Relational Ethics and Partiality

A Critique of Thad Metz's 'Towards an African Moral Theory'

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Abstract: In this article, I question the plausibility of Metz's African moral theory from an oft neglected moral topic of partiality. Metz defends an Afro-communitarian moral theory that posits that the rightness of actions is entirely definable by relationships of identity and solidarity (or, friendship). I offer two objections to this relational moral theory. First, I argue that justifying partiality strictly by invoking relationships (of friendship) ultimately fails to properly value the individual for her own sake – this is called the 'focus problem' in the literature. Second, I argue that a relationship-based theory cannot accommodate the agent-related partiality since it posits some relationship to be morally fundamental. My critique ultimately reveals the inadequacy of a relationship-based moral theory insofar as it overlooks some crucial moral considerations grounded on the individual herself in her own right.

Keywords: agent-related partiality, deontology, focus problem, harmony, ubuntu

Thad Metz (2007a) in his ground breaking article 'Towards an African Moral Theory' defends an African relational moral theory.[1] By 'moral theory' he refers to a principle of right action or 'normative theorisation', which involves invoking a norm, some basic value like utility or dignity, in virtue of which one can differentiate between (what all) right and/or wrong actions have in common

(321). His normative theory is 'relational', as opposed to individualist,[2] insofar as it ultimately accounts for right actions purely in terms of a property that is external to a human individual. Metz's moral theory singles out some relationships, harmonious ones, as bearers of intrinsic value (331). Metz argues that the relational character of his moral theory renders it relevantly African. And, when it is compared to extant (individualistic) attempts to capture African ethics, Metz considers his account to be (more) plausible insofar as it best captures moral intuitions prevalent below the Sahara.[3] In this article, I question the plausibility of Metz's relational moral theory.

I make two objections to this relational moral theory. First, I object that a relationship-based moral theory will have counterintuitive implications with regard to what we should ultimately care about, the *relationship* in which the individual is in or the individual herself in the relationship. This, in the literature, is called the 'wrong focus' objection since a relationship view will insist that we ought to focus on the relationship rather than the individual for her own sake (Lord 2016: 574). The question of whether we focus on the individual or relationship is crucial given that Metz draws a strict distinction about where ultimately to locate moral value: on factors internal (individualism) or external (of) an individual (relationalism). Second, it strikes me that this theory is unable to accord primary consideration to agent-related partiality: the idea that an individual has some primary duties to herself-self-regarding duties-that may at times override other-regarding considerations. This objection strikes me as plausible given that Metz insists that right actions are determined solely by some facets of interpersonal relationships and not by facts about the individual in the relationship itself. All these criticisms will indicate that a monistic relationship-based moral theory will not be able to accommodate the consideration that morality, to some extent, is about *me* and *my* life-plan as an individual, without slipping into moral egoism; but represents part of what it means to lead a robust moral life.[4]

I criticise Metz's moral theory because it is arguably one of the most influential attempts to theorise African ethics qua ubuntu in African philosophy. Furthermore, I am aware that this theory has been criticised for several reasons. I find at least three major criticisms against this moral theory in the literature. First, there is a complaint that Metz's moral theory is not *African* or fails to under-

stand what is distinctive about African ethics (Ramose 2007: 348–355). Second, there is a concern about cross-cultural differences in moral thinking relative to concerns that 'we cannot coherently act or reason at all about what to do or think without presupposing that there are objectively good reasons, we should not abandon that presupposition' (Wood 2007: 338). At the heart of this concern is that we should not be content with merely presenting some account as an 'African' moral theory. Instead, we should aspire for objective moral truths, which, in turn, should influence our cross-cultural theoretical engagements, so that we come as close as possible to objective moral truths transcending the effects of our geography and its impact on our perception of moral truths. Lastly, there are two interesting attempts to defend a *perfectionist* ethics as at least as plausible as Metz's relationship theory (Lutz 2009: 313–328; van Niekerk 2007: 365–368). This last criticism comes close to my preferred interpretation of African ethics insofar as it favours some *individualistic* interpretation of African ethics, but this also falls short because it does not show what is internally problematic about grounding the entire moral gamut on some relationship.

What, however, I find missing in the literature is a criticism that goes to the DNA of Metz's moral theory, namely: a criticism that demonstrates the inadequacy of grounding the entire edifice of morality in some kind of relationship. This article problematises the DNA of Metz's relational theory by distinctively evaluating this theory in light of the ethical idea of partiality, more specifically agent-related partiality, which is largely ignored in the literature in African ethics (Molefe, 2016a/b). 'Partiality' is the moral idea that sanctions favouritism in morality specifically in our special relationships like family and friends (Cottingham 1983; Lord 2016). 'Agent-related partiality' refers to the agent prioritizing herself and her own projects (Cottingham 1991). Agent-related partiality points to a morality that is agent-centred. In Greek moral thought, the virtue of temperance, for example, is an agent-centred consideration since it is concerned about a self and its good (Metz 2012a). The critique here against Metz's theory, ultimately, is: it is not clear how a moral theory that accounts for a right action in terms of relationships with others can prioritise agent-centred considerations for their own sake.

This critique will succeed supposing I am correct that Metz's theory is rightly construed as strictly relational, that is, it is a monistic

theory that considers some relationships to be entirely doing the job of accounting for right and wrong, and other factors, whatever they may be, are simply secondary.[5] I am convinced that this is the best way to read Metz, but anyone who may read him differently will not be convinced by this article. Furthermore, it is crucial that the reader notes that I limit my critique to Metz's article as cited above and other progressions of it in related articles that bear the feature of *relationality* as the mark of his moral theory (Metz 2007b, 2009, 2013a, 2013b).

For purposes of going to the heart of this theory, I structure this article in the following fashion. First, I present Metz's African moral theory. In the second section, I proceed to offer the criticisms mentioned above: the focus problem and agent-related partiality objection.

Metz's Moral Theory

In his article, Metz seeks to defend a plausible principle of right action (321). To do so, he needs to invoke a norm with an 'African pedigree' (324). This norm will do the job of distinguishing 'what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones' (321). Metz notices a crucial distinction between norms that capture values that are 'individualistic' and those that are 'communitarian' (331). 'Individualistic' norms are those that ultimately ground morality on some *internal* feature of an individual, specifically dignity, life, utility and perfection (329–330; see also Metz 2013a: 78). 'Communitarian' norms are those that locate it on some *external* feature like a relationship, specifically survival or harmony (331–332). Metz ultimately grounds his theory of right action on a communitarian norm of harmony.

Metz favours the norm of harmony precisely because it promises to capture 'properly communitarian renditions of Ubuntu' (331). By 'properly communitarian' he means that his theory is congruent with an emphasis on relationships and/or community as a distinctive feature that characterises African moral thought (Gyekye 1992: 101; Menkiti 1984: 171; Wiredu 2008: 332). On this communitarian moral theory, a right action is a function of prizing some interpersonal relationships. This should come as no surprise given that Metz searches for an African moral theory by surveying the literature on

the notion of *ubuntu*, which is saliently considered to be at the heart of African moral thought, particularly among the Bantu people, among others (Eze 2005; Ramose 1999; Shutte 2001). The idea of ubuntu is generally captured by the following maxim: 'a person is a person through other persons'.

I submit that two facts may be gleaned from this maxim 'a person is a person through other persons'. First, moral personhood is a function purely of some relationship, that is, to achieve moral excellence or to practise virtue, I need to be engaged in some kind of relationships with others (Gaie and Metz 2010: 275; Gyekye 1992: 118; Menkiti 1984: 172). By implication, the possibility 'to become a *full* person, a *real* self, or a *genuine* human being, i.e., to exhibit virtue in a way that not everyone ends up doing' is impossible in the absence of others (Metz 2010: 83, emphasis added). Second, Metz specifies that *harmonious relationships* are the *only* way to achieve the end of being a good person (Gaie and Metz 2010: 275). It is for this reason that Metz observes that this account of ubuntu 'posits certain relationships as constitutive of the good that a moral agent ought to promote' (334). Thus, it is correct to observe that ubuntu as a moral theory is relational insofar as it grounds morality on the external property of certain relationships. It is therefore urgent that we be specific about what kinds of relationships constitute the whole gamut of morality in an African tradition.

To specify and clarify which relations are of the relevant moral kind, Metz draws from Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, who is famous for chairing the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Tutu opining on the idea of ubuntu states: 'Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good' (1999: 35). Here, Tutu unequivocally submits that harmony is the greatest good. Harmony is considered to be the ground-norm that defines right actions or it is considered to be intrinsically good. In line with Tutu's adumbrations on ubuntu and how it posits harmony as the greatest good, Metz also asserts that harmonious relationships are the sorts of relations that are constitutive of the principle of right action (2010: 84). In other words, if one wants to ascertain what constitutes a right action then one has to rely solely on the basic value of harmony (Metz 2007b; 2009).

According to Metz, the idea of harmony is best construed in terms of two distinct relationships: those of *identity* and *solidarity*.

By 'identity' he means 'sharing of a way of life' in which a person sees herself as part of a social group, wherein she defines herself in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'; she shares in that group's practices and goals by taking part in coordinating projects to achieve those shared ends (Metz 2007a: 335; 2009: 52). By 'solidarity' he has in mind 'caring and supporting relationships', ones in which people help one another, are affectionate towards one another and empathetic (335–336). With this understanding of harmonious relationships, we arrive at this principle of right action: 'an action is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an action is wrong' (Metz 2009: 51).[6]

This principle specifies that right actions are a function of prizing communal relationships and wrong ones are a function of disrespecting such relationships. Right actions are a function of respecting some interpersonal relationships where we share a way of life and take care of those with whom we share a way of life. Or, as Metz states: 'So, it also follows that the present moral theory can be understood to instruct an agent to respect or honor friendly relationships' (Metz 2009: 54; 2010: 84). It should be emphasised that Metz's principle is *deontological* as it requires us to prize or honour some relationships as opposed to promoting them, as a consequentialist theory would prescribe (MacNaughton and Rawling 1992).[7] It is also interesting to note that Metz thinks that his way of construing 'harmony' in terms of identity and solidarity translates harmony into a broad sense of 'love' or an ethics that prizes 'friendship' (337).

It is also crucial to note that Metz informs us that a moral theory that grounds moral normativity in 'friendship' or a broad sense of 'love' can reasonably be conceived to be partialist, that is it accords prior and extra moral considerations to our loved ones and extant relations over strangers and new relationships (Metz 2009: 52). This implies that we have a duty to respect relationships of identity and solidarity wherever possible, but our priority should be to our extant special relationships.

Above, I have given the reader what I consider to be as close as possible an understanding of Metz's deontological moral theory. We observed that this theory posits harmonious interpersonal relationships as fundamentally valuable. We also observed that 'harmony'

is constituted by relations of identity and solidarity; and, our deontic obligation is to respect or honour relationships of identity and solidarity. In what follows, I turn to criticise Metz's theory.

Relational Ethics and the Focus Problem

The literature in African ethics has tended to neglect considering whether African ethics is best construed in terms of partiality or impartiality (Molefe, 2016a/b). Elsewhere, I have argued that African ethics is best represented in terms of partialism rather than impartialism (Molefe, 2016b, 2018). Interestingly, Metz thinks that African ethics is best construed in terms of partiality, though he does not necessarily defend this claim (Metz 2009, 2010). For example, Bell and Metz, comparing Chinese and African ethics, note that they have these features in common: 'We focus in this article on three key precepts shared by Confucianism and *Ubuntu*: the central value of community, *the desirability of ethical partiality*, and the idea that we tend to become morally better as we grow older' (2011: 80; emphasis added). Generally, the literature concerned about partiality usually justifies it by appeal to three sorts of considerations, namely: projects, individuals and relationships (Lord 2016). I am here not interested in delving into the details of each of these moral-theoretical justifications of partiality; I limit myself to the relationship-based justification and objections against it since I believe they will equally apply to Metz's relational theory.

One way of justifying that we have greater or special duties to our personal ties like family and friends is usually supported by invoking the idea of *relationships*. 'The relationships view holds that facts about our relationships provide reasons to be partial. These reasons are often weighty enough to justify partiality' (Lord 2016: 570).[8] The parent–child relationship, on this view, is ground enough for me to show differential concern towards my daughter than to a child of a stranger. For example, if I hear screams in a nearby river and upon coming closer I see two persons drowning, if one of them starts calling me by name, soon I realise it is my daughter. According to this view, the parent–child relationship is ground enough for me to save my child, supposing I can only save one. The rationale informing my prioritizing my child over a stranger, if a relationship-

based partiality account is true, is the mere fact of the relationship itself – she is my daughter.

   Though justifying partiality by appeal to relationships strikes the intuitive chord of many, it has a serious limitation. One such limitation is referred to as the 'focus problem' objection (Lord 2016: 572). Following the case of my drowning child in a river, what reasons ought to justify or inform why I prioritise my daughter rather than the other child? Will my reasons be informed by considerations about her as an individual, like her soul/welfare/rights or should I be drawn merely by the fact that she is my daughter (parent–child relationship)? If I have to reflect on the reasons that inform my choice, what facts ought to take priority in terms of my focus: individual-based or relationship-based facts? This strict dichotomy makes sense supposing one accounts for partiality strictly in terms of relationships, wherein one considers them to be fundamentally valuable as does Metz and other scholars (Scheffler 1995).

   A strictly relational ethics will surely have to invoke considerations taken to be fundamental in terms of justifying partiality, which are facts about the relationship itself. The objection against appealing solely to facts about relationships as a basis for justifying partiality is that it is 'very odd to think about which relationships we have with things when thinking about what to do … it would be inappropriate for me to focus on the fact that my relationship with my (child) would be damaged if (s)he was badly injured. I shouldn't be primarily thinking about our relationship. I should be thinking about her' (Lord 2016: 571). The point is that relationship-based accounts appear unable to focus on the individual qua individual. In situations wherein my daughter is in danger, I should not primarily be thinking about the parent–child relationship itself at least not as a priority; instead, I should be focused on my daughter herself as an individual and her threatened welfare. Other considerations should naturally be in the background but should never eclipse the individual herself. If the individual, my daughter, and some facts about her like her welfare do not take centre stage, this leaves the unfortunate impression that the parent *'cares less for you yourself than for a role that he wants you to fill'* (Keller 2013: 63; emphasis added).

   So, at the heart of this criticism is the question about what facts should inform our reasons for prioritising our loved ones and, quite naturally, a relationship-based view will invoke considerations riv-

eted on facts about the relationship itself. Given the fact that a relationship-based justification of partiality considers relationships to be so fundamentally valuable that they ground partiality to our loved ones, it follows that our focus should be on the fact of our relationship with the individual and not the individual herself; hence, the focus problem. My criticism to Metz's theory expresses this concern about the lack of proper focus on the individual herself.

The reader should remember that Metz considers relationships of identity and solidarity to be morally fundamental in accounting for a right action. These two facets of harmonious relationships, which the agent is to prize or honour, throw her into a relationship with others. Metz is unambiguous in this regard about where ultimately to locate moral value: 'A different understanding of the morality of *ubuntu* includes the idea that moral value *fundamentally* lies not in the individual, but rather in a *relationship* between individuals' (333; emphasis added). So, there is no question that Metz distinguishes between individual-based and relationship-based considerations; and, he considers the latter to be decisive for capturing African ethics.

Second, there is no question that Metz considers relationship-based considerations to be morally fundamental and prior to individual-based considerations – so much so that one accounts for morality solely in terms of relationship-based considerations. It is also crucial for the reader to bear in mind that Metz is ultimately after a monistic moral theory, hence he defends a moral theory grounded solely on the relational norm of harmony qua identity and solidarity, which he construes in terms of friendship. It is for this reason that Metz avers that 'The idea that interpersonal relationships of some kinds have basic moral status is not often found in Anglo-American or Continental normative theory' (333). And, taking seriously the idea that some interpersonal relationship is a basic carrier of value emphatically captures the distinction between the fact that 'one might morally value something about people as they are in themselves or as being part of certain relationships' (333). So, here Metz insists on the dichotomy between valuing the individual on the basis of some facts about her and valuing the individual on the basis of facts of the relationship she is in. And, Metz is unequivocal that his African relational moral theory explains right actions by specifically focusing on considerations of

relationships the individual is in and not the individual herself in her own right.

On the first individualist (moral) logic, if one asks 'Why do you save this drowning child?', the response will invoke some facts related to the child herself, be it welfare, dignity or rights (Keller 2013; Metz 2013a). On the communitarian (moral) logic, one will adduce facts about the relationships she is in: she is my daughter, neighbour and so on. It is on the basis of this dichotomy that I submit that Metz's moral theory is susceptible to the focus problem because it has the same features that a relationship-based justification of partiality has (Keller 2013). To demonstrate the focus problem with regard to Metz's moral theory, I consider an objection he makes against a principle of right action derived from the moral notion of 'personhood' in African philosophy, which makes it the agent's chief moral goal to realise her true humanity (Metz 2007a). Metz offers what I consider to be some version of the focus problem as a criticism to this self-realisation moral theory qua personhood.

A self-realisation theory locates the ultimate value in some internal feature of a moral agent, some facet of her humanity; and, the sole moral good on this theory is a function of perfecting one's own humanity. So, the reason informing the agent's actions is the fact that she will benefit from these actions by way of perfecting herself. Metz, on his part, 'questions the (self-realisation) theory's ability to provide an attractive explanation' for why we should help others (332). And, he observes that this theory is stuck with a 'basic justificatory reason' for helping others that is grounded in the fact that 'it will help me by making me […] a better person' (ibid.).

In his analysis, Metz correctly submits that a more promising 'explanation' should invoke 'the fact that it would (likely) be good for them, an explanation that a self-realisation ethic by definition cannot invoke' (ibid.). So, the crux of Metz's criticism amounts to the view that we should be able morally to respond (offering help) to others merely because it is good for them. Their well-being should have some place in morality even when we do not stand to benefit, particularly where no greater sacrifice is involved. The underlying logic is that there is something attractive about altruism insofar as we act merely to advance others' interests/welfare because it is good for them; and, a theory that is essentially agent-centred like a self-realisation account will not be able to accommodate this (other) indi-

vidual-centred facet of altruism (Metz 2013a: 81). Metz ultimately jettisons a self-realisation moral theory for its intransigent self-focus since this feature generally renders it unable properly to focus on others for their own sakes; and, as such, he considers it to be unattractive to ground a plausible African moral theory.

From the above, we can make the following observations. First, it can be observed that a robust or even a plausible moral theory must be able to capture crucial features of an individual qua individual insofar as an individual ought to be the proper focus of our help rather than the helper, particularly in cases where altruism is under consideration. So, the reason for helping has to involve some facts about the individual being helped. Thus, if Metz's theory is to be plausible, at the very least, it should also have this feature of relevantly focusing on individuals for their own sakes. This strikes me as the essence of the spirit of altruism. Second, this consideration of individual-based facts is enough to cast doubt on the plausibility of a theory that does not have the theoretical corpus to account for proper focus on the individual for her own sake.

What justificatory explanation will Metz's moral theory invoke to account for helping my drowning daughter? Will this theory be able to focus properly on the individual for her own sake? I do not think so. So, the key question here is: do I focus on my daughter herself as an individual or do I focus on the parent-daughter relationship as the basic explanatory basis for my action? Harmony comprises of the relationships of identity and solidarity. Metz's theory appears to point us to the odd direction of focusing on facts about the parent–daughter relationship itself rather than merely on my daughter herself as an individual. I say so because the right action according to Metz is a function solely of prizing the most attractive relationships constituted by identity and solidarity; and, *not directly* prizing the individual person herself. I think this difference may be clarified by comparing Metz's African relational theory against Western individualist theories. Metz's own comments with regard to his own relational theory and Kant's deontology and utilitarianism as principles of right actions are quite revealing:

> Permissible acts […] are a function of participating in certain kinds of desirable relationships […] The ultimate explanation of why a particular action is wrong, or why one has moral reason to avoid performing a certain act, *involves a failure to relate*. Such a perspective differs from

utilitarianism, in which moral value is a function of the *individual's capacity for pleasure and pain*, and from Kantianism, in *which it is a matter of the individual's capacity for autonomy*. Of course, insofar as utilitarianism and Kantianism prescribe certain actions, they often require an agent to treat others in certain ways. The point is that, for these views, treating others rightly is a function of responding to something good that is intrinsic to an individual, either her pleasure or autonomy (2013a: 82; emphasis added).

So, Metz is clear that his moral theory explains rightness and wrongness in terms of successful or failure to relate; and, emphasis is put on the activity of relating as *the* defining feature of morality; whereas Kant's deontology and utilitarianism are focused on considering some capacity intrinsic to an individual of a person like pleasure or autonomy as the basis for determining rightness or wrongness of actions.

We can actually separate these two relationships of identity and solidarity to demonstrate how it is in the basic make-up of this theory to focus essentially on relationships as taking priority rather than individuals qua individuals. I start with the requirement to prize a relationship of *identity*. To prize a relationship of identity amounts to seeing my personal identity in terms of 'we' or a 'common sense of self', where the 'we' includes me and others with whom I am enveloped in a relationship (331); so much so that when I refer to myself I use 'we' as if to suggest that the 'we' takes priority over the 'I'. Furthermore, to prize *identity* also involves thinking of projects in terms of *our* projects and also working together to achieve such shared projects. Here, we see that this relationship of identity really defines me (personal identity) and my entire life-plan in terms of relationships with others. So, a right action is essentially characterised by this feature of 'beingness-with-others' (Menkiti 2004: 324).

It is crucial to note that this aspect (identity) of this deontological theory is very important since it caters for the communitarian aspect of African moral thought, where I think of myself as 'inextricably bound' with others or the idea that 'I am because we are' (Mbiti 1969: 141; Tutu 1999: 35). Why does Metz insist on this feature of identity? It is because it offers his theory an 'African pedigree' – remember he is after an *African* moral theory (324, 340). If he loses this feature, he remains with just *a* moral theory.

The second relationship to prize is that of solidarity, which imposes on me duties to care for others' welfare for their own sakes: to be sympathetic, loving and caring towards them in their own right as individuals (Metz 2007a). One might here hastily suppose that this facet of the theory solves the focus problem since it calls on us to care for others for their own sakes as individuals.

Nothing could be further from the truth. We should remember that according to this theory, fundamental moral value is constituted by these two relationships of identity and solidarity *together* (337). So, the solidarity facet essentially requires the identity element. One usually unnoticed implication of this principle of right action is that a right action is one that is simultaneously characterised by 'being-with-others' (identity) and improving others' well-being (solidarity). In other words, a relationship of merely improving others' welfare, on its own, does not quite count as a right action; and the relationship of merely 'being-with-others' also does not count as right action. Without any of the two, one does not yet have the right action.

The focus problem emerges precisely because of the identity facet of this moral theory. If one were to rank identity and solidarity in terms of priority, Metz informs us that solidarity will rank higher than identity: 'While good-will (solidarity) without shared identity is morally more valuable than the converse, it is better still with shared identity' (337). In other words, showing sympathy (solidarity) to a stranger is less moral than doing so 'to mutually recognising members of a group' – identity (ibid.). Since we cannot separate identity from solidarity, it surely follows that the focus problem is structured in this marriage of these two relationships. I say it is 'structured' because the identity aspect of this theory always locks me in a relationship with others, where I see myself and others as inextricably bound in a reciprocal we; and, thus it becomes impossible to see the other merely as an individual qua individual, where morality is concerned.

Think about it this way. Take the case of my drowning daughter. In scenario 1: the parent can save her own daughter; and, in scenario 2, a stranger can save my daughter. If the stranger saves her rather than the parent, it does not yet account (properly) as a right action because it lacks the facet of 'mutually recognising members' captured by the idea of identity. If the parent saves her then we have a

(proper) right action because we have an instantiation of both mutually recognising members qua parent–child relationship and solidarity. So, it is the facet of identity that explains the focus problem of Metz's theory.

Think about it differently. It seems that common-sense morality, in the case of the drowning child, ought to instruct us merely to concern ourselves with saving the child. Who does the saving should not be important at all because our focus is the individual (child) and to make sure she is safe. But, not so with Metz's theory. Whether it is a stranger or the parent that does the saving makes *all* the (moral) difference in the world. The action of saving the child by the stranger since it lacks identity does not yet count as a right action; and, the action of saving the child by the parent does count as a right action because it has both the identity and solidarity facets. So, the idea of identity makes *all* the (moral) difference in accounting for the right action.

One might here argue that I construe the identity relationship in a very uncharitable or even narrow sense; and, this presents Metz's moral theory in an implausible light. No, I think the problem is not so much my interpretation but the nature of the relationship-based moral theory itself. Metz is very specific about what he has in mind when he talks about relationships of identity. Above, I quoted him talking about a *mutually recognising relationship*. One is called a 'stranger' precisely because there is no property of mutual recognition. A person like Mother Teresa who commits herself to helping the poor world over is not having an *identity* relationship with the poor she is helping, at least not in the sense employed by Metz. The fact that she departs from the point of view where she and the poor are the children of God is too broad to capture the precise sense of identity Metz has in mind.

To approximate the precise sense Metz has in mind, one has to consider analogies he employs to reveal the true nature and scope of this relationship. He uses the idea of 'family', as is common in African thought; he also uses the idea of 'love' and he ultimately reduces these relationships to the idea of 'friendship' (337; Metz 2009: 51–52). One feature that captures the precise sense of the idea of family, love and friendship is that they are 'anti-universal' in the sense that they do not include everyone in that relationship, in the way the idea of everyone being a child of God does (Appiah 1998).

Not everyone can properly count as your *family* member, your *loved* one and your *friend*. These values capture the idea of partiality, wherein there are those that are special (mutually recognising) and those that are not (outside of this relationship).

So, a correct understanding of identity must understand it in this precise sense wherein it espouses values that operate within the framework of partialism rather than universalism as Mother Teresa's case would suggest. This reading of Metz is not surprising because it coheres with one of the crucial moral intuitions of African moral thought: the idea that 'charity must begin at home' (Metz 2013a: 83; Wiredu 1992: 200). So, the focus problem objection is effective against Metz's theory because a right action essentially depends on the relationship that holds between individuals in the first place. This relationship (of identity) is essential even for some action to count as right in the first place.

I proceed in the last section to capture briefly what I call the 'agent-centred partiality objection'; this criticism is also centred on the idea of identity.

Agent-related Partiality Objection

One of the attractive features, according to Metz, of his moral theory is that it can accommodate the idea of partiality in African moral thought – the idea that charity begins at home (Metz 2009, 2013a; Wiredu 1992). Bell and Metz (2011: 88) state: 'Both Confucianism and *Ubuntu* defend the value of partiality: our ethical obligations, at least with regard to beneficence, are strongest to those with whom we have personal relationships, and they diminish in intensity the farther we go from those relationships.' But, one can draw a distinction between two types of partialisms, one that is *other*-centred and one that is *agent*-centred (Molefe, 2018). The 'other-centred' partiality usually refers to our special relationships with our loved ones, mainly our friends and family (Cottingham 1986: 368). An 'agent-centred' partiality refers to the favouritism an agent ought to manifest towards herself, her identity and projects (Cottingham 1986: 364). My objection here to Metz's theory is that it does appear to accommodate other-centred partiality since it values certain interpersonal relationships as morally fundamental; but, it does

not appear to have the moral resources to account for an agent-related partiality.[9]

So, the objection above was that the identity dimension render this moral theory unable to focus on the individual herself for her own sake; the moral patient must first be in a relationship with the agent, then we can properly or sufficiently talk about morality. The objection here is that the dimension of identity renders this moral theory unable to prioritise the agent and her own projects in morality. To unfold my case, I will appeal to these two examples.

Suppose I have some money to fund my own doctoral studies, but I have a friend who needs money to pursue her first academic qualification. Suppose it is really my life-project to become a philosopher and to live my life contributing to the community of philosophy. And, my friend for one reason or another also needs this qualification. How do I decide where to plough the funds: on my studies or hers?

Remember, in Metz's theory, right actions are characterised by the dual features of identity (being-with-others) and solidarity. The act of prioritising my own project of being a philosopher appears to lack the feature of identity. This act appears to be focusing on me as an agent and not others. The act of helping a friend appears to have both features of identity and solidarity; we are mutually recognising and I do wish well for my friend. It appears then that the right thing to do, in this instance, is prioritising my friend over myself. This other-regarding facet of Metz's moral theory, on the face of it, might appear as a virtue but it is actually a limitation.

A defence of Metz that my project of doing my doctoral studies does have the element of identity since I *will* be joining the community of philosophers does not work. This kind of defence does not quite take off given that Metz explicitly informs us that 'for the African tradition, one's own, existing relationships have a priority relative to others' relationships and relationships that one could have but does not yet' (2013b: 83; see also 2009: 52). In this case, the extant friendship takes priority over the newer or potential future relationships with philosophers.

For another useful example, suppose, using some moral calculus I stipulate, I discover that leading the life of a bachelor will make my life more fulfilling than a married one. This example is useful because, remember, Metz informs us that one of the salient moral

intuitions in African moral thought is the idea that 'Many African people think there is some strong moral reason to extend familial relationships by finding a (heterosexual) spouse and having children' (327). If Metz's relational moral theory is true, then which sort of life ought I to choose between these two, supposing a more fulfilling life is a worthwhile goal of any plausible moral theory?

In spite of the facts on the table that an unmarried life would work out better for me as an agent than a married one, it appears that Metz's moral theory would prescribe a married life. An unmarried life does not have the feature of being-with-others and solidarity but a married one does have these crucial relational moral properties. This example is not a farfetched one because it is possible to live a miserable or less fulfilling married life and it is possible to lead a more fulfilling solitary life pursuing art or something. The point of the objection is to show that a relationship-based moral theory cannot prioritise the agent and her own projects, particularly ones that are just about her and have no obvious bearing for others, such as pursuing art that one never shares with anyone.

I do not here defend agent-centred partialism per se. I work on the intuition that it should be a plausible feature of any robust moral theory. At the heart of this kind of partiality is the robust moral idea of *me* and things that come to identify *me* insofar as they pick *me* out as distinct and special (Cottingham 1991). The idea here is to observe that a robust moral theory must come to terms with the fact that 'specialness of a self […] has an important place in any plausible' moral account (Cottingham 1991: 799, 800). What captures this *specialness* is the fact that in my 'scale of values' I rank my life and its projects to be prior and higher than even relationships, though some relationships are part of my core commitments (Cottingham 1983: 87). And, if someone were to ask me why I care about these relationships, a plausible moral response will not merely invoke relationships themselves; but, I submit it has to invoke that important feature of agent-relative reasons: the mere fact that they are *mine* or that they are good for *me* (Appiah 1998). Also, a relationship-based theory by its very nature does not have the corpus to account for such an agent-related facet of morality.

The major concern then against this moral theory is that its focus on being-with-others leaves the place of the 'I' unexplained in moral theory. How does one choose in the case where there is a competition

between the 'we' and 'I' as captured in the examples above? Which projects are to be prioritised – those of 'we' or 'I' – in cases where they diverge? It strikes me as disingenuous not to imagine such divergences precisely because one of the perennial debates in Afro-communitarianism is just this ever-present tension or even competing claims of individuals and those of the community. What is interesting about Metz's moral theory is that it does talk about projects involving mutually recognising members; but what is exceedingly concerning about it is its absolute silence on personal projects that are concerned purely about me and their place in moral thought.

Another useful way to capture this objection is in terms of Kwame Gyekye's critique to the so-called 'radical communitarianism'. One way to make sense of Gyekye's (1992) critique is that radical communitarianism is too focused on relationships to the exclusion of the crucial moral features pertinent to the individual and her own good; and, also it overlooks the possibility that some of these individual issues and goods may have nothing to do with the community in an essential fashion. On his part, Gyekye (1992) defends 'moderate communitarianism' as it equalises some inter-personal relationships and some individual goods. The upshot of such a project is that it allows that 'from time to time (I) can take a distanced view of communal values and practices and reassess or revise them. This possibility implies that the (I) can set some of (my) own goals and, in this way, participate in the determination or definition of (my) own identity' (Gyekye 1992: 113).

The insight from Gyekye's complaint from grounding morality purely in terms of relationships without allowing for some individual projects is that it denies one crucial attribute of human beings that any robust moral theory must accommodate – the idea of autonomy and even that of authenticity (Gyekye 1992; Tshivhase 2013). Morality must allow individuals some space to determine who they are in that fundamental sense of 'I'; it must allow me space to answer that crucial question of why I think I am here and it must allow me to think about how I want to live my life, by way of setting some of my own goals (moral and non-moral) – all this without denying the importance of relationships. The point is not so much to rule out relationships but to critique the role they are made to play in this moral theory. The underlying insight from this idea of autonomy and authenticity is that it posits the self as a possible locus

or even a source of morality, rather than the interpersonal relationships, important as they might be. Or, more moderately, it strongly points out that relationships cannot be the whole story about morality though they are an important part of it.[10]

This insight about some space for an individual and her own projects as occupying a special place in morality is best captured by John Cottingham and he refers to it as 'anthropodicy'. He refers to this as an 'ethics of self-concern', whereas for Metz morality is a morality of other concern (1991: 798). The crucial feature of this position is that we must reckon with the fact that some ineliminable degree of self-preference is inevitable in morality (1991: 802). Cottingham uses the notion of 'self-preference' to include loved ones like friends and family (ibid.). The insight here is that some portion of morality must concern itself with the agent and her projects, which includes relationships. The idea of 'autonomy' as I use it here is to see an agent in her own right and as distinct though not necessarily opposed to others. This self-preference is crucial but not all-encompassing – there are times when I may overlook some agent-related projects. But, it is a general principle that these characterise my day-to-day activities, otherwise *me* as a project would be seriously threatened.

If this idea of agent-related partiality matters at all in moral theory, as I think it does, it is not entirely clear how a moral theory like that of Metz can accommodate it. What makes this objection strong is that it puts the cart where it belongs, behind the horse. Though relationships matter morally and we should prize them, we should prize them as a function of an individual or part of an individual, not necessarily for their own sake. To express this point clearly, it is not so much that Metz's theory will not accommodate an agent-related partiality; were it to be able to do so, it would do so for wrong reasons. Such a partiality would be admissible only insofar as it would ultimately contribute to the final value of interpersonal relationships of identity and solidarity. However, I think this completely misses the point: the idea is that some moral good is a function purely of some individual interests or welfare, and relationships matter insofar as they are part of what constitute *my* projects, interests and welfare, not as an end in themselves.

My point is not so much to argue for autonomy as the basic norm to ground morality, but merely to indicate that a robust moral theory

has to reckon with some goods that reside in the agent and her own good without regard to relationships. The fact of being an individual gives her some obligations to herself as an agent and to make sense of her own life. A robust moral theory must be able to account for such individual goods; and it appears that a morality of relationships such as Metz's does not have the corpus to accommodate them.

Conclusion

Above, I offered two objections to Metz's African relational moral theory that instructs moral agents to respect relationships of identity and solidarity. I first objected by appeal to what is referred to as the focus problem, namely if the basic good is some relationship then it is not clear that this theory is able to focus properly on the individual herself. Second, I argued that this theory does not have a place for agent-related partiality. The legitimate place for self-preference and one's independent goal does not appear to have space in this moral theory. I think Metz is correct to observe that some interpersonal relationships are crucial in African moral theory, I just think he overstates their importance in moral philosophy by according them the final value status. A robust moral theory will have some crucial considerations for the 'I' and her own projects. I think a promising moral theory is one Metz identified as 'probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature', one that is rooted in the normative notion of 'personhood' (331). It appears to have inter alia features that Metz's moral account does not have.

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Notes

1. Henceforth all pages for this article appear on their own in parenthesis.
2. An 'individualist' moral theory is one that defines a right action by appealing to some feature *internal* to a human individual like welfare, on the part of utilitarianism, or, rationality, on the part of Kant's deontology (331).
3. Metz identifies at least six attempts to account for a plausible conception of African ethics. Metz finds the following basic norms in the characterisation of African ethics in the literature, namely: dignity, utility, self-realisation, survival and harmony. Related to these basic norms, he specifies six principles of right action (328–334). He ultimately defends an interpretation of African ethics grounded in the relational norm of harmony.
4. 'Moral egoism' is a moral theory that instructs a moral agent to pursue her self-interest (Pojman 2002). This moral theory is more comparable to Aristotle's Eudaimonia (van Niekerk 2007).
5. Those who are familiar with Metz's moral theorisation will do well to remember that he seeks to defend a monistic theory, one that is grounded in a single norm – such an account is either grounded in an individualistic or communitarian norm. Metz articulates a theory that is purely grounded in a communitarian norm. In this regard, Metz (2013a: 153; emphasis added) avers: 'However, I am in the first instance interested in pursuing a *monistic* interpretation of sub-Saharan ethics, mainly since one can know that more than one basic end must be posited only upon first having posited a single one and having found it inadequate'.
6. I am equally aware that Metz does at times, particularly when he articulates conceptions of dignity, offer interpretations of African ethics that construe in terms of the capacity for relationship rather than the relationship itself (Metz 2010; 2012b). Metz is aware of this disjuncture between these two disparate interpretations of African ethics: internalist and externalist interpretations of a theory of right action. Metz notes these two possible interpretations of African ethics. An internalist interpretation: 'U: An act is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an act is wrong' (Metz 2010: 84). An externalist account: 'U2: An act is wrong (at least in part) because it degrades the individual's dignity that she has in virtue of her capacity to engage in harmonious relationships' (Metz 2010: 94). Metz goes on to make this comment with regard to these two disparate construals of African ethics: 'I am as yet unsure of how U2 and U precisely relate to one another, specifically, of whether they are ultimately equivalent, whether U2 is more fundamental than U, or whether they need to be combined in some way' (ibid.). This is evidence enough that Metz draws a distinction between U, a principle that is externalist insofar as it defines right actions strictly in terms of prizing some interpersonal relationships, and U2, a principle that is internalist insofar as it defines right actions strictly in terms of prizing some individual capacity. In this article, I limit my criticism to U and I completely ignore considerations of U2 as my critique is reserved for his relational ethics.
7. An earlier statement of this principle was given in *consequentialist* terms, wherein an agent was required to promote these relationships of harmony (334). In this article, MacNaughton et al. distinguish between consequentialist

and deontological theories in terms of promotion and honouring. Consequentialism promotes some value, whereas deontological accounts honour some value.

8. This clarification is crucial to bear in mind about what we mean when we are talking about relationships, since we are surrounded by them at every turn: 'Most restrict their attention to (i) familial relationships and (ii) loving relationships (including friendship and romantic loving relationships)' (Lord 2016: 574).

9. I borrow this phrase from John Cottingham (1986).

10. The objection that autonomy, for example, as feminists are wont to argue, emerges in relational contexts is not strong enough to weaken the objection made here. It is true others play a crucial role for one to be autonomous but insofar as the agent is ultimately responsible for their actions then it follows that there is that residual element that can be traced and tracked to the individual herself, otherwise we will not be able to account for personal responsibility and accountability.

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