



# Individualistic Versus Relational Ethics – A Contestable Concept for (African) Philosophy

Pamela Andanda<sup>1</sup> · Marcus Düwell<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Thaddeus Metz, in his book “A Relational Moral Theory” compares the relational African view to Western theories of right action with a focus on Kant (respective contemporary Kantianism) and Utilitarianism. In focussing on the opposition between a relational and an individualistic view, Metz questions the interpretation of basic normative assumptions that are guiding central Western moral and political institutions. He particularly focusses on Kantian and Utilitarian approaches to which he ascribes substantive moral assumptions in terms of utility respective autonomy. In this paper, we reconstruct Metz’s position on the opposition between a relational and an individualistic view on ethics. We then investigate whether his relational conceptualisation is a convincing reconstruction of African views and question his take on Western positions, focussing in particular on views around individual rights and communality as presented in the Kantian tradition. We highlight the value of ubuntu in intercultural discourse to foster ethical and moral reasoning in a holistic way and conclude that any reflection on ethics necessarily involves an understanding of our common human nature, which is at the core of philosophical anthropology.

**Keywords** African philosophy · Communality · Individualism · Kantianism · Relational ethics · Ubuntu · Philosophical anthropology

## 1 Introduction

In his book “A Relational Moral Theory” Thaddeus Metz confronts African, relational approaches to morality with what he describes as traditional Western views based on individualistic presuppositions. Regarding the Western views he particular focusses on Kantian

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✉ Pamela Andanda  
pamela.andanda@wits.ac.za

Marcus Düwell  
marcus.duewell@tu-darmstadt.de

<sup>1</sup> School of Law, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Department of Philosophy, Technical University Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany

and Utilitarian approaches to which he ascribes substantive moral assumptions in terms of utility respective autonomy. He reconstructs the relational alternative as a moral theory, shows the meta-ethical presuppositions and demonstrates the implications of such a view for various concrete moral questions. In focussing on the opposition between a relational and an individualistic view, Metz questions the interpretation of basic normative assumptions that are guiding central Western moral and political institutions.

We take this approach to strive for a twofold aim: On the one hand, Metz wants to give voice to a worldview and to a specific understanding of morality that he takes to be widely held in Africa. On the other hand, his ambition is to elaborate this view as a genuine African contribution to the global philosophical discourse, distinct from other views. We will challenge Metz on both levels. We are not convinced that the opposition between an individualistic Western versus a relational African perspective is a helpful framework for such an intercultural discourse. In a first step, we will reconstruct Metz's position. In a second step, we will investigate whether his relational conceptualisation is a convincing reconstruction of African views. In a third step we will question his take on Western positions, focussing in particular on views around individual rights and communality as presented in the Kantian tradition. His characterization of Western positions overlooks the fact that any reflection on ethics necessarily involves an understanding of our common human nature, which is at the core of philosophical anthropology. Accordingly, Western and African approaches to ethics have much in common and Metz's disjunction of Western/African approaches is unhelpful in a globalized world. It also overlooks the extent to which globalization, integration and the need for universal ethics in addressing moral issues are unlikely to accommodate the approach and geographical labels that he has adopted. In a fourth step we will consider possibilities of more integrated views for a hermeneutic of communal self-understanding that take African views seriously but avoid the extreme oppositions of Metz.

## 2 Reconstruction of Metz's Position

The book 'A Relational Moral Theory' is an attempt to synthesize the research of Metz that aims to give voice to a genuine moral approach from African origin. Metz developed his research in a series of earlier publications with a more limited scope and a variety of earlier articles have been rewritten for the aim of this volume. The strength of this attempt lies certainly in its systematic ambition. Metz takes an African ethics to be a tradition of its own that deserves systematic elaboration and has the potential to form as 'the great gift from Africa' a genuine contribution to the global moral discourse. In order to realize this ambitious project, Metz tries to develop this tradition in three steps following the mainstream structure of contemporary textbook introductions into ethics.

In the first part (2021, pp. 25–61) he elaborates the meta-ethical presuppositions. In doing so he discusses the Is-ought-problem, the presuppositions in terms of concepts of sociality and self, the basic intuitions, and offers an attempt for a justification. This chapter offers rich material in fundamental philosophical discussions and engages with a variety of modern debates in meta-ethics.

In the second part (2021, pp. 65–144), Metz discusses basic elements of a normative theory in terms of value theory, concept of a good and a concept of communality. On the

basis of those elements, Metz reconstructs the key normative principle of such an ethics in terms of ‘the capacity to commune’ (2021, p. 106 ff).

In the third part (147–241), Metz shows the implications of his approach for various discussions in applied ethics: environmental, biomedical research, education and business ethics. This is a broad variety of areas, which cover very diverse dimensions of life.

This structure of the book has several advantages. First, it is possible to show the inter-relationships between the systematic foundation and the implications for important and contested areas of human life. The book has a systematic structure and is not just a collection of single papers. Second, that he follows the mainstream structure of this kind of ethics books makes comparisons to Western mainstream approaches possible. Third, Metz’s decision not to discuss moral theory alone but to engage in such an extensive way in discussions in applied ethics makes the book much more than an academic endeavor that engages with the intricate moral dimensions of real life. Fourth, about all dimensions that are covered in the book exist extensive literature in the global ethical discourse, which makes it possible to engage in comparative discussions.

We think that the entire outset of the book is very convincing in its structure and that in this sense the book is really an impressive achievement. Metz succeeds in presenting ideas and intuitions that are articulated in various contexts in a systematic fashion. He also makes presuppositions and implications visible and by doing so the relational approach he has in mind can be discussed in a systematic manner. We as well think that he succeeds in grasping important cultural elements, which are worthwhile for further discussion. To embed those cultural differences in a systematic concept is certainly an important step forward.

When we challenge this approach in the remainder of the paper, this happens not due to lack of respect for this achievement, quite the opposite. We are, however, not convinced by the outcome of his work. There are some systematic decisions of Metz that call for critical scrutiny. But it is important to stress that those criticisms could only be articulated in such a straightforward manner because the outline of the book makes the systematic structure very clear. In that sense we think that the discussions about those systematic questions are not concluded by our critique but that more systematic discussions will be possible, and we look forward to learning from the reactions of Metz.

### 3 Comparing African and Western Perspectives

In this section, we focus on the issue whether the way Metz opposes African and Western perspectives is convincing. For a huge part, the book of Metz compares a ‘relational’ African view to Western theories of right action with a focus on Kant (respective contemporary Kantianism) and Utilitarianism. This comparison raises a variety of questions.

First, from a methodological point of view, one can wonder how such a comparison can and should be performed. What is this comparison about? Talking about Kant, we talk about the work of a philosopher in the 18th Century Prussia. We can refer here to a canonical body of texts about moral and political philosophy as well as other topics. In the same line we have some authors of the 18th and 19th Century Britain that call themselves Utilitarians and we have as well some canonical texts of Bentham, Mill or Sidgwick. Both lines of thought reflect affirmative or critical, explicit or implicit some written intellectual European traditions. Talking about contemporary Kantianism and Utilitarianism means reconstructions of

Western intellectuals, primarily from the US and Europe in the 20th and 21st Century, that developed ethical theories which in some sense refer to the respective traditions but react to contemporary challenges. Both traditions develop their philosophical approaches with global aspirations that is with claims which go far beyond the reach of the historic context within which they were developed. Talking about Ubuntu, however, means to talk about the (re-)constructive work of some contemporary intellectuals from various backgrounds that develop a systematic view on the basis of traditional (mainly unwritten) sources that are to some extent developed in explicit or implicit reference and/or opposition to non-African sources. This means when comparing Kantian, Utilitarian and African tradition, we compare very different forms of ethical thinking. In the reconstruction of the African tradition, interpretative categories and patterns are introduced that have been developed in Western discussions, like the opposition between ‘liberalism’ and ‘communitarianism’ - an opposition that was developed in the 20th Century in the USA against the background of a quite specific liberal or libertarian tradition and its political contestation. It is doubtful whether this opposition articulates moral and social traits which can in this way be adopted for the interpretation of other societies. It is probably not appropriate to analyse European societies along those lines, let alone traditional African ones.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the methodological starting point of Metz presupposes ‘a premise shared by its major interlocutors’, namely the assumption that ‘they share a certain, individualist claim’. This is not only contestable as a claim regarding Western moral traditions but it entails as well that his entire framework depends on this claim: ‘once individualism is rejected, one can develop a relational alternative that fills in many gaps left open by these competing theories’ (2021, p. 1).

Secondly, we can wonder whether we should understand for the purpose of such a comparison Kantian philosophy, Kantianism and Utilitarianism primary or even exclusively as theories of right action, independent of their embedding in a systematic philosophical context in which their claims are explained and justified. This is, among others, relevant for the question whether or not one can ascribe to Kant a moral position that one can in a meaningful way describe as ‘individualistic’. At least, one can wonder in which sense that is the case. Kantian ethics has some methodological angles on which the system is based and a specific way of carrying it out, e.g. with regard to examples of moral behaviour, social and political institutions: treatment of animals, relationship between genders, sexual behaviour etc. Of course, the way Kant explains his ethics is bound to the world of the 18th Century. A comparison in terms of world philosophy, however, should probably refer to the methodological angles. In this regard, it is disputable in which sense Kant’s ethics entails a substantive commitment to a position that can be called ‘individualistic’.

We propose to see the difference between a Kantian and a utilitarian ethics in a fundamental methodological point of view. A Kantian ethics starts from the perspective of the self-understanding of agents and wonder how a consistent moral perspective on the world would look like. In this sense, a Kantian philosophy would try to understand how human beings can orient themselves in the world, it tries to elaborate “the human standpoint” (Longuenesse 2005). Thus: it is the question how a rational agent can come to understand the kind of moral and rational commitments he or she has to embrace. Such an ethics is self-reflective and starts from the perspective of embodied, vulnerable and fallible beings who can understand that in their capacity as practical beings, that is beings that are able to strive for specific ends, they have some commitments unavoidable for rational beings. Such an

<sup>1</sup> See for the interpretation in cultural oppositions Düring 2018.

ethics does not strive for a foundation of moral commitments in some human-independent values but claims that there are practical and moral laws that all human beings have to embrace. In that sense, Kant found that humans act under some imperatives: instrumental imperatives (which come with the structure of action as such), eudemonistic imperatives (which come with the structure of striving for human beings) and a moral imperative (which is grounded in the maxims that a pure rational being would have). Those normative commitments are something human beings can understand when reflecting on themselves as beings that are able to form practical judgments.<sup>2</sup>

In which sense such an ethics is individualistic in a specific liberal or even libertarian sense, is contested. It is, however, methodologically important to notice that when reflecting on necessary elements of their own self-understanding as practical beings, humans find out that there is something they share with other agents and something that connects them. They share a joint humanity in the sense that they are vulnerable, fallible beings with the fundamental powers of understanding, the capacity to strive for ends and in that regard, they are under the same laws. These common capacities form the basis of communality as Kant stresses, among others, in the Critique of the Power of Judgment when it emphasizes that *sensus communis* is only possible on the basis of common human understanding, on our ability to exercise some capacities (Beyleveld and Düwell 2020). Thus: Kantian ethics is characterized by a self-reflective way of justification that refers to fundamental capacities of human beings which can be exercised under different cultural conditions, and which are necessary to develop cultures in the first place. This is not to say that a Kantian is a cultural relativist, but it means the critical reflection on different cultures has to be based on an understanding that all human beings are in a similar situation as biological, embodied beings that are faced with similar challenges in life and that can use their capacities of understanding and action to make sense of their life and to deal with these challenges. We have only to ascribe dignity to all human beings because of the insight in the joint capacity for understanding. That humans develop different cultures, social habits, institutions etc. has to be interpreted within the context of this ability to share something. Regarding the *sensus communis*, Kant stresses that it is based on the ability to think for oneself, to place oneself in thinking in the position of all other and to think consistently (Kant 1790/2000, pp. 293–294). By no means is it justified to assume that the relevant capacities for *sensus communis* are limited to one specific culture, but they apply to human beings in general. That Kant's own views on specific cultures, as we find them, e.g., in his writings on anthropology, have been developed by a man who never left his hometown is a contingent limitation of the historical person Immanuel Kant and not a principled limitation of the philosophical approach. The important point here is that the sense of communality is important for Kant not only as a fact of life, as something that is empirically given, but rather this communality is something that emerges from the exercise of our capacity for human understanding.

In a similar vein one could emphasize that a rights-based ethics cannot only be perceived as a means to see individuals entitled to realise their personal goals in an individualistic manner. The entire point of such an ethics is rather that the mutual recognition of each other as right-holders create a form of communality, namely a society of right-holders. This has been canonically stressed by Hegel. And we can doubt that such a normative theory based on rights has to be seen as 'atomistic' (Taylor 1985). Gewirth has in his 'Community of Rights' shown that it is not intelligible to establish a theory of rights only in terms of 'nega-

<sup>2</sup> See Steigleder 2002.

tive rights' but we can only establish 'negative rights' if there are as well 'positive rights', at least to some degree (Gewirth 1996).

In the same way one can ask what the methodological point of utilitarianism is. One can of course refer to the substantial moral principle to maximize happiness for all but by doing so one isolates a moral principle from the considerations under which this principle can be justified. To reconstruct utilitarianism is in that sense more difficult because there is not one central author, comparable in status to Kant within Kantianism. There are, however, good reasons to agree with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer when they claim that the model of Henry Sidgwick is the most reflected version of Utilitarianism (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014). Without going into much detail we can say that Sidgwick offers a view – in a critical reflection on Kant - according to which the right action has to be determined not from different viewpoints of agents but 'from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe' (Sidgwick 1907, p. 382) -a quote that gave the title to the book of Lazari-Radek and Singer. If we can see such a method of abstraction from the own value perspective as the guiding principle, we can discuss the broader background assumptions under which such an axiom is foundational for each concept of morality as Sidgwick claimed. One may find this approach to ethics attractive or not but from a methodological point of view it is not evident why it should necessarily be seen as 'individualistic'.

This paper is not the place to discuss Kant and Sidgwick in detail and there are of course different views on their account to morality. But if we reconstruct their methodology in a more formal way, this has some consequences for the discussion of a comparative project as the one of Metz. To start with, it will be difficult to make claims such as the claim that their position is individualistic as opposed to the communality-approach of African philosophy. It would be far more appropriate to claim that they search for a theory of right action that aims for making communal life in a just manner possible. Furthermore, such a systematic reconstruction would as well have the consequence that we would have to abstract from the specific substantive views that Kant or Sidgwick hold. As an example: it is not the question how Kant thinks about the right treatment of animals but how one has to think on the basis of Kant's methodological starting points.

Such a methodological reconstruction is, however, necessary for a comparative ethical endeavour. Because the aim of such comparison in ethics is to understand how we should think about contemporary moral questions in light of different traditions of thought. The aim should not be to profile those traditions against each other but to use this comparative conversation as a basis for a more enhanced way of moral thinking. We have good reasons to assume that the dominance of Western traditions in the international ethical and legal debates had one-sided consequences. But this should not be a reason to assume that Asian or African traditions would *eo ipso* be fundamentally different in their outlook on moral life. It is rather quite likely that there is a great dimension of overlap in moral thinking. After all, human beings have a shared human condition: they can speak and act, they relate to each other, they are vulnerable, have similar desires, dreams and aspirations etc. Humans are confronted with similar challenges in life: they need to survive, to protect themselves, procreate and are dependent on external conditions to lead their life. Finally, they have the task to interpret the world around them, their inner life and the actions of others to make sense of their situation in the world and to orient themselves.

Thus, in the first place human beings share some conditions as human beings and it is the task of philosophical anthropology to investigate these shared conditions. It is not necessary

to claim that there is one substantial view on the human being, which is shared globally but before we can focus on different views on the human being we have to confirm that those differences rest on a shared *conditio humana* and on shared capacities to create world views in order to make sense of life. Under those conditions, moral thinking takes place in which humans are confronted with questions regarding the right course of action. It is not surprising that some methodological aspects are quite globally present as e.g. the golden rule. In that sense, a comparative project will only be possible on the basis of such methodological abstraction and by a systematic search to find out whether or not similar normative rules and obligations can be justified from different methodological starting points – we will come back to this point in part five of this paper.

Starting from here we can wonder whether specific claims of Metz are convincing. Metz's discussion on the moral status of animals can be an example (2021, p. 158ff). Of course, Kant's own thinking about the treatment of animals is quite limited and one can indeed have doubts whether his argument regarding the relationship between brutal behaviour towards animals and humans is so strong.<sup>3</sup> We can instead reflect ourselves on the basis of Kantian methodological starting points in the following direction: Agents strive for ends and all agents are morally obliged to respect those that strive for ends as ends in themselves and since human agents are vulnerable beings this respect for the dignity of agents entails some negative and positive duties that follow from the vulnerability of those agents. Now, since we can understand that animals are in that regard in some sense similar to us. That means, they strive as well for ends and they are vulnerable. They do so in different ways than human beings and they indeed lack rationality in a Kantian sense. But if we know that our striving for ends and our vulnerability are relevant features for the determination of a moral status and moral duties, we can at least wonder to what extent the similarity of animals would be a reason to oblige us to take their interests into account. And if that were the case it would be as well plausible to assume that not all animals are equal, but some animals are more similar to us in the morally relevant characteristics than others. That implies that it would be plausible to make hierarchisations regarding the duties we have to different animals, and it may as well be plausible to treat wild animals different to animals we use and we live with.<sup>4</sup> This discussion is ongoing, and we do not want to make a decision on it, but it is not the case that from a Kantian perspective this topic is settled. The views and comments of Kant himself are in any case not the last word in that matter.

Another example could be all questions around the moral status of embryos, fetuses and babies (2021, p. 183 ff.) where Metz claims that Kantians would either not give them a moral status as such due to the lack of rational capacities or the same status due to the potential for the development of those capacities. Metz could have engaged here with a variety of debates in bioethics since this is one of the main topics in this field, discussed for decades. But it is by no means clear that a Kantian would see these as the only theoretical options. If a justification of the moral status refers to human's capacity for rationality, this does not mean that there are only rational beings/potential rational beings vs. non-rational beings. Rational capacities rather develop over time and there are parts of human life where rational action is not possible at all. This raises a question regarding the beginning and the end of moral status

<sup>3</sup> We leave aside that there exist diverging interpretations of Kant's argument.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Heeger 2005; Korsgaard 2018.

and whether or not such a status comes in degree. It is not to see why Kantians should here be limited to the opposition that Metz introduces.<sup>5</sup>

Generally, Metz's views on individualism seem to overlook what could have been valuable for understanding the fact that a human being is 'a living and changing being' (Burke 2007, p. 3), particularly in a globalised context that is prone to interdisciplinary discourse. In a bid to develop a relational alternative, Metz rejects approaches that ground ethics in metaphysics such as Gyekye's argument for moderate communitarianism. Gyekye acknowledges that 'the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing' (1997, p. 41) thus making an individual a product of both nature and nurture. Metz's view is that 'nothing moral can follow from anything merely metaphysical' (2021, p. 33). What Metz proposes as a correct strategy to eliminate any reference to metaphysics relates to what he describes as 'the *source* of the human self' (2021, p. 34).<sup>6</sup>

Metz does not however, explain what 'source' implies in this quoted categorisation. Although he concedes that 'norms that are meant to regulate people's decisions ought to *take account of* human nature and he contrasts this with Gyekye's idea that 'norms ought to *reflect* human nature' (2021, p. 35). Considering the context of Gyekye's argument, 'source' can safely be interpreted from a philosophical anthropological perspective by asking questions that Metz has chosen to overlook in his formulation of the relational theory namely 'who am I' (as a human self)? Where does my human self come from? Both questions relate to the value of human life, which Metz has also overlooked in formulating his relational theory. He might possibly argue that these are metaphysical questions since his methodology seems to isolate ethical theory from the context of other philosophical disciplines such as philosophical anthropology or philosophy of law. This is evident from his explanation that his focus on interpersonal morality does not systematically address institutional matters of law, politics, or economics thus casting doubts on whether this approach is holistic. Notably, philosophy cannot operate in total isolation from other relevant disciplines that relate to the human person and the values that determine how he makes moral decisions. The relational theory, which Metz seeks to develop concerns humans and one wonders whether ethical values can be determined in isolation from other institutions and value systems in the society that affect human welfare.

Ultimately, any reflection on ethics necessarily involves an understanding of our common human nature, which is at the core of philosophical anthropology. Questions relating to what it means to be human, the extent to which humans are alike or different, and 'the relationship between the individual, society, biology, and culture' fall within the domain of anthropology (Stewart 2008, p. 186). Anthropology can be used alongside global public health and bioethics to examine social values that may be conceptually similar across cultural traditions but significantly different in practice (Stewart 2008, p. 192). In this regard, Kanu observes that 'every culture makes a contribution from its house of experience to the universal themes of philosophy, and this makes philosophy relevant to the reality of life. Each culture traces the unity of these themes, synthesizes and organizes them into a totality, based on each culture's concept of life, namely, the relationships between objects and persons and between persons and person themselves' (2014, p. 93). One then wonders if a

<sup>5</sup> For an overview see Düwell 2018, pp. 109–124.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added.



relational theory that overlooks African realities such as human life and the centrality of human nature qualifies as an African theory.

Metz explicitly states that in his theory, ‘unlike many African philosophers who would place imperceptible agents such as ancestors, God, and the not-yet-born at the heart of their ethical thought’ he does not focus on these so-called agents (2021, p. 43). Again, one wonders if these ‘agents’ are unique to African experience or they exist in other world views due to our shared human nature. Moreover, philosophy can for example, in the form of social ontology clearly analyse the social function of something imperceptible. And there is a clear philosophical tradition of philosophy of religion. Metz therefore, does not seem to engage with interdisciplinary approaches that are usually at the heart of making moral decisions thus making him miss an opportunity to appreciate a holistic understanding of the values that should be considered in making moral decisions. Metz rejects human life in his methodology and admits that even in relation to Ubuntu, he ‘draws on that collection of properties selectively in order to construct and defend a general moral principle’ (2021, p. 45). Can his theory, then, be considered as an abstract philosophical exposition that is detached from the lived realities of human life where moral decisions are usually made? Moreover, Metz’s relational conceptualisation raises two related questions:

### 3.1 Whether Relational Theory is Widely Held in Africa

Although Metz argues that relational ethics is widely held in Africa, not all African cultures hold the same view (Ikuenobe 2015). There are diverse views on Ubuntu as a normative theory, in contrast with Ubuntu as a worldview to such an extent that Matolino (2015) has argued that a reconstructed universal normative ethical theory that is inspired by the Ubuntu worldview is not Ubuntu theory. Etieyibo also argues that Metz’s articulation of Ubuntu as an African moral theory incorporates some western paradigm and is therefore, culturally imperialistic in so far as he seems to prohibit ‘the sacrificing of individual freedom and rights in the pursuit of some communal values of harmony and relationships’ (2016, p. 17). As demonstrated in the response to the second question below, the difficulty in attributing relational theory to Africa lies in the shared human nature across the globe and what may be viewed as ‘different approaches’ seems to emerge from different modes of justifying certain actions, which may be influenced by how humans are nurtured to make moral decisions. Gianan confirms that Ubuntu is manifested in non-African cultures in various ways particularly in the treatment of the human person thus testifying to the universality and universalizability of the core values of Ubuntu (2011, p. 63).

The formulation of relational theory by Metz seems problematic such that Mangena has argued that Metz’s ‘attempt to validate Ubuntu ethics through comparing them with Kantian deontology’ is false (2016, p. 72). Mangena argues that the moral imperative of Ubuntu is based on ‘the Common Moral Position’ (CMP)... that has been passed by elders, from generation to generation’ (2016, p. 75) and there is certainly a universalistic ambition in this CMP which can be approached from different traditional perspectives. The CMP is as a way of life (Mangena 2016), which cannot be equated to principles or norms that Metz seeks to compare Ubuntu with in his reconstructed relational theory.

### 3.2 Is Relational Theory Distinct from Other Worldviews, Such as Western Worldviews, If One Considers the Centrality of Human Nature and Dignity of the Human Person that are Prevalent in These Worldviews?

The value of Ubuntu in intercultural discourse is discussed in the next section of the paper to demonstrate that relational theory is not significantly distinct from what can loosely be described as ‘western’ worldviews especially considering the three different theories concerning human nature as explained by Bodenheimer (1986, p. 208) to highlight different views on human nature: every person has character traits different from other persons thus free to choose ways of being and acting (existentialism), human beings are by nature self-regarding and ego-centered (individualism), and humans can transcend their purely self-seeking impulses and participate in common endeavor (social view).<sup>7</sup>

The two theories at stake in the context of this paper are individualism and social view since Metz’s argument is to create a distinction between a relational African worldview and individualistic western worldview. We advance three arguments to demonstrate that making such a distinction seems to be flawed.

First, humans share a common nature irrespective of their geographical location. This nature grants all humans an inherent dignity, which has to be respected in all circumstances since it is inseparable from human condition. This nature endows humans with a practical reasonableness that enables them to acknowledge their own dignity and that of others, when making decisions that may affect the others. This is what Mokgoro captures in her description of the social values that the concept of Ubuntu represents. She argues that Ubuntu ‘is one of those things that you recognize when you see it’ (Mokgoro 1998, p. 2). Metz however, equates Mokgoro’s statement to intuition (2021, p. 5) instead of recognizing its resonance with the shared human nature, which he ignores in a bid to avoid contested metaphysical claims (2021, p. 17) although he also admits that intuition is insufficient in specific situations.

It is worth engaging with human nature as conceptualized in traditional African thinking at this point. A starting point is Gichure’s exposition on the concept of human nature and identity in the Ubuntu worldview, which informs our approach to an ethics grounded in human nature. She explains “untu” as referring ‘to a particular kind of ‘something’ which is always human. It is at once the nature of the existent man or woman, and, at another level, it refers to ‘humanness’, understood as having qualities beyond mere ontological existence” (Gichure 2018, p. 25). Kresse further explains “humanness” from an anthropological perspective as follows: ‘the quest for basic intellectual orientation in life, covering fundamental questions about ‘knowledge’ and ‘goodness’, is likely to be characteristic of human beings wherever they live. It does not belong exclusively to any particular society or cultural history’ (2007, p. 45). Consequently, Kresse argues that as human beings we spend time at some point ‘trying to find orientation for ourselves about principles that could and should guide our thinking and doing’ (2007, p. 46). He emphasises that ‘this kind of conscious reflection... is part of what it means to be a human being’ (2007, p. 46). Thus, human nature is marked by this conscious reflection, and this supports our argument that the foundation of all ethics lies in our common human nature.

Edet and colleagues also outline a number of cherished traditional African values but the most relevant value in the context of this discussion relates to ‘the value of high moral

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed appraisal of the three theories see Bodenheimer (1986, pp. 215–222).

standards and good character’ (2014, p. 53). Morality is seen in the social context such that immoral conduct affects the whole community and disrupts the natural order or natural law (Edet et al. 2014, p. 53). The conceptualization of natural law in African thinking is described by Edet and colleagues as ‘being founded on that principle of *I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am*, which is to say that one is there for the community, just as the community is what guarantees the individual his or her fullest welfare. Thus, the foundation of the value of high moral standards and good character is the African consciousness of the need to promote the mind-set of ‘we need one another’ (2014, p. 53). The attributes of natural law as a law of reason, self-evident, known naturally, with its obligations coming from within man’s very nature and being immutable are all recognised in African traditional conceptualisation of natural law (Edet et al. 2014, pp. 55–56).

The African conceptualisation of natural law does not imply that an individual has no welfare apart from the community, hence the use of the expression ‘fullest welfare’. This approach is similar to the anthropological approach as explained by Burke who argues that we have a radical need of others and ‘are put to a particular test by values- accepting or rejecting them- when we meet them present in others, by whom they are both incarnated and personalised’ (2007, p. 73). This means that since man is a social being, ‘his development as a person has an essentially interpersonal aspect’ and needs to collaborate with others to satisfy his needs (Burke 2007, p. 83). Burke’s position is supported by Adams’ observation that ‘human nature consists of both individual and social characteristics’ such that failure to put the two aspects in balance can result to injustice (1997, p. 507). In this regard, Bodenheimer notes that the individualistic theory ignores the fact that service to the community is indispensable for the realisation of individual happiness (1986, p. 217). Since balancing individualistic and social characteristics of human nature are essential, Bodenheimer observes that focusing exclusively on the social theory can lead to an individual being treated as ‘a mere dependent part of a social whole, if he is deemed to be altogether devoid of personal autonomy’,... [and] ‘may instill in them the belief that their individual person amounts to nothing, while the political or social cause they are asked to serve counts for everything and should absorb their total energies’ (1986, p. 218).

The above exposition confirms the dual nature of the human person such that a watertight distinction cannot be made in practice between relational and individualistic worldviews. Notably, human nature has a direct impact on social organisation of the society and is a core focus of philosophical anthropology that aims to determine if ‘any values exist, rooted in the impulses of human beings and therefore largely independent of place and time, which call for realization in a political and legal order’ (Bodenheimer 1986, p. 207).

The exposition also relates to respect for human dignity, which occupies a prominent position in intergovernmental instruments thus making it an overarching principle in global bioethics (Andorno 2009). For example, Article 3.1 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights emphasizes the principle of respect for ‘human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms’ (UNESCO 2005). Additionally, the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states, ‘the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’ (United Nations 1948). Notwithstanding the fact that respect for human dignity may be open to abuse or even misinterpretation it is still a common principle in all worldviews since they recognize the moral worth of humans irre-

spective of the diverse moral approaches that may be adopted in different cultures.<sup>8</sup> This fact is notable in the way international human rights law is framed by representatives from diverse countries and cultures to provide common legal standards that protect human dignity (Andorno 2009; Riley 2019).

The common argument that is usually used to distinguish ‘western’ worldviews from the African worldview is that the western worldviews focus on individual rights while the African worldview is communitarian. As demonstrated in the next section of the paper, the African worldview is also based on individualism so any distinction from the western worldviews cannot be made on this basis. Moreover, as Andorno correctly notes, it is evident that human rights are accepted by all states and international human rights instruments are flexible and compatible with respect for cultural diversity (2009, p. 237). The distinction between individualism and communitarianism does not seem viable in these circumstances when it comes to moral decision-making. Molefe has demonstrated that African moralities are more individualistic (2017).

Secondly, making ethical decisions entails public discourse, which is interdisciplinary and open to different perspectives and worldviews. It is thus often difficult, in this context, to link different philosophical approaches in ethics and the principles that inform the guidelines and regulations that guide decision-making (Andanda 2006). Green aptly explains the reason for this difficulty (1990, p. 192):

It is notorious that physicians, scientific researchers, and even lawyers are impatient with the kind of fine-grained analysis (or ‘logic chopping’) to which philosophers are prone. Hence, a pressure has always existed on those working in the necessarily interdisciplinary setting of bioethics to ‘get to the point’. Frequently, the ‘point’ has been a set of readily understandable moral ‘principles’ that ethicists could reasonably explicate and apply.

Green’s explanation confirms that it is unnecessary and not helpful to make a distinction between Ubuntu and other worldviews in intercultural or interdisciplinary discourse. Notably, most worldviews are based on the do no harm principle and the recognition of other humans as part of the human family that deserve respect and care in the way we treat them. Moreover, ethics is a common discipline for different fields of study, and it uses experience as its primary source of information to address situations that demand ethical consideration (Gichure 1997).

Thirdly, in making moral decisions, guidance that is based on ethical principles derived from diverse worldviews, is always essential. For example, in interpreting Kantian view of autonomy as the basis for individual rights, one must not overlook the need for guidance, which is important in making decisions and choices. Seeking guidance necessarily leads to a relational ethical approach in making decisions since, as Ikuenobe argues, ‘the responsibility and need to pursue human welfare, to care for others, and to see oneself as connected to others in the community will give meaning, content, and value to one’s identity, free choices, and life plan’ (2015, p. 1018). Accordingly, ‘western’ worldviews in this context can be described as including an array of contemporary ethical theories, including Kant’s ethics (Baron et al. 1997) and relational theory.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview on different approaches see Düwell et al. 2014.

## 4 The Value of Ubuntu in Intercultural Discourse to Foster Ethical and Moral Reasoning in a Holistic Way

Ubuntu is an African worldview, which urges us to appreciate solidarity and interdependence among people (Mbigi 2007). In the *Makwanyane* case, Justice Langa explained the concept of Ubuntu as:

‘...a culture which places some emphasis on communality and on the interdependence of the members of a community. It recognizes a person’s status as a human being, entitled to unconditional respect, dignity, value and acceptance from the members of the community such person happens to be part of. It also entails the converse, however. The person has a corresponding duty to give the same respect, dignity, value and acceptance to each member of that community. More importantly, it regulates the exercise of rights by the emphasis it lays on sharing and co-responsibility and the mutual enjoyment of rights by all’ (1995 para 224).

In this regard, we can see our humanity in that of others thus making this worldview resonate with the golden rule that is embedded in major world cultures namely to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us (Gwagwa et al. 2022). Accordingly, Ubuntu cannot be construed as exclusively focusing on communitarianism, which emphasizes communal rather than individual rights since, as Molefe observes, ‘all morality ultimately is about individuals and their own lives in a social context’ (2017, p. 51). Molefe provides convincing evidence, based on two ethical concepts of personhood and dignity, which are central to the moral theorization in African tradition (2017, p. 57). Notably, these two ethical concepts are conspicuous in other worldviews. Moreover, the Ubuntu worldview is not unique to Africa since the word ‘Ubuntu’ connotes the process of achieving humaneness through relating with others thus fostering an inclusive approach in resolving ethical issues. Therefore, Ubuntu provides principles that are based on this relational ethics, which are needed to address ethical issues.

The application of relational ethics to emerging technological advances at a global level is widespread. For example, in the context of emerging technologies related to artificial intelligence (AI), Gwagwa and colleagues observe that ‘at the heart of Ubuntu are principles that prescribe the virtues needed, procedures, and the desired consequences in the application of universal AI ethical principles’ (2022, p. 2). This raises the question whether adopting extreme oppositions is appropriate when dealing with practical moral issues. What is rather essential in intercultural discourse is deep engagement with ethical issues in a bid to agree on applicable ethical principles and guidelines. This entails applying ethical theory and moral reasoning in a holistic way that considers human nature, different worldviews and relevant virtues. This approach can also be associated with virtue ethics, which focuses on the inner characters of an agent such as inner traits, dispositions and motives (Slote 1998) and which can be related to various ethical traditions as we can see e.g. in the instructive comparison between Aristotelian and Kantian approaches to virtue ethics in Sherman (1997) which show more communality than is often assumed.

A good example is the application of the principle of respect for autonomy that cannot be treated as purely western and incompatible with relational ethics, which Metz claims to be embedded in Ubuntu. Ikuenobe convincingly demonstrates that there is compatibility if ‘the idea of personhood in African traditions implies a *relational* and *positive* sense of autonomy, which involves the community helping or guiding one to use one’s ability and knowledge of one’s social relations and circumstance to choose freely the requisite goods for achieving one’s life plan’ (2015, p. 1005). This compatibility essentially shows that relationships have special moral

importance in Ubuntu, and individual rights are not subordinated to the community (Ewuoso and Hall 2019). An incompatibility can only be imagined if autonomy is viewed in the negative sense. This negative sense implies ‘non-interference with one’s free choices’ (Ikuenobe 2015). One’s actions necessarily affects other peoples’ choices. Consequently, autonomy in the negative sense is difficult to conceptualise in a society where we relate with other people. Accordingly, relations with other people shape our choices and give them meaning (Ikuenobe 2015).

The value of Ubuntu in the intercultural discourse lies in its ability to help bridge the gap between theoretical principles and their application to local contexts (Ikuenobe 2015). Accordingly, the relational approach in Ubuntu, among others, helps an individual to behave in ways that do not harm others. Notably, this approach is compatible with the ‘do no harm’ principle and it cannot therefore be argued that Ubuntu is in opposition with this widely held ethical principle. Ewuoso and Hall’s theoretical formulation of Ubuntu shows that ‘human beings are in a web of relationships and interconnectedness in which we are to care for others’ well-being’ (2019, p. 100). This formulation is in line with the internationally recognised principle of solidarity. For example, Article 13 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights encourages solidarity and international cooperation among human beings and seems to consider global solidarity from a relational perspective (UNESCO 2005). This relational perspective has indeed been applied in UNESCO’s reports such as the International Bioethics Committee’s report on the Principle of Individual Responsibility as related to Health, which emphasizes that solidarity is associated with ‘the motivation of individuals to serve group or societal interests (common good)’ thus also helping individual interests to be realized (2019, para 37).

## 5 Towards an Integrated and Inclusive Approach to Intercultural Ethical Discourse

In this section, we briefly consider possibilities to more integrated views for a hermeneutic of communal self-understanding that take African views seriously but avoid the extreme oppositions of Metz. The European Commission (EC) has for instance advocated an integrated approach in addressing issues of ethics across borders. The EC acknowledged that ethics across borders is part of a long-term project of global reflection on ethics, which should recognise and learn from diverse moral practices (Ozolina et al. 2009, p. 30). The focus of this section raises the question: which philosophical approach can lead to the possible integration of different views on ethics? As already discussed in the preceding parts of this paper, we think that one should search in a direction that is not isolating a theory of right action from considerations from philosophical anthropology. There are different avenues that can be chosen here. In a first instance one has to be aware that questions of right action will only arise under the conditions of human life, characterised by the capacity to act and being in a situation of neediness and vulnerability. These are conditions that human beings share. Helmuth Plessner has outlined the hermeneutical preconditions under which a biological life form is possible that exist as embedded being which at the same time is able to develop reflective distance to itself; he calls it ‘excentric positionality’ (Plessner 1928/2019). Biological beings that live within such a lifeform are capable of developing cultures and at the same time they are only able to lead their life if they develop cultures (Plessner 1931/2018). Thus: philosophical anthropology will first remind us that we share a biological basis and that the different cultures are only possible on the basis of certain aspects of the human condition that we share.

The awareness of this communality can be the starting point for further ethical considerations. Speaking of human nature in a metaphysical sense, about the concept of the person and developing an account of the dignity of the human person will in any case have to refer to these aspects of the human conditions (Lombo and Russo 2020). An appropriate reconstruction of African views will as well have to interpret in some sense the idea of the human person's openness to transcendence, which some scholars consider a necessary element of an African view that is characterized as holistic in its approach towards the human person (Dolamo 2013).

Philosophical anthropology can address a concern relating to 'a tendency to develop ethics without reference to man in a way that is disconnected from anthropology' thus leading to an ethics 'without an idea of the nature and end of man' (Sgreccia 2012, pp. 174 and 195). A philosophical anthropological approach is thus capable of aiding in an integral understanding of the human person with the inherent dignity that is shared and valued in all worldviews. For example, Ubuntu often relates to 'a person's integrity and dignity' (Dolamo 2013, p. 1). Accordingly, an African ethical theory must be compared to other ethical approaches from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. This approach is also supported by Cornell and Van Marle who observe that there is 'much more work to be done in terms of the historical genealogy and, indeed, the anthropological investigation into what African philosophy is or can be, and perhaps most importantly what it ethically should be, in the struggle of African nations to define themselves in the purportedly post-colonial world' (2005, p. 197).

Understanding other cultures and communicating their philosophy is thus critical in ensuring an integrated approach to ethics across borders. In an African context, this seems more complex due to the continent's diverse regional cultures that have largely been influenced by forced colonisation, slave trade and what is documented is largely attributed to recent social anthropological studies (Bell and Fernback 2015). Bell and Fernback also highlight the need to understand what is significant from an African perspective in attempting to understand the way its people inhabit the world by making room for their categories and concepts. These observations highlight the relevance of philosophical anthropology in attempting to take African views seriously.

In their application of Ubuntu in a transcultural context, Steenkamp and Fourie underscore the need to find commonalities with a view to enhancing cooperation (2023). The authors emphasise that it is necessary to continue the dialogue between Ubuntu and the transcultural approach (2023, p. 62). Philosophical anthropology is accordingly proposed in this paper as a useful reference point for this important dialogue and our criticism of Metz's approach should be understood in this spirit of dialogue.

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