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An African religious ethics and the Euthyphro problem

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Supposing that an African metaphysics grounded on the notion and/or value of vitality is true, can it do a better job in terms of informing an African religious ethics than its Western counterparts, specifically, the Divine Command theory (DCT)? By 'religious ethics', in this article, I have in mind a meta-ethical theory i.e., an account of moral properties whether they are best understood in spiritual rather than physical terms. In this article, I articulate an under-explored African meta-ethical theory grounded on vitality, and I argue that the Euthyphro problem is not a successful objection against it like it is usually thought to be for DCT. This relative advantage of the vitalist meta-ethics does not necessarily render it plausible, but it gives us some ground to seriously consider the future of African religious ethics grounded on it.

Key Words: Divine Command Theory, Meta-ethics, Religious Ethics, Vitality

1. Introduction

Is there a necessary relation between morality and religion? One influential theory in the Western tradition, the Divine Command Theory (DCT), responds to this question affirmatively. I understand 'DCT' as a meta-ethical theory i.e., an account about the nature of moral properties; specifically, it claims that moral properties are *spiritual* insofar as they are a function of God's will, which is captured solely by God's commands. This meta-ethical theory is typically objected to by appeal to what has come to be known as the 'Euthyphro problem'. At the heart of this objection is the dilemma raised by Socrates in his dialogue with Euthyphro about whether morality is *autonomous* from God i.e., the gods love the holy because it is holy; or, morality is *arbitrary* i.e., it is holy because the gods love it (Plato, 1974). Presuming that the Euthyphro problem is a successful objection against DCT, I argue that an under-explored African religious (meta)-ethics *qua* vitality offers an interpretation of a religious ethics that avoids this Socratic dilemma.

Many African scholars have articulated a moral theory that is grounded in the value of vitality (Tempels 1959; Magesa 1997; Shutte 2001; Bujo 2001). But these have not made it their sole project to consider their account as a meta-ethical theory in comparison to other world influential religious meta-ethical theories like the divine command or natural law theories. African religious moral discourses are characterised by two sorts of limitations. With regards to the authors cited above, these have not thought of comparing their own ethical accounts against others so as to assess whether any of them is more plausible than the other. This lack of internal philosophical dialogue and critical discourse has limited the growth of religious ethics in the African tradition, and has tended to make their project less philosophical and more anthropological. This tendency, more recently, is evidenced in an edited collection dedicated to religious ethics drawing from various world religious traditions; African scholars had an opportunity to compare African religious ethics with other competing moral cosmologies, but they did not philosophically reveal a contribution that African religious ethics could make by comparing it with other competing traditions (Bujo 2005; Gbadegesin 2005; Hallen 2005).

In this article, I undertake such a task of comparing an under-explored meta-ethical theory of vitality with DCT. I undertake this comparison specifically with

1 I am aware that there are several ways to interpret the claim that there is a relationship between morality and religion, namely: metaphysical, epistemological and motivational. In this article, I specifically focus on a metaphysical claim that some divine property defines rightness. This is a meta-ethical claim, one about the nature of moral properties. *Epistemological* claim, a claim about how some knowledge about morality depends on God. *Motivational* claim, a psychological claim that divine feature moves human beings to take morality seriously.

regards to the ancient moral insight contained in the Euthyphro problem. I aim to show that vitality ethics avoids the Euthyphro problem. I am aware that the mere fact that a theory avoids what another fails in does not render the theory in question necessarily plausible; but that said, such a difference does warrant that such a theory ought to be further scrutinised and taken seriously.

'Vitality', in African metaphysical thought, refers to an invisible and spiritual energy that is considered to maximally inhere in God; and, God has since distributed it to all aspects of reality both animate and inanimate albeit in varying degrees (Shutte 2001: 10). By 'religious ethics', I mean, a meta-ethical theory, a claim about the nature of moral properties that they are spiritual insofar as they are a function of a divine property of vitality. I am aware that this meta-ethics may entail three possible normative theories, namely, *perfectionist*, *deontological* and *consequentialist* (Metz 2012). It is not however within the scope of this paper to consider these normative theories. Mine is to make a case for a vitality based meta-ethical theory in relation to DCT.

I do not intend, however, at least in this paper, to argue and defend the plausibility of vitality or even DCT (and the spiritual properties they invoke, which would be strictly a metaphysical project that is outside the interests and scope of this article, which is largely an ethical project). In this article, I presume the truth of an African ontology that informs the notion of vitality and I also assume the truth of its meta-ethical theory, like I do that of DCT, for the sake of demonstrating that an African spiritual ethics is not affected by the Euthyphro problem. If it turns out to be true that a meta-ethical account informed by vitality avoids the Euthyphro problem then this would be reason enough to think that this theory might have a lot to offer us, theologically and philosophically, speaking. At this stage, I simply want to demonstrate that this ethical theory avoids the Euthyphro problem; and, I hope, this would give us a sense that this theory ought to be taken seriously.

I structure this article in the following fashion. In the first section, I begin by discussing how a relationship between religion and morality is generally captured by appeal to DCT in the Western moral tradition. I further show how the Euthyphro dilemma is generally used as an objection against DCT. My aim here is not to assess this debate for its own sake or to consider who in this debate gives a more compelling argument for their respective positions, either rejecting or defending DCT. I presume, rather, the truth of the objection of the Euthyphro problem for the sake of demonstrating that an under-explored interpretation of an African religious ethics *qua* vitality avoids this problem; in fact, I hope to show that this problem does not rise at all. Thirdly, I briefly familiarise the reader with an African ontology that informs the high prize usually attached to the notion of vitality/life. And, I subsequently discuss a meta-ethical account specifying that

'rightness' is a function of relating *positively* to vitality and the 'wrongness' of a *negative* relation. Finally, I proceed to show how a vitality-based ethics avoids the Euthyphro problem.

2. The divine command theory

One of the controversial discussions in moral philosophy is whether there is any relationship between religion and morality. Many philosophers defend the position that morality is best interpreted in secular terms (Arthur 1990; Wiredu 1992; Gyekye 1995; Wolf 2002; Pojman 2002; Russell 2002; Nielson 2002). But there are philosophers who defend 'ethical supernaturalism': the claim that morality is grounded in some spiritual property. One dominant way of capturing a relation between morality and religion is in terms of DCT. I here consider DCT as a meta-ethical theory: it teaches that 'morally right' is a matter of being commanded by God and 'morally wrong' of being forbidden by him (Rachels and Rachels 2010: 50; see also Joyce 2012: 49). According to this moral theory, 'rightness' is a property of being commanded by God and 'wrongness' of being forbidden by him. If morality is entirely defined by God's activity of commanding or forbidding then it is obvious to see that the essential nature of morality is grounded in the will of God or is spiritual.

There are two possible interpretations of DCT as a meta-ethical theory. On the one hand, it can be construed as a *linguistic* theory about the meanings of moral terms. On this version, to say that 'God commands something' and to say that 'something is good' is to say one and the same thing; these two expressions *mean* the same thing (Adams 1973: 318 – 347; Harrison 1978: 582; Berg 1991: 525; Idziak 1997: 454). This interpretation is generally considered implausible since it is at odds with our experience of atheists and agnostics who use moral language, and of whom we cannot properly say they are believers or even have God in mind when they use moral terms (Berg 1991: 526)². A more promising interpretation of DCT is the claim that

'the good' and 'God's will' do not mean the same thing, but that they amount, in terms of *reference*, to the same thing – that is, God wills whatever is good, and whatever God wills is good. This yields the intended equivalence without requiring the troublesome semantic claims (Berg 1991: 526).

On this view, 'the good' and 'what God wills' do not mean the same thing but are co-referring terms – they pick out the same property. For example, to talk about 'Winnie Mandela's husband' and to talk about 'the first black president of

2 I am aware of Adam's (1981: 319) modified defence of the linguistic version.

South Africa' is to talk about the same person, Nelson Mandela. Though these two expressions are used to talk about the same person (property), Nelson Mandela, they do not mean the same thing. It is this latter version of DCT, which appears to be less problematic as a meta-ethical theory that is typically objected to by appeal to the Euthyphro problem. I turn now to consider the Euthyphro problem.

3. Euthyphro problem

The objection against DCT is called the 'Euthyphro problem' because this objection emanates from a dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro (Plato 1974: 562). The key question in this dialogue is: do the gods love holiness because it is holy or is it holy because the gods love it. The first horn of the objection establishes the autonomy of morality from God; and, it also implies that morality, in some sense, has authority over God. In other words, firstly the objection points out the idea that moral truths exist outside and independent of God and God merely discovers them rather than invents them. Secondly, the objection points to the idea that morality even has authority over God insofar as he is influenced by the good to command it (Berg 1991: 527).

Because morality even has influence over God's behaviour of commanding or forbidding, it is not surprising that this objection is called a 'psychological' theory insofar as it informs us about what motivates God to behave in certain way towards it (Harrison 1978: 583). This first part of the objection establishes the objectivity of morality, independent of God. The force of this objection lies in the fact that it appears to undermine God's sovereignty: the idea that some moral norm is not only independent of him but also directs his behaviour to command certain things. Put differently, it appears that God metaphysically and psychologically depends on some autonomous norm to command or forbid certain actions.

The second part of the Euthyphro problem is the assertion that some action is right merely because God commands it. Literally, on this reading, God's act of commanding *creates* rightness – "He defines the whole content of morality by his own revealed will" (Henry 1990: 78). It is not that God commands the right things i.e., God *first* discovers moral truths and subsequently commands them; but, rather, it is that God's very activity of commanding something makes that commanded thing right or wrong. The commanding activity of God creates/invents morality. There are no moral truths out there in the world; they are all depended-and-derived from God's commanding authority. For example, it is not that cheating, in and of itself, during an exam is wrong; it can only be declared so if God forbids it.

The objection here is: if rightness and wrongness are a function of God's commanding or forbidding something then it appears that morality in some important sense is rendered *arbitrary* (Idziak 1980: 14 - 15). In other words, rightness is not a function of some intrinsic property of the action itself or its consequence; rather, it is a function of what God says about that action. If God says 'Thou shalt not kill' then killing is wrong until he changes his mind about it, if at all. Why is killing wrong? It is wrong because God commanded 'Thou shalt not kill'. But if God appears to Abraham and instructs him "Go kill your son", it is right for Abraham to kill his son because God commanded him to do so; and, therefore, that commanded action must be permissible. There is no contradiction here between these two commands from God. Morality is not contained in the action itself (of killing or not) but in carrying out what God wills at any given moment. The true essence of morality is a function of simply obeying what God commands.

The objection that DCT is arbitrary is strong since it shows that things like rape, cruelty and infanticide could be right if God declares them to be so. And, if this possibility for arbitrariness is alive then it seems that the very project of morality is in jeopardy. Common sense morality deems cruelty to be intrinsically wrong, for obvious reasons: the harm it causes to both the perpetrator and the victim. But if God's commanding cruelty makes it right then it seems something is amiss about this moral theory. If morality is merely about doing what God commands then it is no longer obvious that morality is still about 'good conduct' in the relevant sense of providing essential rules for "social existence" (Pojman 2002: 3) and/or "provide a basis for resolving or adjudicating such conflicts" (Wolf 2002: 472) since we cannot be always sure, *a priori*, about what God will command³.

Above, I sketched how the relationship between morality and religion is typically captured in terms of DCT; and, how DCT, in turn, is usually objected to in terms of the Euthyphro problem. I discussed the two horns of the dilemma. On the one hand, morality is construed as autonomous from God; and, on other as arbitrary. These are options a friend of DCT would not welcome because if she accepts the first horn of the problem it rules God out as the foundation of morality; and, if he accepts the second horn, it makes morality a blind and irrational activity. I now proceed to articulate an African religious ethics, but before I do so, I first familiarise the reader with an ontology that informs the notion of vitality.

4. An African ontology and vitality

I need to be explicit about the assumptions that inform this particular discussion. Firstly, I will be working with one possible, though dominant, interpretation of

3 For interesting responses to this objection, see Swineburn 1974; Adams 1973: 320 - 324.

African ontology. This discussion, however, will be a simplistic and sketchy one, aiming merely to give the reader some understanding of *an* African ontology. Secondly, I will not defend the plausibility of vitality per se; I presume its truth for the sake of argument i.e., if vitality is true then what moral account flows from it. Put differently, I stipulate the *antecedent*, truth about vitality, so as to concern myself with the *consequent*, the moral theory entailed by it. Even my concern about the *consequent* (an African religious ethics) is not going to be critical at this stage; I am advocating it for the sake of merely pointing out that this ethics avoids the Euthyphro problem.

I submit that an African ontology is generally captured in terms of three concepts: supernaturalism, holism and vitality. 'Supernaturalism' is the view that beyond the natural or physical things, which can be accessed by use of scientific means, there are invisible things that form part of worldly reality. Ramose refers to this aspect of African thought as "the ontology of invisible beings" and he further observes that it is "the basis of ubuntu metaphysics" (1999: 64). Within this category of the invisible, we have God, the living-dead, spirits, and the not yet born (Shutte 2001; Bujo 2005: 424 - 425). God is typically taken to be the foundation of an African ontology, and is also considered to be part of this earth (Shutte 2001: 19 - 21; Mkhize 2009: 36, 37). On this ontological system there is no heaven or hell, all life is contained within earth (Gbadegesin 2005: 415 - 416).

'Holism' is the claim that all reality is interdependent and interconnected. Bujo observes "Africans are traditionally characterized by a holistic type of thinking and feeling. For them, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; they regard themselves in close relationship with the entire cosmos" (2005: 424). This African holism is best summed up by Heidi Verhoef, an American scholar, thus: "Everything – God, ancestors, humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects – is connected, interdependent and interrelated" (Verhoef and Michel 1997: 395). On this view, the world is constituted by relationships among different things. No object or entity is independent and self-sufficient. Things are held together in these relations of connectedness and dependency by the divine essence (glue) of vitality.

'Vital force' refers to the spiritual energy that emanates from God, which also pervades all of reality, the natural and supernatural (Bikopo and Van Borgaert et al. 2009: 44). There is no object or entity that does not possess this spiritual energy albeit in varying degrees (Magesa 1997; Shutte 2001; Mkhize 2008). African ontology is typically organised hierarchically and is divided into the natural and supernatural spheres. The supernatural sphere is higher than the natural one since it has higher levels of vitality than the natural one. An entity's position in the hierarchy is determined by the degree of vitality it possesses (Imafidon 2013: 40).

Furthermore, within the *supernatural* sphere, God occupies the highest sphere, followed by the living dead (ancestors); and, within the *natural*, human beings occupy the highest position, followed by animals, plants and then inanimate objects (Menkiti 2004; Mkhize 2008). So, the more vitality one possesses the higher one's position in the hierarchy.

5. African religious ethics: Meta-ethics

What is the nature of moral properties within the African religious tradition: are they natural or non-natural (spiritual)? We have already observed that DCT defines moral properties in terms of God's commands. 'Right' is what God commands, and 'wrong' just is what God forbids. It is important to observe that morality in this moral scheme depends on the *revealed* will of God. Interestingly, two influential African philosophers argue that African ethics cannot be religious because they lack the necessary feature of being revealed or institutionalised. Gyekye, for example, argues –

For instance, the claim that the values and principles of African morality are not founded on religion simply derives from the characterization of traditional African religion as a *non-revealed* religion. (In the history of the indigenous religion in Africa, it does not seem that anyone in any African community has ever claimed to have received a revelation from the Supreme Being intended either for the people of the community or for all humanity). This characterization makes African ethics independent of religion and, thus, underlines the notion of the autonomy of ethics in regard to African ethics. If a religion is a non-revealed religion, then it is independent of religious prescriptions and commands (2010).

The problem with this objection is that it has not imagined how the notion of vitality does not require revelation the way a moral theory modelled on DCT does (Molefe 2013). The notion of vitality offers a promising way of construing how morality depends on religious considerations. In the African moral tradition 'rightness' (or 'wrongness') is a function of a relation with the property of vitality. 'Rightness' is defined in terms of a *positive* relation to life force and 'wrongness' in terms of *negative* relation to it. To make sense of this meta-ethical view, we must clarify what we mean by 'positive' and 'negative' relation to life force. I glean this insight from this thought from Tempels:

The key principle of Bantu philosophy is that of vital force. The activating and final aim of all Bantu effort is only the intensification of vital force. To protect it or to increase vital

force, that is the motive or profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the 'muntu', the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself (1959: 158).

And, from Magesa –

For African people the determinative feature of humanity lies in its involvement in the dramatic conflict between life and death which becomes meaningful in the ultimate victory of life over death (Magesa 1997: 66, see also Bujo 2005: 425; 2009: 283).

It appears that the greatest good (or, the best way to think about rightness as a moral property) is in terms of it being a function of protecting or increasing vitality; and the greatest evil is death or actions that conduce towards death. So, these two terms, 'positive' and 'negative' must be understood in terms of honouring/promoting or decreasing/diminishing vitality. Morality is best understood when located within a concrete context of a struggle or tension between life and death. On the first approximation, 'positive' relation to life means honouring or promoting life is what constitutes rightness; and 'negative' relation refers to actions that have a diminishing effect on life and such acts constitute what wrongness is all about. To enrich our conception of rightness and wrongness, it is important that we understand how death as the greatest evil is conceived in this metaphysical-moral scheme.

In this tradition, it is common to conceive of death both in terms that are absolute and as a process (Bikopo and Van Borgiaert 2009: 46). Talk of death as a *process* refers to a gradual diminution of life force and if this diminution continues unabated until one reaches a point where she has lost all her life force, we can then talk of *absolute* death. The tension between life and death provides a purview and a context for thinking about morality as intrinsically related to issues of life (force) and avoiding the process of death. Thus, a 'positive' relation to life refers to a situation wherein one is preserving or growing their life force; and a 'negative' relation refers to one where the agent enters a process of death. Thus, *rightness* is a property of increasing/preserving life force, and *wrongness* is a property of reducing life force. The more life force one acquires or possesses is usually connected to a quality of one's humanity or qualifies one as leading a morally excellent life; and the more one's life force wanes/diminishes then she will become sick and ultimately die (Menkiti 1984: 172; Magesa 1997: 35; Shutte 2001: 14).

This meta-ethical theory is religious insofar as it is grounded in a divine property of vitality. If there was no God then there would be no vitality and hence no life at all – no morality. It is this interpretation of vitality as a foundation for

African ethics that avoids objections noted above from some African scholars that African ethics cannot be religious because it is not a revealed religion (Wiredu 1992: 194; Gyekye 2010)⁴. Though there is philosophical room to debate what is meant by ‘revelation’, the notion of vitality does not require revelation as in God’s command or institution⁵. All one requires is to understand the tension between life and death, and to recognise one’s duty to support life⁶. I now proceed to consider African religious ethics in light of the Euthyphro problem.

6. African religious ethics and the euthyphro problem

If DCT is correct in asserting that *rightness* is entirely a function of what God commands then morality is strictly about *obeying* God. In the African tradition, however, morality is about a positive or negative relation to a divine energy. Morality is entirely defined by appeal to a spiritual property of life, and is geared to the promotion or honouring or perfecting of life – depending on which normative theory one finds most plausible (Metz 2012). The Euthyphro problem is a telling objection for DCT because it identifies the right with God’s command. But, interestingly, the Euthyphro problem loses its *problem* status when it comes to an African ethics (as articulated here) because it locates morality in the property of God, life force. The key is not what God commands or forbids, though circumstances under which his commands might be relevant are conceivable. In this view, God does not have to say or write anything, as in the Bible, or send some prophet or some institution like a church – though he may do so. The crucial feature of this meta-ethical theory is properly relating to vitality as a cosmic force to conduce either to life or death.

If, according to DCT, God commands cruelty, for example, the tossing of infants from a tall building, in this possible world with the laws of nature as we know them, then that action is right. But in this African moral theory, the act of tossing children from a tall building, given the laws of nature that prevail on this planet, is considered wrong because it reduces, harms or dishonours life

4 Molefe (2013: 121 – 123) offers a detailed rejection of this objection.

5 Ramose (2013) offers an under-explored source and interpretation of ‘revelation’ by appeal to the tradition of ancestors. Though here, I observe, the aim of ‘revelation’ is to reinforce life and not to issue right-creating-commands.

6 It is sufficient for me to point that that one does not need revelation, if vitality as a meta-ethical theory is true, as a basis for a religious ethics. I am however aware that this issue raises a lot of complicated issues relating to epistemology about how do we gain access to vitality, our vitality, whether it growing or waning. It is not within the scope of this paper to ascertain answers to these interesting epistemological considerations. I would need an article to survey and critical consider these issues. That said, below, I do sketch how one may gain knowledge about whether their vitality is growing or diminishing.

force; this act conduces to death. One can here suppose instances of cruelty that increase life. It would be interesting to get examples of life-promoting cruelty. But for the sake of argument, I can accept such an objection. I however note that such an objection would affect a *consequentialist* version of right action, but I doubt it can affect the *perfectionist* and *deontological* principles; I would defend the latter version that merely requires us to respect life and not promote it (MacNaughton and Rawling 1992: 835)⁷.

One objection raised against DCT is that it makes morality *mysterious* since it is not entirely clear what in God's command defines actions as right, particularly, in instances like that of Abraham (Rachels and Rachels 2010: 51)⁸. Rachels and Rachels (2010) give us an example of child abuse. We appear to have enough reliable empirical data to inform us about why we should believe that child abuse is wrong. The damage it causes psychologically and physically to its victims and those around them are reason enough to consider it wrong. It is strange, therefore, to say that child abuse is right or wrong because God says it is so or not; even if God said nothing about it we would still know that it is wrong. On the other hand, an African moral theory gives us something more concrete to assess whether actions are right or wrong: does the action in question conduce to or reduce life (or lead to death)? Life and death are things we as human beings are too familiar

7 This kind of objection can only be solved by zooming into normative theorisation. A consequentialist interpretation of vitality morally requires that moral agents maximise life i.e., make sure there is as much life force in the world as possible. If, for example, by being cruel, one will best optimise life then this interpretation would recommend cruelty as a proper means to secure the greatest good of maximising life. I do not think that consequentialism captures the spirit of African religious ethics. African religious ethics *qua* vitality would require of us, not to maximise life at all cost as would suggest a consequentialist approach, but would prescribe that we prize or respect life. The duties to *maximise* or *respect* life diverge insofar from each other as they entail two different ways of approaching value. Maximising life only requires making sure that there is much of that value in the world as is possible with no restrictions. And, respecting life requires that we show regard for life even if doing so may lead to others disrespecting it. Respecting life usually is characterised by *constraints*, the idea that even if we want to maximise the good; there are certain ways of doing so that are forbidden, particularly those that will undermine human dignity (MacNaughton and Piers 2006). Thus, a consequentialist reading of this meta-ethics would permit cruel ways of promoting; but a respect-based interpretation would forbid ways of promoting life that involves cruelty.

8 I am aware of Adams (1981) suggestion that what makes actions right is the fact that God commands them motivated by His love for us. But, the Abraham case does not on the face of it appear to be a manifestation of love; rather, it seems like an instance of cruelty. A possible response can be that God was merely testing Abraham. But, this test appears to me to be all the more irrelevant on the part of God; for starters, God knew that Abraham would pass the test – omniscient. Why do the test if you already know the results? This testing business appears to be arbitrary. This test appears to me to have traces of cruelty given that it involved so much psychological and possible social strains (with his wife – not being honest and all that) on Abraham.

with. This insight is rightly captured thus: “For the African, life is the primary category for self-understanding and provides a framework for any interpretation of the world, nature, or divinity” (cited in Magesa 1997: 71). The central notion of life offers an interpretative or evaluative framework for determining rightness or wrongness of actions, or what is generally accepted human conduct.

Another difficulty associated with DCT is that even if we accept that it is true, we still have to worry about which religion truly reveals the will of God; a question that is far from simple. On the other hand, an African religious ethics locates morality on something intrinsic to an individual, vitality. One does not have to go to any institution, prophet or God to understand that they have life; one is required to deal with an assumption that one has life and one is expected to relate positively with this life. Even if one may have scruples about this metaphysics, I do not. Metz, interestingly, observes that this notion of life can also be interpreted in *physical* terms and treated in this light it would amount to something that is intuitively appealing for those already convinced by physicalism –

they say that a human being is special in virtue of being able to exhibit a superlative degree of health, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage and confidence, with a lack of life force being constituted by the presence of disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity and depression (Metz 2012: 25).

Thus, this religious ethics can appeal to these *physical* manifestations of vitality to judge whether an act is right or wrong unlike DCT which has to appeal merely to what God commands, which at times does not cohere with common sense morality. Unlike, Metz, however, I submit that in the African religious tradition the so called *physical* manifestations are considered to be correlatives or to supervene in the spiritual property of life force (Shutte 2001: 15). In other words, the physical manifestations reflect or report the quality of one's life force. People with more life force are flourishing and fruitful physically and those with diminishing life force manifest opposite physical effects (Shutte 2001).

One may wonder why I insist on the spiritual notion of vitality when one can simply appeal to a physicalist interpretation of ethics. One can assert that a physicalist conception appears to be more economical than a spiritual one. I am not convinced that a physicalist conception (or, physicalism itself) is as obvious as many of its advocates in the African tradition take it to be (Wiredu 1996;

Metz 2009)⁹. Furthermore, at this stage of developing a robust religious ethics, I think it is premature to talk about economy between these two systems before we establish, independently, their plausibility as metaphysical systems. I am aware that economy might be a feature of plausibility. But, it is possible for a system to be economical and yet implausible; and, for it to be uneconomical and yet plausible. Bear in mind, we have not yet demonstrated the plausibility of the economy claim, we are still working on the level of assumptions.

For my part, I am interested more in working out in full detail an under-explored African onto-ethical tradition of vitality so as to explore and expose its internal logic and implications. I insist on doing this because African thinkers who are committed to physicalist interpretations have received extensive analytical attention whereas the religious camp has received theological and anthropological, but little philosophical attention. Secondly, also because those that advocate a physicalist interpretations have not proffered an argument to defend the plausibility of physicalism itself, all we have is stipulations and intuitions (Wiredu 1992: 192 - 194; Metz 2007: 328); and, at this stage, I am also operating on the basis of presuming the truth of spiritual truth for the sake of argument.

I also strongly hold the position that an African spiritual metaphysics of vitality will give us a more compelling rationale than a truncated physicalist interpretation account. Metz offers such truncated conception of physicalist vitality in his discussion of a deontological principle of right action grounded on vitality (2007: 328) and a conception of dignity *qua* (physicalist) vitality (2012a: 23 - 24). He ultimately rejects all these physicalist theories of vitality as implausible. It makes sense why such physicalist interpretations of vitality fail in his moral theorisation; they fail precisely because they have been cut off from their true metaphysical roots, turned to serve secularist aspirations¹⁰.

9 Elsewhere, I have rejected moral physicalism in an African moral tradition on the basis that it fails to secure our duties to some facets of nature. Part of the physicalism targeted is the one that characterises the works of three influential scholars of African ethics, namely: Wiredu, Gyekye and Metz. I am yet to develop a positive defense of a spiritual metaphysics or meta-ethics (Molefe 2015).

10 It is crucial to note that usually claims of life as a foundation of ethics in African traditional thought are almost always construed within a spiritual metaphysics (Magesa1997; Bujo 2001; Shutte 2001). This metaphysical ground is crucial because it has its own logic and rationale that renders a talk of life as robust and promising. Metz severs this spiritual metaphysics and replaces it with a modern secular ontology. This life-based ethic interpreted in this new modern ontology loses the robust internal logic and moral-theoretic promise that depended on the spiritual metaphysics. The suggestion here is not that we may not revise positions to render them more plausible but this would make more sense if one has already demonstrated that the spiritual metaphysics is implausible. This kind of problematisation of the spiritual metaphysics has not been offered and the justification of physicalism has not been offered.

I just indicated some positives entailed by the notion of vitality in terms of capturing morality, and how it appears to do better, moral-theoretically, than its Western counterpart, DCT. Whereas DCT defines rightness in terms of obeying the will of God, and thus becomes susceptible to the Euthyphro objection, an African meta-ethics *qua* vitality defines rightness as a function of a positive relation with the divine energy. Precisely because morality is defined as a matter of either prizing/respecting/realising life, the dilemma that attends DCT does not even begin to emerge in an African tradition.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to articulate an under-explored religious ethics (a meta-ethical theory) of vitality. By meta-ethics, I mean an account about the nature of moral properties whether they are physical or spiritual. I articulated the idea that 'rightness' is definable by appeal to honouring life and 'wrongness' by reducing life. I showed how a meta-ethics of vitality, unlike DCT, avoids the Euthyphro problem. Whereas DCT implies that God may depend on some norm to command morality, in African ethics vitality is a property of God; and on the other hand, whereas DCT implies that morality is arbitrary, vitality grounds morality on some concrete consideration of whether an action conduces or reduces life (death).

Above, I indicated that this meta-ethical theory of vitality admits of three possible normative theories: consequentialist, self-realisation and the deontological account. It will surely advance discourse in African religious ethics of vitality to evaluate which among the three normative theories is the most plausible. So far as I am aware, there is no elaborate literature in African religious ethics that concerns itself with normative theorisation.

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