developing world
bioethics

WILEY

What does an African ethic of social cohesion entail for social distancing?

Thaddeus Metz 🆔

Correspondence
Thaddeus Metz, PhD, Department of
Philosophy, University of Johannesburg,
Johannesburg, South Africa.
Email: tmetz@uj.ac.za

Abstract

The most prominent strand of moral thought in the African philosophical tradition is relational and cohesive, roughly demanding that we enter into community with each other. Familiar is the view that being a real person means sharing a way of life with others, perhaps even in their fate. What does such a communal ethic prescribe for the coronavirus pandemic? Might it forbid one from social distancing, at least away from intimates? Or would it entail that social distancing is wrong to some degree, although morally permissible on balance? Or could it mean that social distancing is not wrong to any degree and could, under certain circumstances, be the right way to commune? In this article, I defend the latter view. I argue that, given an independently attractive understanding of how to value communal relationship, distancing oneself from others when necessary to protect them from serious incapacitation or harm can come at no cost to right action. However, I also discuss cases in which social distancing would evince a lack of good character, despite being the right thing to do.

KEYWORDS
African morality, cohesion, community, coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, social distancing, sub-Saharan ethics

1 | INTRODUCING A TENSION BETWEEN AN ETHIC OF COHESION AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

Many philosophers in the African tradition are fundamentally relational in their understanding of morality, maintaining that it involves community in some non-instrumental way. For these thinkers, community is not a mere means to something else, but is instead roughly a moral end to be pursued for its own sake. Furthermore, even those African philosophers who think otherwise, directing us to promote the common good[1] or life-force,[2] tend to hold that communitarian-

ism is an essential or at least reliable means to such an end. Although I raise a puzzle in the first instance for the fundamentally relational approach, it applies with comparable force to the view that community is a crucial means to meeting the needs of all or fostering their vitality.

For just a few characterizations of community, whether as an end or a means, consider the following statements about African ethics. Two moral education scholars sum up John Mbiti's classic interpretation of sub-Saharan worldviews with: "What is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong".[3] A former South African Constitutional Court Justice analysing *ubuntu*, the Nguni word for humanness often used to capture morality, places harmonious relationship at its core and remarks, "Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic

---

[1]Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 35-76; Gyekye, K. (2010). African Ethics. In Zalta, E. (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/african-ethics/#NotComGoo

[2]Magesa, L. (1997). *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Bujo, B. (2001). *Foundations of an African Ethic*. New York: Crossroad Publishers.

[3]Verhoef, H. & Michel, C. (1997). Studying Morality within the African Context. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26, 397.

---

social relations within the group".[4] One of the influential Ghanaian moral-political philosophers speaks approvingly of communitarianism as what "advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others….a life in which one shares in the fate of the other".[5] A Kenyan historian of African philosophy says of ethical thought, "A life of cohesion, or positive integration with others, becomes a goal…Let us call this goal communalism".[6] Finally, a Zimbabwean political philosopher places community at the heart of *unhu* (the Shona word for humanness), and defines it as "coming together to form a common way of living together".[7]

Notice the phrasings: "what connects people"; "close social relations"; "a life that shares the other's fate"; "cohesion"; "integration with others"; "coming together"; "living together". These terms are plainly read as ascribing moral value to people cooperatively participating in projects with each other and doing so in person. That is what one would expect from an ethical perspective that grew principally out of small-scale societies and extended families. It is also what plausibly explains practices recurrent amongst indigenous African peoples such as: resolving conflicts by everyone sitting under the proverbial tree and seeking consensus; working collectively, e.g., with all those who had harvesting to do moving together from plot to plot, instead of leaving the work to be done on a given plot to those who lived there; and according moral importance to rituals and customs such as singing, drumming, and dancing.[8] Furthermore, isolation from others was often viewed with suspicion by "traditional" sub-Saharan societies, with just one proverb (from the Kom people in Cameroon) saying that "aloofness is good only for a witch".[9]

The question I address in this article is what such a communal value system entails for the coronavirus pandemic and, specifically, for a practice of what is widely labelled "social distancing". As is well known, it appears that essential for slowing the spread of SARS-CoV-2, a highly infectious virus that causes the COVID-19 disease of severely impaired lung function, is for people to distance themselves from others, staying home as much as possible. Still more, people are to stay at least two metres away from one another, whether inside or outside the home. Italy and South Africa, for just two examples, had banned even outdoor bicycle riding and jogging as an extreme enforcement of social distancing.[10]

On the face of it, a call to be close, to live a life of cohesion, or to move towards each other forbids a decision to remove oneself from society, particularly from one's family. Now, does it? Does the best interpretation of communalism prohibit a person from disengaging from others, despite the serious risks to one's health or that of others? Or does it entail that social distancing is wrong to some degree, although morally permissible on balance? Or could it instead mean that social distancing is not wrong to any degree and could, under certain circumstances, be precisely the right way to value communal relationship?

In this article, I mainly defend the latter view. I argue that, given an independently attractive understanding of how to value communal relationship, distancing oneself from others when necessary to protect them from serious incapacitation or harm can come at no cost to right action. However, I do contend that, given an African moral-philosophical context, it is difficult to avoid the implication that one would be doing wrong to avoid others out of self-interest, and I also discuss some cases in which social distancing evinces a lack of good character, despite being the right thing to do.

I do not empirically recount much about SARS-CoV-2 and its spread across the world. I merely note here that it is a respiratory virus that spreads quickly and easily from both symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers, requires intensive care with the use of a ventilator in about a fifth of the cases, has at the time of writing infected more than 4,000,000 people around the world and caused more than 275,000 deaths, and, for all we can tell, can realistically be stopped in the short-term only by social distancing.[11]

Downplaying descriptive issues in favour of prescriptive ones, in the following I begin by advancing a moral principle that is grounded on values and norms salient amongst indigenous sub-Saharan peoples, according to which morality is roughly a matter of prizing communal relationships. I lack the space to defend this ethic thoroughly, though I expect it will be found prima facie attractive by at least a sub-Saharan readership, if not by those in the Global South more broadly.[12] Next, I apply the Afro-communal principle to social distancing, and argue that, despite initial appearances, the

[4]Mokgoro, Y. (1998). *Ubuntu* and the Law in South Africa. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*, 1, 17.

[5]Gyekye, op. cit. note 1, 1997, 75-76.

[6]Masolo, D.A. (2010). *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 240.

[7]Masitera, E. (2020). Indigenous African Ethics and Land Distribution. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 38.

[8]So I have argued in, amongst other places, Metz, T. (2017). Toward an African Moral Theory (Revised Edition). In Ukpokolo, I. (Ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 97-119.

[9]Tosam, M.J. (2014). The Philosophical Foundations of Kom Proverbs. *Journal on African Philosophy*, 9, 12.

[10]Balmer, C. & Jones, G. (2020, March 20). Italy Tightens Lockdown Screw Further as Coronavirus Deaths Rocket. *Reuters*. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy/jogging-park-walks-banned-as-alarmed-italian-regions-impose-more-coronavirus-restrictions-idUSKBN2172BN; South African Government News Agency (2020, March 25). Mkhize Clarifies No Jogging, Dog-walking during Lockdown. *SAnews.gov.za*. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/mkhize-clarifies-no-jogging-dog-walking-during-lockdown

[11]Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19). Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html; World Health Organization. (2020). Coronavirus. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus; Worldometer (2020). Coronavirus Cases. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/

[12]Harmony, construed in various ways, is also prominent in indigenous East Asian and South American moral thought, such that, for those beyond the West, it is arguably the "mother of all values", in the words of Bell, D.A. & Mo, Y. (2014). Harmony in the World 2013: The Ideal and the Reality. *Social Indicators Research*, 118, 797-818.

principle can entail that one would do no wrong to avoid others if done for their sake (other times it entails that one would do merely a *pro tanto* wrong that is on balance justified). However, I point out that a likely implication of the principle is that one would do wrong to avoid others for one's own sake, an outcome that is shared by the other prominent African moral philosophies. In addition, it might be that, when it comes to good character as distinct from right action, one would have grounds to regret not being as virtuous as one could have been, even if one avoids others for their sake. I conclude by drawing out some broader implications of the discussion, perhaps surprisingly for the way we ought to interact with animals in the wild.

2 | AN AFRO-COMMUNAL ETHIC

There are of course a number of different ways that community or communal relationship has been conceived by African philosophers. It will not do to pick an idiosyncratic or unattractive understanding of it and then show that it is consistent with social distancing. Instead, in order genuinely to resolve the tension between an Afro-communal ethic and a practice of social distancing, one should show that the ethic is both representative of the African tradition and is on the face of it philosophically powerful.[13]

I advance an Afro-communal ethic in the context of maxims ubiquitously taken to capture indigenous or "traditional" sub-Saharan morality, namely, "I am because we are" and "A person is a person through other persons". Although these phrases are sometimes used to express a metaphysical claim (viz., that one could not have become who one is without having lived in a certain society), they are also routinely meant to express a moral one. In particular, they are often prescriptions to become a *real* self or a *complete* person,[14] or, in the influential southern African vernacular, they are exhortations to exhibit *ubuntu*.[15]

Such an ethic is a *eudaimonist* or self-realization perspective, similar to the foundations of Aristotelianism and Confucianism. The ultimate answer to the question of why one should live one way rather than another is the fact that it would make one a better person. There is a distinctively human and higher part of our nature, and a lower, animal self, and both can be realized to various degrees. That is, the thought is that one can be more or less of a human, person, or self, and one's basic aim in life should be to develop one's humanness, personhood, or selfhood as much as one can. Indeed, it is

common for those from indigenous African cultures to describe those who are wicked as "not persons", "zero-persons", or even "animals", while nonetheless continuing to recognize them as having a full moral status or dignity.[16]

Turning to the second part of the maxims, one becomes a real self "because we are" or a complete person "through other persons", which roughly means insofar as one prizes communal or harmonious relationships with others. As Augustine Shutte remarks of an *ubuntu* ethic as often understood in southern Africa, "Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded".[17]

It is common for ethicists working in the African tradition to maintain, or at least to suggest, that the *only* comprehensive respect in which one can exhibit human excellence is by relating to others communally or harmoniously, normally as an end (but, as noted above, possibly as a means to some other value such as the common good or life-force). Peter Kasenene, a Ugandan theologian who has studied African morality, remarks that "in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship",[18] while Desmond Tutu, the renowned South African thinker, says of sub-Saharan peoples, "Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*––the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague".[19] Such an ethic manifestly differs from the most salient philosophical approaches to morally right action in the contemporary West, which appeal at bottom to utility promotion, respect for autonomy, agreement in a social contract, or God's will.[20]

The next question is how one is to understand community, fellowship, or harmony. I quote representative African theorists about what it means to live in community, harmony, etc., after which I draw on their comments to advance a principle to guide thought about bioethical matters, including controversies regarding how to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to the above construal of harmony in terms of "close and sympathetic social relations", consider the following statements:

> "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", says the moral philosopher Segun Gbadegesin of his Yoruba people in Nigeria.[21]

---

[13]Much of the following articulation of an Afro-communal ethic borrows from Metz, T. (2018). How to Deal with Neglected Tropical Diseases in the Light of an African Ethic. *Developing World Bioethics*, 18, 234-236. What is new here is not the ethic, but rather reflection on its implications for social distancing, which are not obvious.

[14]Wiredu, K. (1992). The African Concept of Personhood. In Flack, H. & Pellegrino, E. (Eds), *African-American Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 104-117; Menkiti, I. (2004). On the Normative Conception of a Person. In Wiredu, K. (Ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 324-331.

[15]Mokgoro, op. cit. note 4; Tutu, D. (1999). *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Random House, 34-35. For a survey of how several sub-Saharan peoples understand these maxims, see Nkulu-N'Sengha, M. (2009). *Bumuntu*. In Asante, M.K. & Mazama, A. (Eds), *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Los Angeles: Sage, 142-147.

[16]See, e.g., Wiredu, K. (1992). Moral Foundations of an African Culture. In Wiredu, K. & Gyekye, K. (Eds), *Person and Community; Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Volume I*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 199-200; Gyekye, op. cit. note 1, 1997, 49-51; and Nkulu-N'Sengha, ibid, 144.

[17]Shutte, A. (2001). *Ubuntu: An Ethic for the New South Africa*. Cape Town: Cluster Publications, 30.

[18]Kasenene, P. (1998). *Religious Ethics in Africa*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 21.

[19]Tutu, op. cit. note 15, 35.

[20]For contrasts with the ethic of care, see Metz, T. (2013). The Western Ethic of Care or an Afro-Communitarian Ethic? *Journal of Global Ethics*, 9, 77-92.

[21]Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African Philosophy*. New York: Peter Lang, 65.
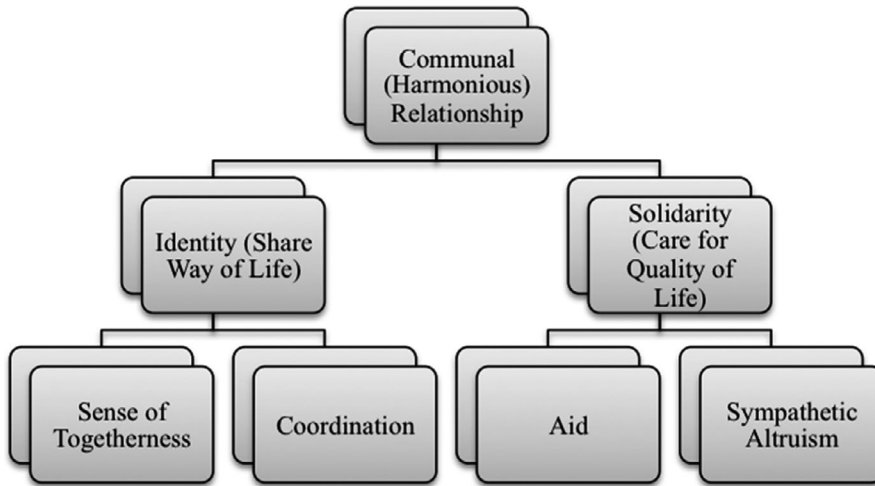
FIGURE 1 (Schematic representation of communal relationship)

Tutu notes of African peoples, "We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share'".[22]

"The fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good", an analysis from the most influential African political philosopher of the past 20 years, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye.[23]

"(T)he purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness", pithily remarks Pantaleon Iroegbu, an Igbo theologian from Nigeria.[24]

"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", writes Gessler Muxe Nkondo, a South African policy analyst.[25]

What is striking about these several characterizations of how to commune, harmonize, or otherwise become a real person is that two distinct relational goods are repeatedly mentioned. On the one hand, there is being close, considering oneself part of the whole, participating, sharing a way of life, belonging, and experiencing oneself as bound up with others. On the other hand, there is being sympathetic,

achieving the good of all, sharing, acting for the common good, serving the community, and being committed to the good of one's society.

Elsewhere I have worked to distinguish and reconstruct these two facets of a communal relationship with some precision, contending that each has a different logic and implications for morality.[26] For an overview, consider Figure 1:

It is revealing to understand what I call 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 in relation with the other and to refer to oneself as a "we" (rather than an "I") and a disposition to feel pride or shame in what the other or one's group does. The cooperative behaviours include 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 I label the relationship of "exhibiting solidarity" with or "caring" for others (i.e., acting for other people's good, etc.) is similarly 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 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.

In principle and in practice, these two ways of relating can come apart. Making an anonymous donation to an overseas charity presumably involves solidarity with the beneficiaries, but little identity with them. Conversely, workers and managers in a firm might identify with each other, but solidarity between them is often low––after all, workers usually do not do their jobs out of sympathy with managers or for their sake. Although identity and solidarity are separable, morally speaking it is best when they are manifested at the same

[22]Tutu, op. cit. note 15, 35.

[23]Gyekye, K. (2004). *Beyond Cultures; Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Volume III*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 16.

[24]Iroegbu, P. (2005). Beginning, Purpose and End of Life. In Iroegbu, P. & Echekwube, A. (Eds), *Kpim of Morality Ethics*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 442.

[25]Nkondo, G.M. (2007). *Ubuntu* as a Public Policy in South Africa. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 2, 91.

[26]E.g., in Metz, op. cit. notes 8 and 20.

time, a combination that captures, e.g., the nature of collegiality in an academic department.

Bringing things together, here are some concrete and explicit principled interpretations of "I am because we are" and "A person is a person through other persons": one should strive to become a real self, which is matter of one's actions and attitudes prizing those capable of identity and solidarity. Or, one ought to develop personhood, which means honouring people in virtue of their dignified ability to be party to communal relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life.

Conversely, one lacking in human excellence, or who is "not a person", would be one who fails to respect those able to commune. Substantial vice or wrongdoing by this ethic consists of prizing the opposite, discordant relationships of acting on an "us versus them" attitude with regard to innocent parties, subordinating them, harming them, and doing so out of cruelty. In addition, simply alienating oneself by failing to participate and being indifferent towards the good of others are also wrong, even if one does not actively suppress or injure.

To "honour" or "prize" communal relationship, or those capable of it, is a deontological notion, and so is to be contrasted with a consequentialist prescription merely to promote it as much as one can, and wherever one can, in the long run. For example, one should give some priority to the communal relationships of which one is already a part, instead of cutting them off whenever doing so would foster marginally more communion on the part of others. *Ceteris paribus*, the stronger and longer one's communal ties with others, the more of an obligation to help them. This interpretation of partiality is meant to reconstruct philosophically the traditional practice of prioritizing aid to blood relations.[27]

However, partiality is not meant to be absolute, and the urgent needs of strangers, who also matter for their own sake by virtue of being *capable* of communal relationship, merit consideration and must be weighed up against the interests of intimates. The idea that every person has a dignity is also prominent in the African tradition,[28] and is accounted for here in terms of an individual's natural *ability* to be communed with and to commune.

This analysis should be enough to meet the two desiderata for a communal ethic, namely, of being African and plausible. In terms of the former, beyond capturing both the partiality and dignity in characteristically African moral thought, the above ethic can also make good sense of the salient African practices mentioned above (in section 1).[29] In particular, the extended family is the exemplar of communal relationship, the quintessential instance of enjoying a sense of togetherness, participating cooperatively, aiding one another, and sympathetically doing so for one another's sake. Such a way of relating also accounts well for consensus-seeking in the face of disagreement or conflict; the interests of all are most likely to be met if everyone assents, while unanimous agreement would plausibly manifest the most intense sense of togetherness and co-operation possible for a distribution of political power. Collective harvesting would obviously be good for others while fostering a sense of togetherness and being cooperative. And, then, singing, dancing, and similar kinds of customs are neatly captured by communion, too.

Insofar as those practices are prima facie morally desirable, the Afro-communal ethic is philosophically attractive for explaining what makes them so. In addition, when focusing on bioethical matters, the ethic does a reasonable job of accommodating widely shared intuitions.[30] For example, whereas utilitarianism accounts for the wrongness of violating informed consent by the long-term damage to trust and consequently health, and Kantianism accounts for it in terms of impaired autonomy, for the Afro-communal ethic violating informed consent is wrong because it is a failure to share a way of life. Forcing or tricking someone into undergoing medical treatment or being part of a medical study flouts the value of cooperation. Consider another bioethical case, of a doctor dumping a long-standing patient in order to treat a new one with marginally greater needs. Utilitarians could easily judge there to be nothing wrong with that, Kantians would likely deem it to be wrong because of a broken promise, while adherents to the Afro-communal ethic would judge it wrong because long and strong bonds incur obligations to provide extra aid to intimates, even when strangers are somewhat worse off. The Afro-communal ethic's explanations merit serious consideration as rivals to familiar western ones.

There is much more that could be said to clarify and motivate this African ethic. For instance, is it right to be discordant or anti-social towards an out-group if doing so is expected to foster communal relationship amongst one's in-group? Are human persons the only others with whom one should commune, or should one also strive to do so with imperceptible agents, such as the living-dead or the not-yet-born? How do human babies and severely mentally incapacitated adults figure in? Such questions deserve answers, but I do not need to provide them here in order to draw some reasonably firm conclusions about the implications of the present form of Afro-communalism for social distancing.

3 | HOW TO RESOLVE THE TENSION

In this section I address three different ways one might seek to resolve the prima facie tension that exists between the practice of social distancing and an ethic of cohesion, which is now specified

---

[27]On which see Appiah, A. (1998). Ethical Systems, African. In Craig, E. (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ethical-systems-african-v-1

[28]See, e.g., Wiredu, op. cit. note 16, 199-200; and Gyekye, op. cit. note 1, 2010, sec. 6.

[29]See Metz, op. cit. note 8.

[30]For some more thorough and also wide-ranging applications than what is sketched here, see Metz, T. (2010). African and Western Moral Theories in a Bioethical Context. *Developing World Bioethics*, 10, 49-58; Metz, T. (2017). Ancillary Care Obligations in Light of an African Bioethic. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 38, 111-126; Metz, T. (2018). A Bioethic of Communion. In Soniewicka, M. (Ed.), *The Ethics of Reproductive Genetics*. Cham: Springer, 49-66; Metz, T. (2018). Addiction in the Light of African Values. *Monash Bioethics Review*, 36, 36-53; Metz, op. cit. note 13.

in terms of the Afro-communal ethic (from section 2). I argue that two of the strategies are tempting but do not work, while contending that another strategy is much more promising. I conclude that cases of social distancing, when done to protect others from severe incapacitation or harm, are consistent with the idea that one's basic aim in life should be to honour (people's capacity for) communal relationships.

3.1 | The weak identity strategy

According to the Afro-communal ethic there are two distinct ways a moral agent ought to relate, by identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them. Now, the tension with social distancing arises solely from the identity condition. There is no prima facie incoherence in the thought that one could benefit others from afar, with recent titles such as "Solidarity in a Time of Social Distancing" or "Social Distancing Is Solidarity" making perfect sense.[31] One strategy for seeking to resolve the tension would therefore be to weaken the identity condition.

The most extreme option would be to remove the identity condition altogether, and thereby to advance a purely welfarist or care-based account of communalism. Less extreme would be to retain the identity condition but to ascribe lexical priority to the solidarity condition, such that any amount of sympathy and aid to another, no matter how small, morally outweighs any amount of sense of togetherness and cooperation with her, no matter how large. In that case, helping people by withdrawing from their presence would also be straightforwardly prescribed. The same implication might obtain by a still more moderate approach of assigning a greater cardinal weight to solidarity than to identity, such that, say, a given degree of sympathy and aid to another is morally worth three times the comparable degree of sense of togetherness and cooperation with her.

Although these moves would indeed ground an ethic that is consistent with social distancing, they must be well motivated as opposed to ad hoc. One prima facie reason for thinking that they are indeed well motivated is that they would neatly avoid objections pertaining to traditionalism. If substantial moral weight were ascribed to sharing a way of life, then it would apparently be wrong to change long-standing cultural practices even when they are harmful. Clitoridectomy and other patriarchal ways of life would seem to be justified by a strong identity condition; weakening it easily solves that problem, providing independent reason to do so.

In reply, I maintain that both the Africanness and the plausibility of a communal ethic would be undermined if one did not ascribe comparable weights to the identity and solidarity conditions. In terms of

Africanness, it is hard to see how a purely or substantially welfarist ethic can make adequate sense of the widespread suspicion of both robust competition and large inequality. When it comes to the state, African philosophers tend to reject the currently widespread practice of competing for a majority of votes such that minorities have no or very little political power. Instead, by and large political theorists in the sub-Saharan tradition favour a consensual model that would distribute political power much more evenly. In the economic realm, African philosophers also usually find problematic intensely competitive markets in which individuals aim to maximize their own benefit and minimize their own costs, with some accruing enormous amounts of wealth relative to others. Even if everyone would be better off in a village if one person amassed all the farmland and put everyone to work on it in exchange for a wage, for most thinkers influenced by sub-Saharan values, there would be some moral cost to such an arrangement relative to public ownership of the land and collective harvesting.

Now, competition and inequality in both politics and economics are often in the long run good for people, improving everyone's position relative to their absence, at least when supplemented with protective measures targeting the worst-off (as the work of John Rawls suggests). Solidarity is therefore unlikely on its own to explain why there is something morally troubling about competition and inequality from a typically African perspective. A plausible explanation, though, is that they flout the values of a sense of togetherness and cooperation. Similar remarks apply to the moral weight that many African philosophers have ascribed to rituals and customs; these, too, are implausibly exhausted by considerations of well-being. For instance, when many people sing harmoniously it can bring out painful emotions in them, and yet it is worth doing, plausibly for the sense of togetherness and the cooperative participation.

The latter point again suggests that the identity condition is an inherently conservative one, but, turning now to philosophical plausibility as opposed to the quality of being African, it need not be understood in that way. First off, many intuitively objectionable traditions are wrongful because they involve subordination as opposed to coordination. Clitoridectomy, for instance, is wrong by the Afro-communal ethic I have advanced at least when minors are subjected to it, not giving their free and informed consent. Wherever there is coercion, deception, or other kinds of manipulation (of innocent people), there is a loss of cooperative participation and hence a moral cost. The relevant way to share a way of life is not to have it imposed, but rather to have it freely chosen by those party to it. Note that the relevance of free choice here is not autonomy, which could amount to independence from people, but is instead an aspect of the relational value of interdependence between them.

Still more, upon reflection, it is clear that the only way for a communal ethic to ground an objection to paternalism, patriarchy, and related practices is by including an identity condition of some kind! If solidarity were the only relevant criterion for community, then men could satisfy it by imposing their will on women, so long as the men were sympathizing with them, doing what were likely

[31]Kaufman, A. (2020, March 18). Solidarity in a Time of Social Distancing. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/solidarity-coronavirus_n_5e7151e1c5b6eab7793e3d97; Howard Brown Health. (2020, March 25). Social Distancing Is Solidarity. Retrieved March 25, 2020, from https://howardbrown.org/social-distancing-is-solidarity/

to improve the women's quality of life, and doing it for their sake. As I and some feminist philosophers critical of the ethic of care have pointed out,[32] paternalism can be caring. Only a conception of communion that includes genuinely *sharing* a way of life with others, viz., on even-handed terms, can do the relational job that Kantians normally ascribe to the individualist concept of autonomy.

3.2 | The thin identity strategy

For the rest of this article, I suppose that identity is no less important than solidarity for an attractive and African conception of communal relationship. Another strategy, then, might be to reconceive identity more thinly, in such a way that it does not involve being in the physical presence of other people.

In particular, one might point out that it is possible to participate with others on a cooperative basis far away from them. After all, American astronauts out in space are plausibly identifying with their NASA counterparts in Houston, and workers can and do coordinate their decision-making with one another through Skype, Zoom, or other video chat applications. It is patently possible to engage with others on a voluntary and trustworthy basis even if one is spatially removed from them. Hence, it appears that social distancing from people is consistent with sharing a way of life with them, so construed.

What is missing from the revised conception of identity is the condition of a sense of togetherness. The revision includes the behavioural component of the conception of identity I support, of cooperative participation, but excludes the psychological one, typified by thinking of oneself as part of a "we" as opposed to an "I" and taking pride and shame in others' respective successes and failures. The question now is whether the revision is sufficiently both African and philosophically attractive.

An initial reason for thinking that it is not philosophically attractive is that the life of an astronaut is hardly ideal. There is a cost to her leaving the family with whom she used to live in order to orbit the planet. That cost is not merely to her mental health, in terms of feeling lonely or homesick, but also to her ethical decision-making. An astronaut pays a moral price upon leaving a spouse, children, and any others who had for a long while been sharing her (earthly) space. Even if an astronaut continued to participate cooperatively with her children through radio transmissions or video chats, the spatial distance she has put between them is *pro tanto* wrong. Notice the *pro tanto* qualification—I am not to be read as suggesting that those with families should never become astronauts. The point is that in order to account for the intuition that there is *some* moral cost to becoming an astronaut––that the guilt an astronaut naturally feels is appropriate––one probably has to ascribe value to a sense of togetherness that she disrupts when departing and prevents when remaining away. Astronauts *leave their families*, not merely spatially, but also relationally.

Similarly, there would be *some* moral cost for a manager to elect to have his workers engage with each other online instead of in person. Of course, sometimes it would be impractical for employees working on a project to meet, say, if they are spread out across the globe. In addition, I readily acknowledge the savings to time and benefits to the environment that would often come in the wake of working from home instead of driving to a firm in the same city. The point, again, is that there would be *something* morally undesirable about separating workers in this way, even if doing so were justified on balance.

To see that, suppose the workers lived in the same suburb and could all walk five or ten minutes to get to the company. If, in those circumstances, a manager did not have people meet in person, he would be doing them a disservice. That would be true, not merely because teamwork would be enhanced by people enjoying a sense of togetherness, but also because that sense of togetherness merits pursuit as an end and would be adequately fostered only if people were to shake hands, have meals together, pick up the subtleties of each other's body language, and avoid the stilted communication typical of online conversations.

I submit that a sense of togetherness is a quintessentially African value, so that a conception of communal relationship without it would be substantially less African than one with it. "Ubuntu's idea of leadership practice is centred around the leader as a cohesive force within the group, one who brings people together".[33] My suggestion is that this familiar claim is to be taken literally; if, as this author continues, the point is "developing a sense of community and belonging",[34] that would be much more forthcoming were people to interact without electronic mediation. Returning to earlier examples, a large part of the value of rituals and customs, which many African philosophers believe have moral significance, is the sense of togetherness they foster. In addition, the common practice of collective harvesting is attractive in part because of the sense of togetherness involved, as opposed to one feeling left on one's own.

In sum, while I accept that some of an attractive identity condition can be realized without people being in one another's presence, I deny that all of it can be. Part of what is valuable about identifying with others or sharing a way of life with them, intuitively for many readers but especially for those from an African culture, is people feeling like insiders, members, teammates, colleagues, friends. And, so, the tension between an Afro-communal ethic and social distancing remains, for social distancing is plainly incompatible with cultivating such a feeling.

3.3 | The protection strategy

Instead of considering identity to be of much less importance than solidarity (3.1), or cutting the psychological dimension out of identity

---

[32]Metz, op. cit. note 20. See this text for citations to others.

[33]Rosa, C. (2009). From Dictatorial to Consultation and Participation – The Ubuntu Way. In van Aswegen, S. *et al.* (Eds), *Fresh Perspectives: Human Resource Management*. Cape Town: Pearson South Africa, 302.

[34]Ibid.

(3.2), let us accept, for the rest of this article, that all parts of the conception of communal relationship advanced above (in section 2) have a comparable degree of moral importance. Although a robust identity condition is responsible for the prima facie tension between social distancing and prizing community, I believe the tension can be resolved, upon some further reflection. There is no disrespect of communal relationship or the people capable of it, if one infringes some communion as necessary to prevent a much greater loss of it. I call this the "protection" strategy.

A familiar analogy with the protection strategy in western moral and political philosophy is John Rawls' claim that infringing a liberty is just if and only if essential to protect a more important liberty from violation.[35] "The limitation of liberty is justified only when it is necessary for liberty itself, to prevent an invasion of freedom that would be still worse".[36] One of Rawls' examples is the intuitive permissibility of constraining the liberty of religious practice as required to protect public order and security, where "the maintenance of public order is understood as a necessary condition for everyone's achieving his ends whatever they are".[37]

One way to interpret the deep ethics of Rawls here is in terms of the principle that it does not degrade people's capacity to set ends if one restricts some of their ends so as to prevent a greater restriction of them. It would treat people's end pursuit as less than the most important value if it were traded off for the sake of some other perceived good such as happiness, piety, or racial purity. In contrast, constraining end pursuit for the sake of a more robust end pursuit can still amount to treating it as a superlative non-instrumental value.

There are two distinctions worth drawing, here. The first is whether one may infringe a liberty (or restrict the pursuit of an end) if necessary to prevent the infringement of *any* larger liberty or only a *substantially* larger liberty (end pursuit). Fellow deontologists will be most comfortable with the latter interpretation, which avoids a strict minimization criterion.

The second distinction concerns whether one may infringe a person's liberty if and only if necessary to prevent *her* larger liberty from being infringed or if necessary to prevent *someone else's* larger liberty from being infringed. Nearly all deontologists will be comfortable with the former on at least some occasions, agreeing that it would be permissible to shove someone out of the way of an oncoming bus, if that were the only way to prevent her from getting hit by it. In addition, nearly all, even including many libertarians, accept that minor infringements can be rightly imposed on some if essential to protect others from substantially greater infringements, e.g., it is permissible for the state to tax the rich in order to protect everyone from domestic crime and foreign invasion.

[35]Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (Revised Edition). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 179, 186-188, 200-202, 212-213, 220.

[36]Ibid, 188.

[37]Ibid, 187.

Now, let us replace liberty with community, so to speak. I propose the principle that where communal relationship is infringed for the sake of protecting a much greater degree of communal relationship, it is justified––and precisely on grounds of respect for it. One is rightly anti-social towards others, at least to a minor or moderate degree, if essential to prevent a substantially larger anti-sociality. By this principle, there are two distinct respects in which the Afro-communal ethic plausibly prescribes social distancing as a way to combat the effects of COVID-19.

Firstly, there is the straightforward idea that identity and solidarity, the two parts of communion, can sometimes pull in different directions, and that sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter could be a way of respecting communion in certain situations. In particular, if solidarity would be greatly undermined by a failure to social distance, as is plausibly the case with the coronavirus, and if social distancing would infringe identity to merely a moderate degree, then considerations of communal relationship themselves can justify social distancing. The case is broadly similar to one in which a long-standing, voluntary cultural practice has been severely harmful to people, say, that of human sacrifice. Since, for all we can tell, killing innocent people did not in fact serve the function of appeasing the gods, considerations of communion entail that the practice was right to challenge and overturn, even if everyone had been accepting of it for a long while.

Secondly, and more interestingly, there is the idea that the identity condition on its own is sufficient to make sense of why engaging in social distancing is justified. Doing so would often amount to a minor to moderate infringement of identity for the sake of preventing a much greater infringement of it. Removing yourself from the space of others is, as discussed above (3.2), likely to reduce a sense of togetherness with them, and doing so could also reduce participative cooperation to some notable degree if electronic means of communication were poor. However, passing on SARS-CoV-2 to others would threaten them with death, long-term impaired lung function, and severe ill-health for some weeks, all respects in which you could not identify with them and they could not identify with you or indeed anyone else. Not much of a sense of togetherness and participative cooperation are forthcoming from a person in ICU hooked up to a ventilator, after all. It follows that, since engaging in social distancing is essential to prevent such outcomes, considerations of identity on their own can justify it. Although a robust identity condition has appeared responsible for the tension between an ethic of social cohesion and a practice of social distancing, one now sees that it in fact helps to explain why this ethic prescribes that practice in the context of the coronavirus.

I believe the logic of this argumentative strategy entails that social distancing need not be wrong at all, which is stronger than the claim that social distancing is always wrong to some degree but is often all things considered justified. Recall the liberty cases—it does not appear wrong to any degree to constrain religious practice as essential to maintain public security, to shove someone to prevent her from getting hit by a bus, or to tax the super rich if necessary to prevent serious aggression in society. Supposing that the communal reinterpretation

of Rawls' approach is indeed analogous, as it appears to be, it likely has similar implications. There appears to be nothing wrong with practising social distancing when necessary to prevent other people from catching SARS-CoV-2, even given an ethic of social cohesion.

However, one reason for thinking that there is in fact *something* wrong with social distancing is that it can be natural to apologize for doing so. Were I to become infected with SARS-CoV-2, it would feel right to say to my sons, "I'm sorry, boys, but I can't look after you for a while, and need to stay in my room. It's for your own good, and not because I don't want to be close to you. I wish I could play with you, but I can't right now". This statement is plausibly reinterpreted as saying, "I am wronging you to some degree by removing myself from your presence, but I would otherwise wrong you to a much greater degree".

In reply, I grant that there would plausibly be reason to apologize in the case of disrupting an extant bond, such as with one's children, but I submit that there would be no reason to apologize in the case of failing to form a bond in the first place. Having lived with my sons for many years, they reasonably expect me to *be there* for them. When I remove myself from their presence, I am infringing that reasonable expectation. Notice the difference between that sort of context and one in which I simply stop opening myself to forming bonds. I do not owe the world any apology when I hole up in my apartment to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 to strangers, even though I am thereby being anti-social towards them in a certain respect. So, in some cases it is not wrong at all to engage in social distancing, while in others it might be wrong to some degree but is all things considered justified by communal considerations.

3.4 | Further reflections on the protection strategy

So far I have argued that respect for people as communal beings supports the principle that one can treat others in somewhat anti-social ways if necessary to prevent a much greater anti-sociality towards them. In this section I consider some related cases, ones in which it becomes important to invoke the distinction between right action and good character (personhood) much more rigorously than I have done up to now.

Think, first, about a scenario in which a person engages in social distancing from certain people, but not for their sake. What to say about this scenario depends on two things, namely, how the action would affect others and why the person is performing it. To be more specific, then, suppose a person engages in social distancing from others because they are of a certain ethnicity. Suppose, further, though, that doing so would in fact be what protects them from getting infected, even though that is not the person's motivation. I maintain that this person would be performing a right act, but would evince bad character in the course of doing so. The person's action would be justified because it would be wrong to risk others suffering from COVID-19 when one could avoid doing so with ease, but his attitude would be undesirable for failing to be moved by that consideration and for instead being moved by a discriminatory outlook.[38]

For a second case, suppose a person engages in social distancing from strangers, not for the sake of their health, but rather for her own. We know from my response to the previous case that I believe the action would be morally right, when social distancing would be necessary to protect the strangers from getting infected. However, would the person manifest vice, according to the Afro-communal ethic? Much depends on precisely why she is seeking to protect herself from getting infected. If she is trying to remain healthy so as to be able to raise her children to adulthood, then she is displaying good character.[39] However, consider the case in which she engages in social distancing from others merely for self-interested, short-term motives, e.g., of not wanting to experience the physical pain that would result from infection. Then the ethic probably entails that she would be lacking personhood or virtue, or possibly evincing vice, to some degree.

That last implication will be counterintuitive to some readers, but probably not to those steeped in African cultures. Recall the maxims widely used to capture sub-Saharan morality, "I am because we are" and "A person is a person through other persons"––and notice that they are on the face of it purely other-regarding. For much of the African ethical tradition, the only way to realize oneself or become a real person is by communing with others, where failing to do for self-regarding reasons would be a failure to accord others their moral due. The point is explicit in the work of Kwame Gyekye, who denies that there is an ethical category of supererogation,[40] and also implicit in that of Kwasi Wiredu, whose invocation of the Golden Rule entails something similar.[41] These are two of the most influential African moral-political philosophers of the past 20 years, with their views having been taken most seriously by the field. Although I would not want to say that an ethic is downright unAfrican if it places limits on one's obligations to others, it seems clear that an ethic is more African for including the view that the interests of others are alone what matter when it comes to becoming a real person.

For a final case to consider, return to the situation in which I isolate myself from my sons and doing so appears essential to prevent them from getting infected. I clearly do no wrong or, at the very least, no wrong all things considered. In addition, I clearly evince no vice, if my motivation for isolating myself is to protect them as opposed to, say, have more time to play chess online. It might nonetheless be the case that it would be appropriate for me to feel some guilt or shame, for displaying less virtue than would be desirable. In the ideal scenario I would continue to look after my sons, and not distance myself from them. Although I do only right by them upon isolating myself, I arguably have something to regret about this action that unluckily has been forced upon me. This case is similar to survivor's guilt, in which a person has survived when others with whom she had associated have not and for reasons of dumb luck. Part of the explanation for survivor's guilt is the sense that one simply did not rescue one's associates, regardless of

[38]In this I broadly follow the approach to intention found in Thomson, J.J. (1999). *Physician-Assisted Suicide. Ethics*, 109, 497-518.

[39]Cf. an African approach to "options" not to promote the good in Molefe, M. (2019). *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 93-116.

[40]Gyekye, op. cit. note 1, 1997, 66-68, 71-73.

[41]Wiredu, op. cit. note 16, 198.

the fact that one could not have. Although one did not wrong those who perished, guilt comes in the wake of just not having prevented them from perishing, that is, for not having been able to be as good a person as would have been desirable.[42] Something analogous might go for distancing oneself from family for all and only the right reasons.

4 | CONCLUSION: EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS BEYOND PERSONS

My project here has been to consider what an ethic of social cohesion entails for social distancing, and I have argued that an attractive Afro-communal morality can in fact justify social distancing. There need be nothing degrading of others' communal nature when we are anti-social, say, isolating ourselves at home, so as to prevent a significantly larger anti-sociality, e.g., other people dying or becoming severely ill. Of most interest, I contended that, despite initial appearances, it is possible to honour the value of sharing a way of life with others in the course of distancing oneself from them—when sharing a way of life with them would be much less possible upon not distancing. I conclude this article by considering how one might apply this argumentative strategy to cases beyond the coronavirus and even pandemics more generally.

In particular, I note that it is worth thinking about what this rationale might entail for how to relate to wild animals. Just as there is on the face of it a tension between an ethic of social cohesion and a practice of social distancing, so there is between such an ethic and a practice of letting animals remain in the wild. A comprehensive morality must provide an account of how to interact with not just persons, but all existing beings. That is not meant to suggest that all beings have a moral status, only that an ethic must tell us, of all existing beings, which ones have a moral status, how much of a moral status they have, and how we are to treat them. It follows that an ethic of cohesion or an Afro-communal moral theory should provide guidance about how to interact with animals. Supposing that it would be grossly counterintuitive not to ascribe moral status to any animals,[43] such an ethic should be read as entailing that we have direct duties to at least some animals and, furthermore, that these duties would have us come closer to animals and live together with them. More specifically, we appear to have duties of some weight to identify with and exhibit solidarity towards animals capable of being related to in that way, such as elephants and wolves (not so much insects and bacteria). That, in turn, appears to permit, if not require, domestication, amongst other ways of integrating our lives with animals, such as routinely entering what had been wild spaces. Some might find such an implication troubling.[44]

The issues are complicated and cannot be thoroughly addressed here. I raise them mainly to note that one central strategy to consider is the core principle I used when thinking about social distancing in respect of the coronarvirus. Specifically, does it make sense to avoid identifying with wild animals in order to facilitate a much greater identity with them? It appears not, if the relevant identificatory relation is between animals and us and not between animals themselves.

Would it make sense to avoid identifying with wild animals to facilitate a much greater solidarity with them? That is more promising on the face of it. Where fostering a sense of togetherness with animals and interacting on a trusting basis would nonetheless mean real harm to them, such as causing them anxiety, considerations of communal relationship can plausibly entail that we should leave them in the wild. Here the case appears analogous to social distancing in order to prevent the reduced quality of life that would come from the spread of SARS-CoV-2 to other human persons.

However, what about those situations in which identifying with animals would not seriously reduce their quality of life? Would it indeed follow from the Afro-communal ethic that one should domesticate or otherwise commune with them? Under those conditions, would that really be wrong? There is wide room for further reflection about the implications of an ethic of social cohesion.

ORCID
Thaddeus Metz iD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9861-2408

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Thaddeus Metz, PHD, is currently Distinguished Professor (2020 – 2024) at the University of Johannesburg. Author of more than 250 books, articles, and chapters, he is particularly known for having developed an African moral theory, applied it to a variety of applied issues, and argued that it rivals East Asian and Western ethical philosophies. Other recent work of his in bioethics and related fields includes: 'An African Theory of Moral Status' in M. Chemhuru (Ed.) *African Environmental Ethics* (Cham: Springer, 2019); 'Addiction in the Light of African Values' *Monash Bioethics Review* (2018); and 'Medicine without Cure?: A Cluster Analysis of the Nature of Medicine' *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (2018).

---

[42]For argumentation that this explanation for survivor's guilt is also a (partial) justification of it, see Metz, T. (2019). Making Sense of Survivor's Guilt. In Hull, G. (Ed.), *Debating African Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 149-163.

[43]A bullet that some African philosophers have been willing to bite, e.g., Menkiti, I. (2017). Community, Communism, Communitarianism. In Afolayan, A. & Falola, T. (Eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 467.

[44]I thank Samantha Vice for having raised this puzzle for the Afro-communal ethic at a colloquium held at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2018.