoniera, and Woodling (2018), Rahajarizafy (1953), and Rajaona (1959) for more discussion.

Aza manao tsikombakomba ifanaovana.	Don't join in with a bad scheme.	Don't let your friends drag you down.
Aza manao foly mena tohizan-drofia.	Don't join raffia with silk.	Don't make friends with those of a different type from you.
Nahoana no manao kitapo miara-pena?	Why do you all fill one bag?	There are people of different types in some situation and they shouldn't mix.
Ny havana tiana tsy hiaraha monina.	Family likes to not live together.	Staying too close to family can be bad for relationships. ⁷

There are clearly some practical limits on *fihavanana*. While it's important to try to treat others as family, some individuals or perhaps situations are such that one should be very cautious. If one has a bad character, then it is best to leave them alone. If a friendship is not good for one's own character, then a time may come to sever it. It also suggests that certain types of people should be avoided, people presumably with poor characters. So, *fihavanana* has some clear limitations, and we are told to be street smart in our dealing as well. In the end, the proverbs advise people to be practical and realistic while at the same time striving for the ideal of *fihavanana* when appropriate.

3. THE COHERENCE OF TRADITIONAL WISDOM ABOUT *FIHAVANANA*

Philosophers are always on the lookout for inconsistencies. Does the traditional wisdom about *fihavanana* stand as a coherent body of knowledge? After all, there is a great wealth of proverbs and perhaps a worry is that one can cite them as evidence for many distinct, and perhaps even contradictory, positions. As Lee Haring, a notable scholar of Malagasy folklore, notes, "Malagasy eloquence is so prolific that they [proverbs] could have proved several other philosophical positions from assembling *ohabolana* (Haring 1992: 71). Out of context, a proverb or two could be used to support seemingly any position one wants. There may be concerns that something similar has happened in this essay. I hope when one notes the number of proverbs cited and the convergence on main themes such a fear will ease. What I have done here is to assemble many proverbs that discuss *fihavanana*. When seen together, they do present a very crucial and coherent ethical ideal, though it is admittedly one that has some flexibility as seen in the last section that sketches the limits of *fihavanana*. I do think that Malagasy ethics is practical and realistic and thus it is no surprise that there are proverbs that discuss the limits of *fihavanana*. Malagasy philosopher Arianala Ratiarevelo (2014) sums this realistic perspective on Malagasy ethics as follows.

⁷ I thank my former student Jessica Martinez De Ubago for the suggestion to include this proverb.

Malagasy moral[ity] is not speculative, it starts from the real from what man is really: a being who has fails [faults] to be put right in order to make possible the living together, to make the best as possible the [situation] to live with. (Ratiarivelo 2014: 88)

If one surveys the proverbs cited, they will find no outright contradiction. There may be some tension in saying that one should be wary of associating with certain people at the same time that one says that one should try to treat everyone as if they were family. However, this is merely a tension and one that can be resolved when we realize that proverbs about *fihavanana* are not merely about the ideal that one tries to live up to but also about realistic advice on how to live. Malagasy ethics is very much tied to the practical realities that all humans face in life. In essence, we should try to live up to the ideal when possible but you have to be street smart as well.

4. *FIHAVANANA* AND SOME THEMES FROM THE WESTERN TRADITION

It would be obviously impossible in this essay to compare *fihavanana* with the whole of the history of Western ethics. What I aim to do is merely contrast it briefly with some major themes and ways of thinking that one sees in the history of Western ethics. One common theme in Western philosophy is that moral thinking is an exercise of reason. Ethics is not a matter of the heart but the head, as one might say. Kant is perhaps the clearest proponent of this idea. He is very clear that desire, wants, emotions and the like simply run interference on good ethical thinking. Feminist ethics has served as a corrective to some of these extremes in the tradition. Malagasy ethics, and the role of *fihavanana*, certainly allow that emotion and feelings have a role to play in deciding what one ought to do. The bonds of immediate family are no doubt emotional bonds. If treating others as one treats family is the ideal, then it is only natural that the feelings of empathy, the warmth of fellowship and communion with others, the joy felt at success, the sadness at defeat and so on should be extended to how one deals with others. Arianala Ratiarivelo noted in personal communication that Malagasy are typically describe as *olon'ny fo*—people of the heart—and this stands in stark contrast to Kant's focus on the exercise of rationality as being the key to right action. Kant is a helpful contrast here to draw out the idea that in Ratiarivelo's words, "Malagasy moral theory is based on feeling" (personal communication). No doubt, the further one goes outside of one's close family and extended family, the more muted the feelings will be, but certainly they are still there and have a role to play as one lives in light of *fihavanana*.

The second theme is about moral motivation. It is common in the West to see one's responsibilities as things that have to be done or discharged. Of course, this varies over thinkers and schools of thought, but certainly in the utilitarian and Kantian traditions, there is no requirement that one do one's duty out of any sense of love for others. In fact, Kant seems to hold in highest regard those acts where one tears oneself away from one's desires in order to do one's duty. Respect for the moral law is what should motivate us. In the case of *fihavanana*, one should be motivated in the right way as

well, but one should do good for others out of a feeling of love and not out of a sense of requirement. This is not to say that there are no duties related to *fihavanana*. The idea is that if one has a duty, then it should be done out of a sense of love and not a sense of requirement. This is a high bar to set, but it is part of the ideal nevertheless.

The last point is about the scope of the moral community. In the Western tradition, the moral community has been seen in a rather abstract way. The utilitarian says that the moral community contains not just all people but all other sentient creatures. Kant says that it is a community of rational beings. In the case of *fihavanana* as an ideal, it appears to be one's family and then one's friends and then the community gets wider still from there. There are some clear limitations to this widening as outlined above. For example, it is best not to mix with some individuals due to their poor moral characters and for their potential to drag us down. We start with the immediate family, extend to friends, then acquaintances and so on as far as we can reasonably go. This is the moral community as some people see it today, no doubt—not just Malagasy but people the world over. It is not the moral community of some of the great philosophers, but it is a more realistic and practical way to think of the moral community, without sacrificing one's ideals.

There are still many questions to explore about Malagasy philosophy, as seen in the traditional proverbs and the work of Malagasy philosophers, regarding the comparative weighting of obligations we have to immediate family and the wider community. In short, does *fihavanana*—or Malagasy ethics more generally—require that I weigh my obligations to immediate family the same as I weigh my obligations to friends? There is also a question of just how far we can be realistically asked to stretch the canvas of familial obligations to the wider community and how we adjust for people of decidedly poor characters. More work needs to be done here in fleshing out what the Malagasy tradition has to say on these important matters.⁸ For these areas of further research, much of this exploration would benefit from comparing the Malagasy ideas here, to the extent that there is a consensus, to other traditions that speak to these questions.⁹ Additionally, it is worth noting that of the major ethical theories typically thought of as part of the Western canon, the ideal of *fihavanana* finds its closest counterparts in Aristotle's virtue ethics and feminist ethics. It would be fruitful to examine *fihavanana* and Malagasy ethics more broadly alongside the key insights from these two traditions.

5. A LOOK AT FIHAVANANA TODAY AND SOME LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

While I don't give a complete assessment of *fihavanana* in 2022, I want to close by drawing attention to one possible role it plays in current Malagasy society. Consider the following set of facts. Madagascar is among the poorest countries in the world. According to *The World Factbook*, it ranks 221 out of 229 countries in terms of GDP

⁸ I thank Katherine Englehardt for pressing me on these points.

⁹ I thank Jianping Eunice Hu for insightful questions about possible connections between Malagasy ethics and Confucian ethics.

per capita (\$1,500). Many of the countries below it or very near it suffer from some serious form of internal conflict, either civil war (recent or active) or the presence of a large terrorist organization. South Sudan (219th), Mozambique (224th), Central African Republic (227th) are all countries that have suffered from vicious civil wars. Burundi (229th) had great unrest in 2015 due to a coup d'état. According the *The World Factbook*, the people of The Democratic Republic of Congo (226th) experience violence by over 100 armed groups. Niger (225th) has high incidences of terrorism. Madagascar and Malawi appear to be the most stable of the large countries, a fact that calls out for explanation. Surely the extreme poverty that exists in all these countries is part of the explanation for the unrest and volatility. However, it appears that there may be cultural factors that prevent Malawi and Madagascar from having as much as unrest and violence as the others. In the case of Madagascar, there is a history of political unrest that carries on to the present day. Perhaps it is *fiHAVANANA* that has prevented the country from descending into a worse state.

Though it may have prevented Madagascar on occasion from a full-on civil war, *fiHAVANANA* has been under great strain in recent history. The most strain is likely seen in the capital city of Antananarivo. Johary Ravaloson spoke to this in an editorial “Island of Instability” just after Madagascar’s coup d’état in 2009 in *The New York Times*. He writes, “And the *fiHAVANANA*, you ask? How can we maintain the ancient ties when all the ancient values — respect for our elders, the spirit of moderation, the inclination for dialogue — have disappeared?” Ravaloson writes as if *fiHAVANANA* has already disappeared. It can certainly seem that way. It is becoming untied according to Ariana Ratiarivelo. The Malagasy here is ‘*efa manomboka mivaha*’. Such strain is to be expected in a large urban setting such as Antananarivo, which is the most populous city in Madagascar that many estimate to have a population over 3 million people.¹⁰ It is only natural that the bonds of *fiHAVANANA* strain when there are severe financial difficulties and the people one lives close to are not familiar and can even seem like foreigners. The bonds of *fiHAVANANA* require reciprocity for their preservation and maturation. Anyone who has lived in a large city knows that people can seem cold and uncaring. So, the bonds are surely under strain, but this is no reason to think that the ideal has disappeared entirely.

It is perhaps worth noting that Madagascar also ranks very low (128 out of 146) on the World Happiness Report (Report 2022). Over 70% of the population lives in poverty (Osborne et al. 2016). No doubt the fact that there are extremely high levels of absolute poverty explains the low ranking. A deep and rich culture, such as the one found in Madagascar, can only do so much. When people’s basic needs are not met, then the chance for any sort of real happiness or flourishing is very low. In sum, *fiHAVANANA* is alive in Madagascar, but it is becoming undone and is under strain, especially in large urban centers where people find it much harder to treat strangers as if they were family. In 2017, my good friend Davidson Randrianatoandro said that *fiHAVANANA* still exists in the hearts of Malagasy, but material realities force many people to turn inward and fend for themselves or their immediate families.

¹⁰ *The World Factbook* estimates over 28 million inhabitants in Madagascar as of 2022.

What can outsiders learn by studying *fihavanana* or Malagasy ethics more generally? One lesson is that it is a very practical ethical concept. It is tied to our direct experience with treating immediate family members. We can expand that treatment as we move outside of the nuclear family (*ankohonana*) while making the appropriate adjustments the wider out we go from the immediate or nuclear family, for instance, by being less trusting of strangers than friends and family. I think that part of the understanding of the ideal requires experiencing it, so applying it to a culture will take time and it cannot be learned merely by studying ethics, though that is surely one source of insight. The fact remains, though, that it is very practical and can be used by people's daily interactions with others. This is arguably not the case with the grand abstractions of Kant and the dense calculations of utilitarianism.¹¹ The concept FIHAVANANA and its various dimensions has been central to how Malagasy people have treated each other for many years, resulting in a relatively peaceful society even given the high levels of extreme poverty seen in Madagascar in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is a unique and noble ideal that people ought to strive for, while also maintaining other ethical values such as respect for rights and the promotion of social welfare when possible. It would be wrong to think of *fihavanana* as being the ultimate principle of morality which serves as a source of all duty and obligation. Even so, it is an ideal that has led to much peace and right action and which can continue to do so. Acting in light of it allows us to use our emotions in moral reasoning and respect our concrete relationships. For these reasons, it is a nice corrective to the excesses in Western ethics in the same way that feminist ethics and virtue ethics has been.

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¹¹ John Stuart Mill famously argued that people need not do the utilitarian standard to act rightly. The theory provides a standard of rightness but not a decision-making procedure. If this is right, then utilitarianism suffers in terms of practicality.

me. My good friend Davidson Randrianatoandro also helped me in many ways understand Madagascar and Malagasy culture much better than I would have otherwise. I first met him as a Peace Corps Volunteer when he was a driver for the Peace Corps. Later he was my personal driver during my Fulbright. Few, if any, were quicker to smile and make you laugh than Davidson. I am not sure that anyone knew the bewildering roads of Antananarivo better than him. It must be said that he always did his duty and protected his family. He sadly passed away in 2021. This essay is dedicated to his memory.

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