



## Exactly why are slurs wrong?\*

### ¿Exactamente por qué están mal los *slurs*?

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to provide a comprehensive and fundamental account of why racial epithets and similar slurs are immoral, whenever they are. It considers three major theories, roughly according to which they are immoral because they are harmful (welfarism), because they undermine autonomy (Kantianism), or because they are unfriendly (an under-considered, relational approach informed by ideas from the Global South). This article presents new objections to the former two theories, and concludes in favour of the latter rationale. Deeming slurs to be wrong insofar as they are unfriendly is shown to capture the advantages of the other theories, while avoiding their disadvantages.

**Keywords:** dignity; harm; immorality; racial epithets; relationality; slurs

**Resumen:** Este artículo busca proporcionar una descripción completa y fundamental de por qué los epítetos raciales y *slurs* similares son inmorales, allá donde lo sean. Considera tres teorías principales, según las cuales, a grandes rasgos, son inmorales porque son dañinos (bienestarismo), porque socavan la autonomía (kantianismo) o porque son hostiles (un enfoque relacional poco discutido informado por ideas del Sur Global). Este artículo presenta nuevas objeciones a las dos primeras teorías y concluye a favor de la última justificación. Se muestra que considerar que los *slurs* son inmorales en la medida en que son hostiles captura las ventajas de las otras teorías evitando sus desventajas.

**Palabras clave:** dignidad; daño; inmoralidad; insultos raciales; relacionalidad; *slurs*

## 1. Introduction

Note the variety of racial epithets and similar slurs there are and the various contexts in which it appears morally wrong to use them. Consider a judge referring to black people as the n-word when handing down a sentence, a blogger describing women as ‘bitches’ on a website, a group of neo-Nazis calling Jewish people ‘kikes’ when in private amongst them-

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selves, and a person labelling someone who she thinks is gay the f-word<sup>1</sup> Given that such insults targeting people's race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are wrong, warranting guilt and censure, precisely why are they wrong?

This article seeks a theoretical answer to this question, meaning that it considers whether a single principle can make good sense of why slurs are ethically impermissible and hence of when they are and to what degree. It would be interesting and revealing if the myriad of wrongful slurs were all immoral in virtue of one basic thing. This article critically explores three theories of what makes slurs immoral, two of which appeal to familiar ideas about harm and autonomy, and one of which will be new to many Western readers, roughly maintaining that slurs are wrong to the extent that they put distance between people or are unfriendly. This article defends the latter, relational theory, which is inspired largely by ideas from grossly under-considered philosophical traditions in sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South more generally, as more justified at this stage of enquiry or at least worthy of consideration.

Little of the English-speaking literature on slurs has sought to answer the question of why slurs are immoral, at least not theoretically in a systematic way. Most have not even sought to analyze the nature of the wrongness of slurs, placing their wrongness in the background so as to focus on capturing their linguistic contents and functions (e.g., Hornsby, 2001; Himma, 2002; Boisvert, 2008; Hom, 2008, 2010; Richard, 2008; Croom, 2011, 2013; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, 2013b; Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013a, 2013b; Whiting, 2013). This article does the opposite; in order to make headway on the quest for a normative principle that best accounts for what all slurs have in common insofar as they are wrong, this article sets aside detailed analysis of what they say, how they say it, and related descriptive questions. It presumes that the reader can readily identify slurs of various kinds and their foreseeable results, and considers whether they might share an underlying structure with regard to their wrongness (as opposed to their nature).

To be sure, those who have undertaken descriptive enquiries into the nature of slurs have made suggestions about their wrongness, which this article uses as springboards to dive in for a much closer look. In addition, there is some analysis of why insults are immoral that is relevant (especially Neu, 2008; Archard, 2014). However, for most in the field, slurs are distinct from more general insults (on which see Boisvert, 2008; Neu, 2008; Hay, 2011), and, more importantly, the standard accounts of why insults are wrong ground theories that do not best capture the immorality of slurs, or so this article contends.

This article does not presume that slurs are by definition immoral or even that they are always immoral. In fact, it is reasonable to think that some acts straightforwardly construed to be calling someone slurs are not immoral when used by certain people in certain contexts for certain purposes, for instance when 'appropriated' by an in-group. One advantage of the appeal to relationality to explain the wrongfulness of slurs is its plausible explanation of why using slurs can intuitively be permissible—roughly when they serve to bring people closer together, albeit without pushing anyone away.

1 As one scholar points out, mentioning slurs is difficult to avoid when theorizing about them in academic spaces (Hornsby, 2001, 129), even if, as others note, doing so still risks harming and offending (Himma, 2002; Anderson and Lepore, 2013b, 354). In the following, this author tries to balance these considerations by not directly mentioning the worst slurs.

Note, by the way, that this article engages in the ‘normal’ analytic practice of evaluating contested general principles by considering their ability to account for *less* contested (not necessarily uncontested) particular cases. That is, it freely appeals to intuitions about when, why, and to what degree slurs are wrong that it expects many enquirers to share, and, insofar as many do share them, they count as evidence that may be used to appraise theories that are *more* controversial than the intuitions. There is no suggestion made that the intuitions are irrefutable, but those who seek to cast doubt on them have a lot of explaining to do about why we should revise them.

Section 2 briefly sketches some salient elements of slurs, so that the target is fairly clear. The next few sections appeal to the most widely invoked moral theories from the past two hundred years of Western philosophy in order to test their ability to account for the wrongfulness of slurs, and they are found wanting. Specifically, section 3 considers welfarist theories of why slurs are wrong, according to which they are immoral insofar as they reduce people’s subjective well-being. After demonstrating that welfarism cannot account for certain intuitive instances of wrongful slurs and the degree to which they are wrong, sections 4 and 5 then take up Kantian, autonomy-based accounts, according to which wrongful acts are those that degrade people’s capacity for self-governance, and they are found to be vulnerable to similar objections. Section 6 articulates a novel approach by appeal to globally neglected values pertaining to harmony salient especially in the Southern African philosophy of *ubuntu*, roughly according to which slurs are wrong insofar as they are unfriendly or discordant, and contends that it is the most viable contender. This article briefly concludes in section 7 by noting that, since this relational approach not only obtains the advantages of the other two approaches, but also avoids (and even explains) their disadvantages, the view that slurs are wrong insofar as they are unfriendly at least merits consideration in future work, if not belief at this stage.

## 2. Slurs: some salient features

This article does not provide a theoretical account of what all slurs have in common *qua* slurs, i.e., identify the essence of a slur. For one, there might not be any shared core to the nature of what we call ‘slurs’. For another, even if there were, this article lacks the space to consider what it might be, since it is instead devoted to determining what makes slurs at bottom immoral. Even so, it is necessary to lay out some recurrent elements of slurs, or at least of the kinds considered here, to facilitate the project of determining why slurring is wrong.

Slurs of the kind addressed here are *characteristically* forms of (a) communication (b) that is linguistic in which (c) other persons are told that they exhibit (d) undesirable properties (e) associated with their perceived group such as their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. The qualification ‘characteristically’ is important, as this article does not wish to provide a closed analysis of the nature of a slur, and there are some likely exceptions to this core account (as well as borderline cases that are difficult to specify). So, the point is not that all slurs have these features, but rather that they often do. The rest of this section briefly spells out each of these salient elements and also highlights plausible exceptions, where some slurs seem not to include them.

To start, using slurs is typically communicative, where one agent more or less transmits a symbol to another agent with the intention that she both understand a certain proposition and recognize that the agent transmitting the symbol intends her to understand that proposition by means of the transmission (e.g., Grice, 1957). However, some uses of slurs appear to be expressive actions without being communicative in this sense. If a misogynist who thinks he is alone mutters ‘bitch’ to himself upon thinking of his wife, he is plausibly slurring but not communicating, even if his wife were unexpectedly to overhear him.

When slurs are communicative, they are usually linguistic. However, it seems possible for there to be slurs that are communicative but not linguistic. Imagine, for instance, that a student routinely left pictures of a baboon under an African-American lecturer’s door and posted them on the whiteboard he uses prior to him arriving to teach. This would probably be a case of a non-linguistic and yet communicative slur. The point is not that such behaviour clearly counts as a genuine slur; it is rather that it might count, and that, in any event, whatever makes slurs wrong would probably make this sort of behaviour wrong, too.

When slurs are communicated, they are often directed towards the one who is the object of the slur. The quintessential instance of a slur is when another person is called a derogatory name. However, there are cases in which the disparaging language is about someone X, but directed towards another person Y. Members of an Aryan supremacist organization might, entirely amongst themselves, make anti-Semitic slurs, for instance.

Many times slurs involve expressing the judgement that certain individuals exhibit particular undesirable properties. Typical are characterizations of people as lazy, stupid, sexually rapacious, miserly, overly talkative, or nagging. However, there are words that are derogatory, apparently not by connoting specific negative traits such as stereotypes, but rather more generally and performatively, plausible examples being the n-word, the f-word, and, on some occasions, even ‘woman’ (cf. Feinberg, 1985, 218–26 on ‘pure insults’; and Anderson and Lepore, 2013a). There are those who say that these terms are implicitly associated with negative traits, particularly stereotypes, even if they do not refer to them explicitly (cf. Camp, 2013, 342n16, 346–7). However, it at least seems possible for a given speaker to slur without having such properties in mind, e.g., someone at his very first KKK rally who doesn’t yet know what ‘kike’ means but is happy to shout it out because his peers are. It is not being suggested here that slurs are necessarily negative; if at this rally Jewish people were instead called ‘clever’, perhaps it would count as a sort of positive slur, one that reduces them to a stereotype. However, this article addresses slurs insofar as they are straightforwardly disparaging, mentioning in the conclusion the possibility of extending the analysis of them.

Finally, it is characteristic of slurs, or at least the ones addressed in this article, that the undesirable properties apply to the individual by virtue of her perceived membership in a certain group pertaining to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or the like. It is interesting to consider what these groups have in common, with ‘social salience’, i.e., their determining much about people’s past and present interaction, being a plausible candidate (see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, 30–6). When a person is called ‘lazy’ because she is of African descent, one has a clear instance of a slur, but plenty of other occasions of calling someone ‘lazy’ need not be slurring. Some might think that one slurs another’s character if one accuses her of, say, having stolen spoons, where this has nothing to do with her

membership in a group, at least not one that has social salience. However, for this author such an accusation would be to ‘cast aspersions’ or perhaps to ‘insult’, but not to slur in a usefully narrow sense.

### **3. Harm**

Having advanced an account of what slurs typically involve, it is time to consider what makes them wrong, whenever they are. A straightforward thing to say about slurs is that they can be hurtful. Sometimes they are designed to hurt; those who use slurs are on occasion aiming to cause psychological pain. However, beyond the intention to cause such harm, an agent who uses a slur is at least likely to cause it.

These are welfarist considerations. Welfarism is roughly the view that an action is morally wrong insofar as it tends to reduce people’s quality of life. When applied to slurs, welfarism entails that, when they are wrong, they are in virtue of causing harm, which is usually psychological. Utilitarianism is the most influential form of welfarism in the field of moral philosophy and disciplines influenced by it (but is not the only form, as there have been rights-based welfarisms). According to that view, an action is wrong insofar as it fails to produce the most benefit and to reduce the most harm in the long run, taking everyone’s interests into account. For utilitarians, benefit is normally construed subjectively, as a matter of either experiencing pleasure or having desires satisfied, and harm is taken to consist of either experiencing pain or having desires frustrated. The classic utilitarian Jeremy Bentham recommends criminalizing certain speech acts because of the ‘unpleasant sensation’ they usually cause to many who hear them (1822, 546–7). In addition, when explicating utilitarianism, it is common for moral philosophers to note its implications for speech acts such as insults, viz., to point out they are normally wrong on utilitarian grounds for causing unnecessary embarrassment, sadness, and the like (e.g., Feldman, 1978, 25). However, there are those who apply welfarism merely to speech acts and not to morality in general. A good instance is Joel Feinberg, who remarks that ‘to be forced to suffer an offence (...) is an unpleasant inconvenience, and hence an evil’ (1985, 49).

This article focuses on the utilitarian version of welfarism when considering the wrongfulness of slurs, where the advantages and disadvantages of utilitarianism are meant to characterize welfarism generally (including rights-based versions of it). Utilitarianism has the advantage of accounting straightforwardly for the respect in which the hurtfulness of slurs often seems relevant to their wrongness. If a child overhears a slur and is tempted to repeat it, a concerned parent will tell her not to because it would hurt the other person’s feelings. In addition, utilitarianism seems able to explain why some slurs are worse than others, namely, they are likely to hurt more than the alternatives. The reason it would be more wrong to call an Asian businessman a ‘chink’ than a ‘suit’ (as per Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, 25), so the utilitarian suggests, is that doing so would be expected to cause him more psychological distress. Finally, the utilitarian can also reasonably explain why some slurs are not wrong; when slurs have been ‘appropriated’, they do not cause pain when used, making it permissible to use them under that condition.

Despite these strong arguments, there are two glaring problems with the utilitarian, and more generally welfarist, account of what makes slurs wrong. First off, there are occasions

when slurs are intuitively wrong, but utilitarianism entails that they are not. For example, return to the case, mentioned above, of white supremacists who make anti-Semitic remarks only amongst themselves and not to people of Jewish heritage. Since the slurs are not directed towards those who are the object of them, no one can reasonably be expected to be harmed thereby. In addition, one can expect the positive feelings of the ‘in-group’ to be strengthened by virtue of the slurs. Hence, in this circumstance, utility would be maximized by uttering slurs, and hence could even count as morally required by the utilitarian. However, this author’s intuition is that it would still be immoral to do so.

Of course, using slurs in a context in which the object of them is not within earshot is probably not as wrong as doing so purposefully towards those who are the object of them. However, they are still plausibly wrong to some degree. Surely few (if any) readers would ever themselves *encourage* such behaviour or believe it should be encouraged. In addition, most readers, upon reflection, would feel guilty, or at least think they ought to, were they to utter anti-Semitic slurs in such a context.

Supposing, then, that it would indeed be immoral to some extent to utter an anti-Semitic slur only amongst anti-Semites, how might the utilitarian try to explain that? She might initially contend that the reason for the sense of wrongdoing is that one can expect the utterance of slurs in these contexts to get transferred to other ones, where they would indeed cause harm. That is, by indicating that one approved of slurs amongst those of one’s in-group, one would make it more likely that members would say them towards ‘the other’. As a prophylactic, then, one should virtually never communicate slurs, so the reply goes.

However, people are generally pretty good at identifying members of their in-group and regulating their behaviour accordingly. In addition, it would still be wrong to utter a slur even if a neo-Nazi routinely prefaced his remarks this way: ‘I’m calling them “kikes” to you, even though I recommend not doing so to their faces or to anyone else who might report back to them; you know how much power and influence they have, and they could really cause us trouble if they found out we speak this way.’

For a second reply on behalf of the utilitarian, one might suggest that the use of slur terms sustains and fosters attitudes towards particular groups that interfere with building a happier society. Therefore such behaviour is wrong, and not merely because of the immediate pain it can cause those who have been slurred. This reply probably contains a kernel of truth. That is, one reason it would often be wrong to utter a slur in the present context is that it would be likely to make interaction between different groups conflictual and hence to cause unhappiness.

However, it is probably not the whole truth. Imagine a situation in which a neo-Nazi’s fellow anti-Semites are hardcore, meaning their dispositions are extremely unlikely to change, regardless of whether he utters slurs or not. Knowing ahead of time that refraining from slurring would make no difference to anyone else’s behaviour, it appears that the utilitarian must recommend slurring as morally right when it would cause harm that would have happened anyway and would at least make members of the in-group happier for hearing them. However, most readers would still tend to feel bad, and presumably reasonably so, for uttering slurs in those circumstances.

What reflection on these utilitarian replies suggests is that there is something wrong ‘in itself’ with using slurs, by which is meant that they are sometimes immoral apart from their

being responsible for (perhaps indirect and long-term) harmful effects, particularly on those who are the objects of the slurs. Here is a second major way to see this point, in the context of what makes one slur worse than another. Return to the difference between ‘chink’ and ‘suit’, where the former is widely considered to be worse than the latter. According to the welfarist, the reason why calling an Asian businessman ‘chink’ is a greater wrongdoing than calling him ‘suit’ is that he is likely to be more upset upon hearing the former. However, let us consider *why he would be more upset*. Think about the explanation he himself would probably give, and how powerful it is: much of the reason the Asian businessman would be more upset is he deems the slur to be worse! That is, the explanatory relationship is plausibly the *reverse* of what the welfarist suggests: instead of ‘chink’ being more wrong than ‘suit’ merely because the hearer would be more hurt by the former, usually the hearer would be more hurt because he deems ‘chink’ to be more wrong than ‘suit’. Hence, it is apt to search for non-welfarist factors that help to explain the wrongness of slurs.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Autonomy I: Reduction in self-esteem

The other major perspective on right and wrong action in the Western philosophical literature, inspired by the ethic of the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, suggests focusing not on the *hurt* that slurs may be expected to cause, but rather on the *indignity* involved. Instead of accounting for the wrongness of slurs fundamentally in terms of *injury*, the Kantian does so at bottom in terms of *insult*. ‘It is no secret that slurs offend’ (Anderson and Lepore, 2013, 350).<sup>3</sup>

This article does not invoke Kant’s own ethic, but rather how it has been interpreted of late by Kantian ethicists. According to contemporary Kantians, humans characteristically merit respectful treatment in virtue of their personhood, i.e., their ability to govern themselves as self-conscious beings (perhaps in accordance with moral rules), where wrong acts are those that fail to treat them respectfully, or, equivalently, that degrade them. Clear examples in which a(n innocent) being with the capacity for autonomy is treated in a degrading way are (usually) coercion and deception; where someone has not misused his capacity to make decisions for himself, force or fraud treats that capacity as though it does not exist, is unimportant, or exists merely to be used by others. In contrast, to respect a person, an individual with the capacity for self-governance, normally means engaging with him on the basis of offering him good reasons to perform one action rather than another and seeking his free and informed consent to interact with him in a certain way.

Some contemporary Kantians cash out the degradingness of pejorative speech acts in terms of how they tend foreseeably to reduce people’s autonomy, their ability to make choices for themselves. One way to degrade this capacity is to diminish its potency, trading it off for something worth less than it. And people are plausibly less free, the more they are objects of slurs. To spell this latter claim out, consider John Rawls’ influential discussion of the importance of what he calls ‘self-respect’ in an autonomous life (1999, 91–2, 155–8, 297, 348–9, 386–91) and the fact that slurs are likely to impair it. By ‘self-respect’ Rawls

2 For different objections to welfarism as an account of the wrongness of insults, see Archard (2014, 133–4).

3 See also Jeshion (2013), who attempts to capture how it is that slurs offend.

means what many psychologists and laypeople instead call ‘self-esteem’, which amounts to the combination of three key attitudes: high regard for one’s goals; high confidence in one’s ability to achieve them; and high spirits about oneself and one’s accomplishments. A person who lacks these three elements is less able to make choices, all things being equal, than someone who does not lack them. Rawls plausibly calls self-respect (self-esteem) the most important primary good (1999, 155, 348, 386), by which he means that it is essential for being able to carry out a variety of goals. Crudely stated, a depressed or self-hating person lacks the ability to do much with her life, regardless of how much money, liberty, and other resources she might have. She lacks autonomy in a straightforward respect. Now, a reduction of self-respect (self-esteem) is precisely what tends to be caused by slurs. Slurs have the foreseeable effect of making people not only judge themselves to be unworthy and incapable, but also feel bad about themselves. And reducing a person’s autonomy in this way is patently degrading when done out of indifference, let alone with more nefarious aims.

Although Rawls does not thoroughly discuss pejoratives, he does note that for everyday people, ‘self-respect and their confidence in the value of their own system of ends cannot withstand the indifference much less the contempt of others’ (1999, 297). And Jerome Neu, who does analyze pejoratives in depth, remarks, ‘Feeling insulted is not just anger, not just dejection. There is a disruption of the sense of self, of one’s place in the world and one’s place in the heart and esteem of others’ (2008, 33). Just as segregated schools were deemed unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v Board of Education* for undermining black pupils’ self-esteem (beyond considerations of the quality and quantity of teachers, books, and other resources), so calling people the n-word and similar slurs should be considered morally forbidden for the same reason of reducing individual autonomy. Conversely, calling others a slur would not be wrong if doing so did not threaten to reduce autonomy, as when certain groups ‘appropriate’ slurs.

As appealing as this rationale is, and even though it is philosophically distinct from a welfarist ethic, it falls prey to the same two objections that faced the latter. First, it has difficulty accounting for the wrongness of slurs that are not directed towards those whom they are about. Above was considered a case of cloistered anti-Semites. Since they do not use slurs beyond their in-group, they do not threaten anyone’s self-esteem. If anything, they might be improving their own self-esteem by putting others down. One can multiply such cases. Imagine a situation in which people slur you behind your back—perhaps literally in the form of deftly taping a derogatory name to the back of your shirt and then removing it before you have a chance to discover it. The wrongness lies not merely in the prospect of making you feel bad about yourself or undermining your confidence; for such an act would be wrong even if there were literally no chance of you finding out or of people treating you differently from the way they would have had the action not been performed. There appears to be something wrong with the action apart from the negative consequences with regard to the self-esteem of the one who is the object of the slur.

Furthermore, relying solely on the self-esteem rationale provides an implausible explanation of degrees of wrongdoing. Returning to the Asian businessman, the present rationale would be that ‘chink’ is worse than ‘suit’ because the former is likely to reduce his self-esteem more than the latter. But why is this the case? Why would he be likely to feel worse about himself and to judge himself less capable, upon being called ‘chink’? Part of the



explanation is that he would judge being called ‘chink’ to be a more degrading treatment. This point again suggests that there is something independently wrong with slurs beyond their negative effects upon being received.

## 5. Autonomy II: Symbolic disrespect

At this point, the Kantian can and should try another manoeuvre, one that more properly takes advantage of the expressive nature of a respect-based theory. One way to degrade people’s autonomy is causally, e.g., to perform actions that are likely to reduce it, for an end that is worth less than it. However, another way to treat people disrespectfully is symbolically, using conventional representations to convey negative judgements or attitudes. It is plausible to maintain that when slurs are immoral, they are so (at least in part) because of the degrading perspectives they communicate. Wrongful slurs characterize a person, a being with a dignity equal to one’s own, as not having such a value. Although David Archard does not focus on slurs, but rather insults, his remarks about the wrongness of the latter bring to mind this perspective; when it comes to the wrongness of expressive acts, he says that ‘essentially it consists in an attempt to denigrate, humiliate, diminish, dishonour, or disrespect’ (2014, 127).

Since slurs can symbolically degrade another who is their object regardless of whether she becomes aware of the slur or not, the present approach can fairly account for the wrongfulness of those slurs uttered by isolated anti-Semites or posted onto an unsuspecting person’s back. In addition, the symbolic tack does a better job of explaining why some slurs are worse than others than the previous two views; slurs are worse not merely because they tend to have more severe effects on people’s feelings or self-esteem, but in the first instance because they are more degrading in virtue of what they symbolically communicate. What makes one slur symbolically worse than another is a function of a variety of factors, such as the unjust contexts in which it has been used in the past, whether it is used only ever in respect of a particular group of people, and whether it connotes utter sub-humanness. Precisely *how* it becomes the case that a slur means something more degrading than another is something primarily for communication scholars and even historians to sort out (consider, e.g., Anderson and Lepore, 2013a). The point is that one natural thing to say about why ‘chink’ is worse than ‘suit’ is *that* saying the former uses conventional representations to convey a judgement or attitude more degrading than the latter. Hence, the appeal to symbols enables the present version of a Kantian ethic to avoid the major objections made to the other theories considered so far.

Now, it seems clear that a merely symbolic account of why slurs are wrong would be inadequate; after all, their foreseeable effects on people’s lives surely matter, too. It is therefore attractive to suggest, on behalf of the Kantian, that the combination of the self-esteem and symbolic rationales is what does the work. Perhaps slurs are wrong just insofar as they are degrading of persons who have a dignity in virtue of their capacity for autonomy, where degradation can take the form of either reducing self-esteem or using conventional representations to convey an attitude of contempt.

This combined version of Kantianism is attractive. However, there are *prima facie* problems with it, such that it is worth exploring an alternative theoretical approach in the following

section. One worry about the Kantian theory is its difficulty accommodating the intuitions that drive welfarism. Slurs can be designed to hurt, and the pain as something bad for a person—and not merely as something that inhibits her ability to make decisions—is plausibly relevant to their wrongfulness. When someone utters a slur (setting aside ‘appropriated’ contexts), she at best is indifferent to the other person’s feelings and at worst is being cruel. The harm that a slur often foreseeably causes is not adequately captured by the claim that its wrongness consists merely of an ‘attempt to denigrate, humiliate, diminish, dishonour, or disrespect’ (Archard, 2014, 127), supposing that it is the capacity for autonomy that is degraded.

In addition, reflection about why slurs seem worse when face-to-face, amongst intimates, or both suggests that the prospect of reduced self-esteem probably is not the entire explanation. Imagine a white man makes a slur about and directly to his black daughter-in-law. If one were to ask her why that is worse than, say, him saying it merely to his friends or posting the same comment about black people on the web, it is unlikely that she would say that it is *merely* because her self-esteem is expected to be more greatly impaired. *Why* would her self-esteem be more greatly impaired? What might she say in this respect? A plausible account would invoke another, independent consideration, probably about having been in relation with the father-in-law. Similar to the way it is intuitively worse to steal from a friend than a stranger as well as worse to mug someone than to steal behind a person’s back, so it is particularly wrong to direct a slur to a family member and to her face.

The following section presents a theory of why slurring is wrong that promises to capture the advantages of both Kantianism and welfarism, while avoiding their disadvantages. The idea that slurs are wrong roughly because they are unfriendly is now advanced as a plausible monist alternative.

## 6. Unfriendliness

The gist of the last major theoretical approach to the wrongfulness of slurs is that the ways that family members, neighbours, and colleagues characteristically do and should relate to one another ought to be pursued as ends. Roughly speaking, a moral agent normally ought to strive to come closer to others and to eschew distancing herself from them. Although one finds these kinds of ideas in a variety of philosophical traditions, the prizing of relationality is particularly prominent in those in the Global South, where harmony is central to much indigenous thought in sub-Saharan African, East Asian (especially Confucian), and South American ethics (on which see Bell and Mo, 2014; Metz and Miller, 2016; Graness, 2019; Metz, 2020). Few Western philosophers are familiar with these long-standing traditions. The following draws particularly on the Southern African ethic of *ubuntu* to articulate a principle about what we owe to each other that is revealing in respect of slurs.<sup>4</sup>

There is a maxim that many people indigenous to Southern Africa often invoke to sum up how to live ethically, namely, ‘A person is a person through other persons’ (e.g., Tutu, 1999, 35; Dandala, 2009, 160; for discussion in the context of several sub-Saharan peoples, see Nkulu-N’Sengha, 2009). When they say that ‘a person is a person’, what they mean usually includes the idea that someone who is a person, in the sense of a self-conscious,

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4 Particularly as it is articulated in Metz (2021a, 2021b).

deliberative agent, ought to strive to become a real or genuine person, that is, someone who exhibits moral virtue. One with the latter has what is somewhat famously called '*ubuntu*', literally humanness in the Nguni languages of Southern Africa such as Zulu and Ndebele. A true or complete person is someone who lives a genuinely human way of life, who displays ethical traits that human beings are in a position to exhibit in a way nothing else in the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms can. Just as one might say that a jalopy is 'not a real car', so indigenous Africans often say that agents who have been immoral 'are not a person' (Gaie, 2007, 32–3; Dandala, 2009, 260–1) or are even 'animals' (Bhengu, 1996, 27; Letseka, 2000, 186). That does not mean that the wicked are literally not human beings and hence no longer subjects of human rights, but instead connotes the metaphorical point that these individuals utterly fail to exhibit human (moral) excellence and have instead actualized their lower, base nature (Gyekye, 2010, sec. 4).

Turning to the second clause, it tells people how to become real persons and to exhibit *ubuntu*, viz., 'through other persons'. Typically this means by entering into community with others or seeking to live harmoniously with them (Tutu, 1999, 34–5; Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2005, 218). It is well known that African ethics is characteristically communitarian, but this element is often left vague or is construed in a crude manner, such as the collective taking precedence over the individual. However, it can also, and more plausibly, be interpreted in relational terms, which is suggested by the following comments from South African intellectuals about it. Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks of an *ubuntu* ethic that 'harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group' (1998, 17). Gessler Muxe Nkondo, who has had positions of leadership on South Africa's National Heritage Council, says that '*ubuntu* advocates (...) express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community' (2007, 91). Nhlanhla Mkhize, an academic psychologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, remarks that a 'sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another's needs (...). (O)ne attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves (...). To be is to belong and to participate' (2008, 39, 40).

These and other common construals about what it is to commune or to live harmoniously with others suggest two recurrent themes that can be distinguished (Metz, 2021a). On the one hand, there is 'identity', a matter of being close, belonging and participating, and experiencing life as bound up with others. On the other hand, one finds reference to being sympathetic, being committed to others' good, and responding to others' needs, here labelled 'solidarity'.

More carefully, it is revealing to understand identifying with another (or being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of 'witness' and cooperative behaviour. The psychological attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as a member of a group or relationship with the other and to refer to oneself as a 'we' (rather than an 'I'), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what the other or one's group does, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of the other's nature, value, and presence. The cooperative behaviours include being transparent about the terms of interaction, allowing others to make voluntary choices, acting on the basis of trust, adopting common goals, and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that 'this is who we are'.

Exhibiting solidarity with another (or acting for others' good, etc.) is similarly aptly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behaviour. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented toward the other's good and include an empathetic awareness of the other's condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is, to improve the other's state, but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person.

Identity and solidarity are plausibly at the core of what is desirable about a family or a collegial academic department. When both are present, people enjoy a common sense of self, cooperate with each other, seek to promote others' good, and do so for one another's sake. Upon living in such a friendly or harmonious way, one thereby exhibits *ubuntu*.

So far, *ubuntu* has been interpreted as a virtue ethic, indeed one sharing features with Greek *eudaemonism*. Although that is the traditional approach to ethics for indigenous Africans, what is needed is an interpretation similar in form to welfarism and Kantianism, which here have been advanced as accounts of what makes it wrong to slur, not what makes those who slur bad. In order to make sense of the wrongfulness of slurs, one more concept needs to be added, namely, that normally we ought to treat people in a friendly or harmonious way because they have a dignity. More specifically, since people have a dignity in virtue of their capacity to relate harmoniously, we usually have good reason to relate harmoniously to them, at least when they are innocent.

According to this ethic, the reason that it is immoral to kidnap, rape, steal, lie, or exploit is that doing so would be extremely unfriendly or discordant, an egregious failure to treat people as special because of their capacity to be friendly and to be befriended. Such actions characteristically involve: thinking of others as separate and inferior (as opposed to bound up with oneself), subordinating others (instead of coordinating in pursuit of compatible aims), impairing others' quality of life (instead of helping them), and acting on attitudes of indifference towards others' interests (instead of ones of sympathy and altruism). When we fail to harmonize with other innocents, and especially when we act discordantly towards them, we are degrading them, treating their capacity to be party to harmonious relationships as either non-existent or unimportant.

It would be of philosophical interest to weigh up this principle of right and wrong action against utilitarianism and Kantianism as competing comprehensive accounts of right and wrong action (undertaken in Metz, 2021b). However, this article compares them only in regard to the immorality of slurs. According to the view inspired by Afro-communal values, a slur is wrong insofar as it degrades people's capacity to befriend and to be befriended. Typically such degradation is expressed when one treats a person in an unfriendly way and not because this person had initially been unfriendly.

Consider what is happening when a blogger labels women 'bitches' on a website. He is treating women, and specifically their capacity to befriend and be befriended, disrespectfully by virtue of being unfriendly towards them. By communicating the idea that traits such as being controlling and unreasonable are associated with a group of people simply because of their gender, one is thereby acting in an unfriendly manner towards that group; for one is expressing the judgement that women are separate and inferior, participating in a practice that keeps women in a subordinate position, doing what is likely to cause them psycholo-

gical pain, and acting in a way consistent with negative attitudes such as cruelty in regard to others' well-being and excellence. To act in such a discordant manner towards people who have not misused their capacity to be party to harmonious relationships is to express disrespect for that dignified capacity.

Someone who utters a slur such as 'bitch' usually has various things in mind, such as that women are controlling and unreasonable and that they are 'less than' because of that. However, it is possible to express disrespect of women's relational dignity with a slurring term even if one is not thinking these things. Since many people have used the word to convey such judgments, the sentence or conventional meaning of the word can connote them in certain contexts, regardless of what the person who uses the word might intend at the time. Hence, one could act in unfriendly ways towards others, and thereby express disrespect of their capacity to be party to friendly relationships, by using a slur despite lacking a full awareness of what it signifies, e.g., by yelling 'kike' at a KKK rally when one is ignorant of what it means.

The claim is not that slurs are inherently unfriendly or discordant, but is instead that, *when* slurs are wrong, they are so in virtue of that. There are times when slurs can in fact be friendly, for instance when one is recognized as part of an in-group (a member of a 'we') that has 'appropriated' the slur. The present theory provides a strong explanation of why slurring in such a context would not be wrong: it would not be unfriendly, and, indeed, could well be something that is to be encouraged for strengthening ties such as a sense of togetherness and warm feelings! Of course, sometimes cohesion amongst an in-group is enhanced by directing slurs towards those in an innocent out-group. However, then there would be discord exhibited towards the latter and hence wrongness. A slur can intuitively be permissible if it is friendly towards some without being unfriendly towards others. In that case, no one's relational dignity is degraded and there is nothing wrong with using the slur.

Let us return to the welfare- and autonomy-based theories, and consider how the relational approach captures what is appealing about them, while avoiding and even explaining the objections to them. Consider, first, welfarism. Recall it was accepted that the fact that slurs can be hurtful, whether intentionally or merely foreseeably, is partially relevant to why they are wrong. Now, if one is to avoid treating innocent parties in unfriendly ways, then one generally should avoid causing them harm and instead should act out of solidarity. So far, so good.

Turning to objections to welfarism, remember that it had difficulty accounting for the wrongfulness of slurs when there is no chance of those who are the object of them becoming aware of them. There is the case of someone having pinned a slur to your back. The friendliness theory entails that such a slur is nonetheless wrong because, despite the unlikelihood of harm to you, a failure to prize friendliness with you remains. In particular, it is the valuable capacity for identity that is flouted (at least to an extent greater than the capacity for solidarity). In communicating to those besides you the idea that you can be identified with negative traits simply because of your membership in a group, the one slurring is acting in an unfriendly, and particularly divisive, way towards you. For one, it is action consequent to distant attitudes on his part, ones that are hardly expressive of, or disposed to foster, a sense of togetherness or identification with you. For another, there is an undermining of your ends and hence a kind of subordination, insofar as the treatment frustrates your aim not to have your body used without your permission and for the purpose of conveying negative sentiments about you.

Let us also return to the problem with welfarism regarding its explanation for degrees of the wrongfulness of slurs. It does so in terms of amount of (expected) distress or other impairment of subjective well-being, whereas recall that there appears to be an independent moral consideration that explains the greater distress upon being called ‘chink’ compared to ‘suit’. The relational theory accounts for the differential degrees of wrongness between the slurs, and hence differential psychological reactions to them, in terms of there being a greater unfriendliness and hence greater disrespect. Normally someone calls another person a ‘chink’ consequent to a stronger judgement of otherness and inferiority than what is meant by ‘suit’. The hostile attitude conveyed by the former is more intense than what is conveyed by the latter, which moral consideration at bottom explains why there tends to be more intense pain felt upon the victim becoming aware of having been called the former.

Turn, now, to the autonomy-based theory of the wrongfulness of slurs. The strong advantage of this view is its ability to account for the ideas that slurs do seem wrong in virtue of both tending to reduce self-esteem and being symbols that contain disrespectful messages. The friendliness theory can claim these advantages, while avoiding Kantianism’s disadvantages. First off, since both Kantianism and the friendliness prescribe respect for human dignity, they comparably capture the relevance of symbolic considerations. Note that the latter view can also comparably explain the relevance of self-esteem. Performing actions that are likely to reduce another’s self-esteem, at least for intuitively trivial reasons, is to fail to prize a friendly relationship *qua* one that involves cooperation. Doing what one foresees is likely to make others less able to trust and to coordinate behaviour in pursuit of compatible ends is divisively unfriendly and hence degrading.

The previous section identified three logically distinct reasons to question the adequacy of the Kantian view. One is that that it is not readily able to account for the pertinence of welfarist considerations with regard to the wrongness of slurs, as morally relevant beyond impairment of the capacity to choose. In contrast, as noted above, part of treating someone as special in virtue of her ability to be party to relationships of identity and solidarity is to exhibit solidarity with her and hence to avoid causing her harm.

A second problem with Kantianism is that it has difficulty explaining the moral relevance of whether a slur is, say, uttered to someone’s face or instead expressed on the internet. Slurring someone directly makes it personal, which does not seem relevant from the standpoint of respecting the capacity to make decisions autonomously. In contrast, the natural thing to say about a personal slur is that it is characteristically more hostile. There is a greater unfriendliness in slurring a person to his face than simply posting the slur on the web, plausibly in virtue of not merely the greater psychological harm caused, but also the greater flouting of the value of enjoying a sense of togetherness. It is behaviour that undermines any sense of ‘we-ness’ by expressing an intense attitude of ‘me versus you’, for which the relational ethic naturally accounts.

Finally, the third reason to doubt Kantianism is that its focus on autonomy appears unable to capture the moral relevance of who is the object of the slur. Recall that it seems *pro tanto* worse for a person to direct a slur at someone who is part of the family as opposed to someone who is not. It is apt, here, to appeal to relational considerations to make sense of the differential degrees of wrongness. It is a greater flouting of the valuable capacity for friendliness to direct a slur towards someone with whom one has already had somewhat

friendly ties, as opposed to someone with whom one has not. Once one begins to share a sense of self with someone and to coordinate behaviour in the context of a family, one incurs a greater obligation to go out of one's way to share a sense of self with that person, support her ends, help her, and do so for her sake. Slurring her is all the worse, given this extra partial duty that a relational ethic explains particularly well.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has sought to test theoretical hypotheses about why slurs are wrong in the light of intuitions about when they are, why they are, and to what degree. It has considered three major theories, the views that slurs are wrong insofar as they tend to harm people, to degrade their autonomy, and to be unfriendly. This article probably has not presented conclusive evidence in favour of the theory that slurs are wrong insofar as they are unfriendly or, more carefully, fail to prize people in virtue of their capacity for friendly relationships, which has been developed in the light of ideas about harmony from the globally under-explored tradition of Southern African ethical thought. While it might be too soon to jettison the dominant, welfare- and autonomy-based accounts of the wrongfulness of slurs, the analysis in this article entails that those interested in that topic should not disregard the new, friendly-based approach. Relational ideas from the Global South merit consideration in respect of the immorality of slurs, particularly the negative ones that have been the focus of this article, but also any positive ones that might exist as well as other pejoratives.

It would also be worth considering whether the explanation of the wrongfulness of slurs advanced here might be plausibly extended to other kinds of immorality, such as discrimination in the allocation of benefits, e.g., jobs and housing. Perhaps that, too, is wrong because a negative response is directed towards people simply because they are members of certain (perhaps socially salient) groups, which is degradingly unfriendly since they have not misused their capacity to be party to friendly relationships.

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