



Cross-cultural and Applied Ethics in the Light of a Relational Moral Theory

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Abstract

This article is a reply to six contributions to a special issue of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* that is devoted to critically discussing *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*. In this book I articulate a comprehensive principle of rightness that is substantially informed by relational values salient in the African philosophical tradition (and some others in the Global South) and defend it as preferable to some major moral-theoretic rivals, including standard versions of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Some contributions argue for a method of undertaking cross-cultural ethics different from mine, while others consider to what extent my general ethic can entail and powerfully explain particular duties or at times aspects of morality beyond duties. The latter topics include: when biotechnological enhancements are permissible, how to respond emotionally to injustice, how solitude is morally significant, what we owe the environment, and what the obligations of a private business are. I work to clarify and motivate my approach within the constraints of a brief reply.

Keywords African ethics · Biotechnological enhancements · Business ethics · Cross-cultural philosophy · Duties to oneself · Environmental ethics · Harmony · Relational values

1 Introducing a Relational Moral Theory

In *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (Metz 2022a)¹, I draw on philosophical resources from the Global South, particularly the African tradition, to articulate a novel normative ethical theory and argue that it accounts for a wide array of moral intuitions at least as well as, and often better than, standard forms of utilitarian-

¹ Hereafter ‘RMT’, with page numbers referring to this text unless otherwise indicated by a surname and date.

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ism and Kantianism. I am honoured that the editors of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* have agreed to publish a special issue of the journal devoted to critical discussions of this book, that Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Cornelius Ewuoso shared their time and expertise to guest edit the issue, and that they, Pamela Andanda, Mary Carman, Marcus Düwell, Edwin Etieyibo, Darrel Moellendorf, and Qingjuan Sun composed contributions. Owing a debt of gratitude to many colleagues here, I hope this brief reply serves as something of a fitting response.

A noticeable feature of the six contributions is that they are focused mainly on Part III of RMT, which applies the favoured principle of right action, a relational interpretation of the African tradition, to a wide array of practical controversies to reveal the strength of its explanatory power relative to more Western and individualist principles. Some of the contributions advocate doing cross-cultural ethics in a manner different from the way I do in RMT, which I reply to in Sect. 2. In contrast, the bulk of the critical discussions considers to what extent RMT's general ethic can clearly entail and powerfully explain particular duties or at times aspects of morality beyond duties. These latter topics include when biotechnological enhancements are permissible, how to respond emotionally to injustice, how solitude is morally significant, what we owe the environment, and what the obligations of a private business are, which I take up in Sects. 3–7.

2 Cross-cultural Methodology

Andanda and Düwell, who each have done important work on human dignity, are sympathetic to the project of doing cross-cultural ethics, but thoughtfully articulate and recommend an approach meant to replace mine. Mine more or less amounts to becoming aware of moral intuitions salient in long-standing philosophical discourses, systematizing them in the form of normative ethical theories, and then searching for a theory that accounts best for intuitions shared across philosophies, one that might lead various philosophers to revise some intuitions that they had initially accepted (cf. Rawls 1971: 46–51 on reflective equilibrium). When comparing and contrasting such theories, I often use geographical labels such as 'African', 'Western', 'South American', and 'East Asian' as indicating what is salient in (not essential to, not unique to, not exhaustive of) a certain thought-space (7–12; cf. Nisbett 2003), as well as distinctions such as individualism, relationalism, and holism to capture which values do the bulk (not all) of the justificatory work in the theories (not necessarily the cultures out of which they have grown or the methodologies underlying them) (148–152).² I tend to highlight differences between theoretical expressions of right action in order to indicate where debate between them needs to take place, in search of a general principle that best captures less contested particular judgements of what is permissible as opposed to impermissible. Andanda and Düwell advocate what they view as a competing approach, one that is more focused on coming to a well-grounded decision in a certain practical context and (to some degree *therefore*) that seeks common ground between different ethical frameworks around the world. They emphasize moral overlap between world philosophies in terms of the Golden Rule and human dignity, are inclined to see elements of individualism and relationalism (and I presume holism) in all ethical traditions, and pre-

² The parenthetical qualifications in this sentence should help to mitigate the concerns about narrow understandings of authors, theories, and cultures that Andanda and Düwell routinely raise about RMT.

scribe articulating an empirical anthropology of a shared human nature that could ground global ethical thought.

As I have said in RMT (vi-vii, 12, 235–239) and in replies to other critics of RMT (Metz 2023a: 124–125, 129–131, 2025a: 285, 287, 289, 292), I am open to different ways of doing ethics and do not suppose that my approach is the only sensible one. Welcoming pluralism about ethical method, my initial reaction to Andanda and Düwell is simply to suggest they get on with their project while I get on with mine. However, it is not that straightforward, as they suggest that my emphasis on differences between theoretical expressions of moral traditions is inappropriate and retards progress on their project: ‘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’, one that reveals the ‘great dimension of overlap in moral thinking’ (Andanda and Düwell 2024).

Notice how ‘the’ aim is restrictively prescribed here, a single one that is meant to exclude mine as inappropriate. Why think there cannot be two proper ways to do cross-cultural ethics, even if they might be in tension at times?

Furthermore, I think Andanda and Düwell’s approach would have important limits that mine would naturally help to overcome, such that the two frameworks might plausibly be viewed as complementaries as opposed to competitors. Emphasizing differences between ethical frameworks could lead to polarization, but I do not see why it must. In addition, I submit that it could in fact facilitate resolutions of problems that a more common ground approach cannot. For example, consider that the Golden Rule, which indeed seems to be shared by all long-standing traditions, is indeterminate in the frequent situations in which a burden must be placed on someone and also in which a good cannot be given to everyone. A proper normative ethical theory, aiming to be comprehensively applicable, promises to be much more informative and action-guiding than it.

For another example, human dignity, which I do not think is common to all long-standing traditions but which is indeed salient in many of them, prescribes different actions depending on which property is taken to constitute it, a point that much of Part III of RMT aims to show. For example, when (if ever) euthanasia is permissible varies dramatically, depending on whether our dignity inheres in the fact of being a living human being, having autonomy, or exhibiting the capacity to love and be loved (186–188). Resolving this dispute likely requires moving back and forth between particular judgements of right and wrong and general statements of how to understand what it means to respect human dignity, in search of the best understanding of the latter that could then be applied to the case of euthanasia.

Finally, for now, Andanda and Düwell’s prescription to base morality on an anthropology begs the question against the many ethicists, including two contributors to this special issue (see Sect. 3), who are sympathetic to trans-humanism or post-humanism. Andanda and Düwell’s approach seems to rule out a priori prescriptions to change our shared human nature, since for them ‘any reflection on ethics necessarily involves an understanding of our common human nature’ (2024). Talk of ‘necessarily’ here is another place where I find Andanda and Düwell’s views overly restrictive. As I discuss below, I have serious reservations about trans/post-human prescriptions in the light of my communal ethic, but I do not think the moral point of view as such excludes them for the purported reason that ‘the starting point for further ethical considerations’ is 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’ (Andanda and Düwell 2024).

Etieyibo, an expert in African philosophy, is even more strident for labelling my approach to cross-cultural ethics an instance of ‘cultural imperialism’. I draw on relational values salient in the African tradition (and some others in the Global South), but do so selectively and at times leave certain aspects of the tradition behind as unpromising to an international audience of professional philosophers. Etieyibo maintains that it is objectionable ‘when we try to make African morality “less African”’ (2023), and he in its place advocates an approach that ‘recognizes the equality of theoretical contributions from different peoples’ (2023).³

Now, why believe that a given people has already figured everything out about right and wrong and has nothing to learn from the rest of the world? Why think that all peoples are necessarily on an equal footing in respect of theoretical topics?

The only way for Etieyibo to answer such questions would be a commitment to relativism about philosophy, where advancing this view is well-known for being self-refuting since the doctrine of relativism itself is a philosophical thesis being presented as absolutely/universally true and supported by objective reasons (on which see, e.g., Putnam 1981: 119–124, 158–167). I naturally cannot say more to rebut philosophical relativism here, and instead point out that, by my non-relativist approach, it is plausible to think that every long-standing tradition has some insight into morality but also has some gaps that other traditions might fill. When it comes to the African tradition, for one example, it appears that often educational and employment opportunities have been gendered, with some philosophers apparently approving of that approach (e.g., Adeyinka and Ndwapi 2002; Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003; cf. Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014). I submit that such sexism is mistaken, at least in respect of how a global audience of contemporary philosophers would judge, and that it should not inform a normative ethical theory, not even one that is an interpretation of the African tradition. By the same token, note that in other work I have advocated communal practices in the light of characteristically sub-Saharan values, which, I have explicitly said, means that ‘the West should become less Western’ (Metz 2015: 1182) or amounts to it ‘becoming more African’ in the words of two commentators on my work (viz., Enslin and Horsthemke 2016: 177). In learning from one another, different world philosophies are likely to encounter epistemic reason to let go of certain perspectives that have been typical of them and to adopt new ones. Given the sort of even-handed cross-cultural philosophical debate that I recommend and take myself to be engaging in, the label ‘imperialism’ is, I submit, unfair for connoting the one-directional use of force or extension of power.

3 Biotechnological Enhancements

In RMT I argue that my favoured principle of right action, prescribing respect for our capacity to be party to relationships of identity and solidarity, provides *pro tanto* reason to doubt the justifiability of adopting biotechnological enhancements, roughly on the ground that they would tend to put distance between people as opposed to bring them closer together (175–177). Enhancements, i.e., genetic modifications to give us pure benefits far beyond the norm for human nature, would make it harder for people to identify and exhibit solidarity with one another, at least if some were substantially enhanced and others were not. Giving

³ Sun (2022) in her contribution to this issue articulates yet another way to do cross-cultural ethics that is worth considering as an alternative to my approach in RMT.

some people qualitatively superior intelligence would be akin to distributing a large amount of wealth on a minority in regard to its effect on communal ties, so I maintain in RMT. Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso, who have both done work in the African tradition for a long while, argue in their rigorous contribution that this point does not tell against enhancements, maintaining that my ethic in fact justifies them.⁴

My reasoning in RMT turns crucially on the unequal distribution of enhancements, suggesting that great genetic inequalities would put distance between people in the ways that great economic inequalities do. Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso object that we could distribute enhancements equally, thereby avoiding the problem (2023).

However, the only way to ensure an equal distribution of enhancements would be for the state to require that enhancing be done to all embryos, flouting the stake of parents in the decision. It would be discordantly uncooperative in respect of parents not to give them a say in what would significantly influence the nature of the biological offspring they will raise. If, on the other hand, parents were indeed given a say over that, then surely some would elect to enhance their children and some would not, such that the problem of a grossly unequal distribution of talents arises again. Inequalities seem unavoidable, given the communal requirement of a state (normally) to cooperate with those citizens who are not liable for defensive force or punishment.

Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso also object that, while my point might apply to non-moral enhancements pertaining to intelligence, memory, or confidence, it does not apply to moral enhancements. In particular, if my ethic is right, such that moral action is roughly equivalent to communal interaction, then consider enhancements that would foster communality (Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso 2023). These would be enhancements that dispose people to enjoy being part of a 'we', to engage in joint projects, to advance others' objective good, to do so out of sympathy, and then to do all those things much more than has been normal for human beings. Surely those enhancements could not be said to threaten to 'put distance between people', so their objection goes.

I have four brief replies so far to this tempting line. One is that if we imagine something on the order of a Jesus or Mother Teresa (in our stereotypical images of them), I submit that there might well still be kinds of alienation that would arise. I, for one, would find the prospect of dating or even befriending someone like that off-putting, upon comparing their nearly pure nature with my rather crooked one.

Second, although I agree that moral enhancement need not render the one enhanced utterly unfree to choose whether to perform right actions or not, it seems correct that the enhanced one who performs right actions would be entitled to much less moral credit than one unenhanced. The point can be framed in terms of personhood for the African tradition or virtue for the Western: an enhanced individual might perform wrong actions less often, but seems incapable of exhibiting much good character since her behaviour has been steered by the enhancer.

Relatedly, third, if indeed it is the case that moral enhancement would retard the ability an individual to exhibit virtue, then it is arguably degrading of an individual's communal nature to perform the enhancement. It would trade off the enhanced person's capacity for

⁴ For others who have made this claim in respect of my relational moral theory, see Ewuoso and Fayemi (2021); Calcott and Earp (2025). There are also thinkers who have drawn on previous articulations of my communal ethic to explain why they think enhancements are routinely permissible, including Palk and Stein (2020); Shoji (2021).

virtue for the sake of getting her behaviour to adhere to moral rules, a sacrifice requiring justification that Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso do not yet provide.

A fourth and for now final reply is the sense that the meaning of marriage, romantic intimacy, and friendship would change for the worse with relational-moral enhancements. I want to be with a spouse who has chosen me of her own accord. I want her to have options not to be with me ('liberty of indifference') but to choose me nonetheless, and furthermore I would like the decision to be with me to be a product of her self ('liberty of spontaneity') as opposed to that of someone else. I suspect, though, that romantic intimacy, i.e., the most intense sort of communal relating, that results from enhancements would be less free in both these two ways than when not caused by them. Two other critics of RMT note that 'the use of MDMA or psychedelics...might produce the opposite effect (of producing distance—ed.), allowing people to engage more deeply in one another's lives' (Calcott and Earp 2025: 2999). I would not want to be the spouse of someone who is with me because of drugs and hence a reduction of free choice (even if not downright unfreedom), and I currently report a similar reaction to someone who has been genetically enhanced to relate communally. I invite readers to consider whether they have a similar response.⁵

4 Negative Emotional Reactions to Injustice

Whereas Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso are interested in how to get people to relate communally more often, Carman, an expert in the philosophy of emotion, in contrast maintains there are times when discordance is not merely permissible but to be welcomed. It might seem that a relational ethic can never prescribe anti-social behaviour and in the face of such can recommend only peaceful or cohesive strategies, say, preventing conflict from occurring in the first place, fostering rehabilitation, and encouraging forgiveness.⁶ While some other relational ethicists 'bite the bullet' and accept those implications (e.g., Nagel 2023), I need not and do not, as Carman's careful engagement with RMT reveals. In her contribution, Carman explores a particular dimension of unfriendliness as a respectful reaction to an initial (or otherwise wrongful) unfriendliness that I do not, namely, the emotional.

More specifically, Carman addresses anger and resentment as examples of 'disruptive emotions' that are sometimes aptly exhibited for non-instrumental reasons, where similar points could surely be made about, say, disappointment, contempt, and disgust. As she points out, the ethic in RMT does not at bottom prescribe communal (harmonious, friendly) relating but instead respect for our capacity for such, where respect can sometimes permit anti-social (discordant, unfriendly) actions, for instance as ways of preventing, correcting, or punishing an initial and greater anti-sociality (discordance, unfriendliness). RMT articulates and defends a principle of right action, which explains my occasional discussion of decisions to deploy coercion to protect innocent parties or to punish guilty ones, and it does not address moral virtue (beyond some suggestive remarks at 4n4, 237–239). In other work I have extended the communal framework to account for moral virtue and vice (Metz 2022b,

⁵ Reasons of space prevent me from addressing other important points from Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ewuoso (2023), such as that the logic of my view would objectionably forbid inequalities arising from education. I have to give them an IOU.

⁶ Matolino (2025) makes this objection to RMT.

2023a: 143–145), and now explain why I think that Carman’s apt points about the desirability of resentment fit there best.

Carman is dead right that, where someone has misused his capacity to relate communally, for me ‘getting angry just is part of respecting what having that capacity entails’ (2023). However, there is a thin sense of ‘respect’ operative in RMT and its focus on right action, on the one hand, and a thick sense of it that is pertinent to ascriptions of good character, on the other (238). The former is principally a matter of acting in ways that treat others as having a certain moral importance for their own sake, while the latter consists of exemplifying certain propositional attitudes, which might further be expressed when one acts. ‘For instance, virtue includes actually believing another is good for her own sake to the highest degree on Earth and expressing that belief in one’s behaviour, not merely acting in a way that is consistent with such an attitude’ (238).

Beyond cognition, emotion is an additional example of a propositional attitude centrally relevant to appraisals of virtue and vice. Consider the RMT case Carman discusses, of a peacekeeper who shoots aggressors trying to kill a woman merely because she has a different ethnicity. The woman is right to fight back against the aggressors, as is the peacekeeper who shoots them if necessary to protect her from them, while both act permissibly regardless of whether they feel anger at the aggressors. However, if the one under attack and the peacekeeper also felt anger at the aggressors, where, still more, the anger were some of the motivation for their respective uses of defensive force, then we could say the woman and the peacekeeper were not merely acting permissibly but also evincing virtue or at the very least no vice. A dispassionate peacekeeper need not act impermissibly, while a fiery one would not display any bad character, and indeed might be a better person, for that.

Another feature of RMT that prevents a comprehensive analysis of the sort that would be useful given Carman’s interests is that it squarely addresses interpersonal morality and sets aside institutional justice (In1, 239–240), saving the latter for another occasion (see Metz [forthcoming](#)). Carman’s concern about whether my view can justify anger in reaction to structural injustice, where no particular individual appears guilty of having failed to respect others’ capacity to be party to friendly relationships, is fair. I welcome the friendly amendments (so to speak) that she makes in her article, adding in the idea that institutions are plausibly quasi-agents that act in ways capable of treating others’ capacity to be party to friendly relationships disrespectfully. As Carman points out, the institution does not have the natural capacity to relate, but the individuals whose interactions comprise it at a given time do have that and moreover the maxims on which the institution acts, which are a product of their choices, can sensibly be objects of moral evaluation.

5 The Ethics of Solitude

In the previous section I maintained that, insofar as we are discussing having an emotion and its motivating one’s behaviour, virtue and vice are the more natural moral categories to invoke than im/permissibility, where RMT focuses nearly exclusively on the latter. It is likely that the category of duties to oneself is also relevant and would shed light on Carman’s intuition that resentment can be morally appropriate. Qingjuan Sun in her contribution squarely takes up the moral significance of self-regard, richly drawing on the long-standing Confucian tradition that she knows intimately.

I was not unaware of Confucianism when composing RMT and allude to it here and there in the book. It is literally only in the past 15 years, with the spread of English as the academic *lingua franca*, that we have learned just how similar classical Confucianism and the relational facets of the African ethical tradition are.⁷ Sun begins by aptly noting striking similarities between the favoured way to relate in classical Confucianism and my interpretation of the African tradition in RMT (2022).⁸

However, Sun goes on to emphasize differences between a large strand of Confucian thought and my relational moral theory, arguing that the former is ‘more comprehensive’ than the latter for addressing the ethics of solitude: ‘Confucianism also addresses situations in which one is not physically interacting with others, something that is missing in Metz’s account of African ethics’ (Sun 2022). Sun is right that the ethics of solitude is indeed prominent in the Confucian tradition and receives scant attention in RMT.

It appears, though, that Sun wants to make a deeper point, which is that the relational framework I employ is incompatible with removing oneself from the social sphere. Roughly, she seems to think that I did not discuss an ethics of solitude because I could not have coherently done so. On this score, I disagree for several reasons.

First off, consider that a large majority of the point of isolating oneself, by Sun’s interpretation of Confucianism, is to engage in self-cultivation of a sort that would improve one’s other-regarding actions. For many pages Sun details how removing oneself from society can be useful for being able to return to it and then do the right thing (2022). Typical are statements such as: ‘With the constant accumulation of such effort, his moral level would be improved over time’ and ‘If people could sincerely reflect upon what they inherently possess, they would discover virtues internally and be fully aware of the right thing to do’ (Sun 2022). Now, insofar as self-cultivation is a handy tool for performing the right acts, I can accept literally all she insightfully says about that. In RMT I do not address any instrumental techniques to adopt that would enable one to go on to act permissibly, focusing instead strictly on what constitutes acting that way. Sun’s discussion of the means by which to do the right thing strikes me as utterly complementary to my focus on it as an end.

Sun also plausibly maintains that solitude can be a reliable way to enhance one’s virtue. Recall from the previous section that I do not address virtue in RMT, having saved it for another occasion. It is incorrect to claim that, since ‘the point of self-regarding and other-regarding obligations is only to show our respect towards the capacity of communality but has nothing to do with the improvement of moral status....(t)his eliminates the possibility of moral growth for human beings and the necessity of self-cultivation’ (Sun 2022). I am afraid that this statement conflates moral status and virtue. By ‘moral status’ I mean a property because of which a being is owed moral treatment for its own sake (149), a logically different matter from ‘virtue’ or what is often called ‘personhood’ in the African tradition, where

one ought to become a real person, or, in the influential talk of ‘*ubuntu*’ from southern Africa, one should become a genuine human being or display humanness. The thought is that personhood or humanness comes in degrees and that one should develop it in oneself (238).

⁷ Early works by philosophers are Bell and Metz (2011); Unah (2014).

⁸ For several additional similarities between Confucianism and a broad swathe of African ethics, see Metz (2017).

Here at the end of RMT I explicitly welcome the need to articulate elsewhere a self-realization account of virtue, which is in fact common ground between Confucianism and the African tradition (Metz 2017: 209–213). Specifically, in RMT I suggest that an attitudinal form of respect for the capacity to relate communally would be a natural extension of the action-based form of respect addressed in the book (238–239). Again, if self-cultivation is useful as a means to developing virtue as an end (beyond performing right acts), the larger relational framework of which RMT is a central part can easily accept that point.

Sun briefly mentions a different reason for seeking solitude that (unlike others⁹) I accept does put some pressure on the relational ethic in RMT. At one point she tersely remarks, ‘It tends to deprive people of the right to be alone’ (2022). The logic of the position in RMT is that one roughly has a duty to come closer to others. In that regard it aligns with the dominant perspective in the African tradition, which is suspicious of the category of supererogation (Gyekye 2010; Sect. 9) and also of the permissibility of remaining aloof from other people (Tosam 2014: 39).

I have two replies to the worry. One is that, even if we have a duty to identify and exhibit solidarity with others, it does not follow that others may permissibly force us to do so. It might be that we have a right to do wrong in being a hermit and refusing to share ourselves with others, such that others would violate a duty if they were to interfere with such a choice. The second reply is that the category of duties to oneself, which I flirt with at times in RMT (120–123; more recently see Metz 2023a: 147–148, 2025b), could do some useful work here. If one has an obligation to treat oneself in friendly ways, that would have to be balanced against a duty to treat others in those ways and could well entail at times removing oneself from society as a way to respect oneself. It would be worth seeing whether these strategies are enough to capture a fuller exposition of Sun’s intuition.

6 Environmentalism

Moellendorf, a leading environmental ethicist, puts his mind to RMT’s discussion of how to relate to the natural world and raises serious concerns about it. Although, as he recognizes, I do not think that all the weighty reasons to fight global warming, pollution, and related ecological harms are moral ones, moral reasons are central and I believe that many of them are grounded on a conception of moral status. As mentioned in the previous section, by ‘moral status’ I mean the idea of beings to which human agents owe moral treatment for their own sake or that are the objects of ‘direct’ duties on our part (149, 156–157). Moellendorf provides reason to doubt my account of moral status, or at least the implications I take it to have, as well as its relevance for some important environmental controversies.

Moellendorf is right that much of what motivates my account is the intuition that there are gradations of moral status. I am reacting in part to the egalitarianism held by many friends in the animal rights and deep ecology movements, according to which all sentient beings, subjects of a life, or living organisms are deemed to have an equal value from the

⁹ For reasons of space I do not address the reasons to remove oneself from institutional life having to do with avoiding complicity in injustice and being unable to overcome it (Sun 2022). I also do not take up the criticism that my ethic ‘neglects due consideration for people who are unable to enter into communal relationships’ (Sun 2022), but note that ‘ought implies can’ would be central to a response from me to the latter point.

moral point of view. It is implausible, I think, to hold that a human person has the same moral value as a cat, such that one would have comparable reason to save the life of both. I furthermore think that there are degrees of moral importance in the non-human animal world, for example holding that chimpanzees are worth more than cats, such that I should rescue the former instead of the latter if I cannot save both, while cats, in turn, are worth more than worms. I have articulated a monist account of moral status that is meant to capture such intuitions.

It is difficult to come up with a single property that could come in degrees in ways that promise to capture a wide array of intuitions about gradations of moral status, but in RMT I contend that a reasonable job is done by, roughly, being capable of being party to a communal or friendly relationship with us. Such a way of relating includes both identity, enjoying a sense of togetherness and cooperating, and solidarity, advancing another's objective good and doing so out of sympathetic altruism. Those who can (by their nature) identify and exhibit solidarity with others (as subjects) have a full moral status, while beings with which we can (by our nature and theirs) identify and exhibit solidarity (merely as objects) have a partial moral status, one that comes in degrees (147–168).

It is too stark to say that I believe that 'although we have direct moral duties to some nonhuman animals, our duties to fellow human beings are always weightier' (Moellendorf 2023). Moral status is one thing and right action is another, where the former of itself does not always determine the latter (cf. the abortion debate). For example, I maintain that it would be wrong to sacrifice the urgent interests of a being with a partial moral status to meet the trivial interests of a being with a full moral status, thereby prescribing duties not to hunt for sport, not to use animals for certain kinds of experiments, and not to eat them merely for the taste (160–163).

However, I do also hold that it would be wrong to sacrifice the urgent interests of a being with a full moral status for the urgent interests of a being with a partial moral status (161), which is quite intuitive. And, as Moellendorf homes in on, I further hold that, of beings with partial moral status, humans who cannot identify and exhibit solidarity with others, say, because of dementia, have a higher moral status than animals that likewise cannot do so. The reason given in RMT is that, by all the respective natures, we are more able to identify and exhibit solidarity with such humans than with animals. This rationale is meant to provide a plausible counter to the influential 'argument from marginal cases' popularized by Peter Singer; I appeal to a being's relational properties to make sense of how two beings with the same intrinsic ones could plausibly warrant differential treatment (164–165).

Against this rationale, Moellendorf marshals scientific evidence that 'some nonhuman animals are capable of being subjects of friendly action' insofar as they appear able to cooperate with us. The sort of cooperation I have had in mind, but that I did not articulate carefully enough in RMT (93–95), is one in which an agent is aware of another's mind as distinct from its own and restricts its inclinations to advance what it apprehends as the other's ends. (That robust form would cohere with the other major aspect of identifying with others, viz., thinking of oneself as a 'we' as at least two instances of 'I' in relation.) I wonder whether the empirical studies about wolves and orcas that Moellendorf cites support so strong a finding. There is likely stronger evidence about chimpanzees (see, e.g., Call and Tomasello 2008) that could well ground the need to make at least one exception about which beings can be (rudimentary) subjects of identity.

Moellendorf also points out that our ability to satisfy the intentions of animals and promote their well-being ‘suggests that the nonhuman animals are objects of friendly action to a significant degree’ (2023). I do not disagree with that, for our ability to identify with and exhibit solidarity towards them is what gives them a partial moral status by my account. My suggestion, however, is that human beings can be objects of friendly action to a markedly *greater degree* than animals, against which Moellendorf suggests that ‘we seem to cooperate with some nonhuman animals in a way impossible with the comparative class of humans’ (2023). However, even if certain humans cannot cooperate with us as subjects, we are characteristically able both to satisfy their intentions and to enjoy a sense of togetherness with them more than we can with animals.

In RMT I contend that some evidence in support of that claim is the fact that we in fact typically identify with and exhibit solidarity towards humans much more than we do with animals (164–165). Moellendorf says that this reasoning ‘neglects the distinction between fact and capacity, what we do and what we are capable of doing’ (2023),¹⁰ but my point is that what we (often and intensely) do is some real evidence of what we (readily) can do. Additional evidence is that the biological, psychological, and social nature of typical human non-persons is more like ours than is any animal’s nature.¹¹ That sounds speciesist but it is ultimately capacity based and hence in my view more attractive than the outright appeal to membership in *Homo sapiens* that Moellendorf flirts with as sufficient for moral status.

Another challenge that Moellendorf raises for my approach to environmental matters is that he cannot see how what I have to say about moral status can have relevant implications for the grave problems of biodiversity loss, species extinctions, and collapsing ecosystems. He suspects that I will appeal to the moral status of particular animals and suggest that ‘our destruction of their habitat is inconsistent with caring relations’, which is indeed central to my reply. However, Moellendorf maintains that ‘(t)his response would simply ignore all non-animal species, and many animal species that are not the object of our friendly relations’ (2023).

To reply further, I do not think Moellendorf appreciates just how far indirect considerations can go to give us strong reason to enhance biodiversity, protect species, and sustain ecosystems. First, it is true that I do not accord non-animal species moral status, but, then, neither does Moellendorf (2023). He seems sympathetic to the idea that, say, the species of oak trees as such is not the object of a direct duty. We surely have duties in respect of the species of oak trees, but they are plausibly indirect, i.e., are ultimately for the sake of individuals that would be harmed by its demise and are not ‘to’ the species itself.

Second, it is inaccurate to claim that, when I deem the destruction of animal habitats to be uncaring, such is to ‘ignore....many animal species that are not the object of our friendly relations’. If by ‘animal’ we mean (in part) a being with intentions and a life that can go better or worse, then literally *all* individual animals have a moral status by my view since they could be objects of communal relationship. It appears Moellendorf is supposing here that it is only those beings that we are actually caring for that have a moral status, but my view is of course modal; any being that (by our respective natures) we *could* identify with and exhibit solidarity toward is owed moral treatment for its own sake, which means that none is ignored.

¹⁰ For a similar point, see Molefe (2017: 202).

¹¹ This phrasing is cribbed from Metz (2023b: 121).

If there is an animal without intentions and a welfarist good (arachnids?), it is true that it lacks a moral status on my account. However, indirect considerations again do much work: those individuals and the species of which they are members must routinely be treated well in order to safeguard the interests of beings with full and partial moral statuses.

This approach in no way entails that the immediate interests of particular animals always have priority such that we can ignore the longer-term implications for biodiversity, species, and ecosystems. Instead, we have calculating and balancing to do, often in the light of imperfect information. For example, on the one hand, there might be *prima facie* reason to redirect (or possibly kill) a predator to save more animal lives, but, on the other, there might be (weightier) reason not to interfere with a predator so that the ecosystem of which it is a part remains stable and sustains the lives of even more animals, not to mention human persons.¹² I have no algorithm to suggest going forward, but do maintain that a duty of friendliness towards individuals utterly reliant on the enhancement of biodiversity, the continuation of species, and the stability of ecosystems has much more to contribute than Moellendorf acknowledges. We need not ascribe moral status to wholes such as species or ecosystems in order to have weighty moral reasons to protect them, *viz.*, to promote the ends and good of the individuals utterly dependent on them.

7 Business Ethics

Beyond suggesting that my approach to cross-cultural ethics is misguided (see Sect. 2), Etieyibo draws on his deep knowledge of the African tradition to present what he thinks is a way to think about the obligations of business that is more African than mine, one that he moreover suggests is more plausible than it. I welcome the argumentation from Etieyibo, which is a different mode than asserting that the world's peoples already have equal contributions to make on theoretical matters. Perhaps indigenous Africans know more about business ethics than, say, utilitarians, a potential inequality of theoretical contribution.¹³

My approach to right action includes both impartial and partial duties (117–120, 220–221). On the one hand, nearly all human persons have a full moral status because of their capacity to relate communally as subjects, but, on the other, when an agent has actually communed with others, there is some extra moral reason for the agent (roughly) to meet their needs before those of others. Etieyibo thinks the latter condition is both unAfrican and implausible. I focus on the latter issue.¹⁴

Etieyibo suggests that if moral priority goes to those in communal relation, then ‘it is not clear why a firm that operates in a community cannot sell cigarettes if those cigarettes will only be sold to and consumed by the “distant” others and especially if the substantial

¹² For reasons of space, I cannot address the other major issue Moellendorf raises of how to deal with the intuition that wilderness morally matters. Here is a second IOU that I issue as part of this reply to critics.

¹³ Regarding Etieyibo's claim that utilitarianism can avoid my criticism that it would require selling cigarettes, I note that Etieyibo shifts away from the preference utilitarianism that I address towards the hedonic form and I suggest that, regardless of the sort of subjective well-being invoked, the utilitarian calculation will be less stable and explanatorily plausible compared to my (and his) appeal to need.

¹⁴ In regard to the former issue, see, for just two sources, Kasoma (1996); Appiah (1998).

revenue or proceeds go to the firm and community’ (2023). If instead the firm’s obligation is at bottom to meet the most urgent interests, regardless of whose they are, as per Etieyibo’s alternative ethic, then we can avoid this implication.

In reply, it is too crude to say that, for me, ‘we owe more duty to “locals” than “strangers”’ (2023). To begin to add some of the relevant nuance, first note that I believe in rights or restrictions, such that one normally may not treat innocent parties in a very unfriendly way, even when that would promote more friendliness or some other putative good (102–103, 113–114). Taking advantage of people’s addiction to sell them something that is likely to give them a serious disease and indeed kill them counts as ‘unfriendly’ as defined in RMT, viz., as including subordination, harm, and action expressing indifference to others’ good (111, 113, 187). The account of full moral status or dignity operative in RMT, along with the deontological structure of its ethic, can ground obligations of a firm not to sacrifice the urgent interests of innocent distant parties for the trivial interests of wealthy shareholders, even supposing the latter have been intimately related to the firm.

For another relevant nuance, suppose the example were not one of exploiting and harming distant innocent parties for the good of shareholders, and instead involved a choice between two benefits one could confer. Consider Etieyibo’s case where one could either provide ‘a primary item like a farming implement which is required for subsistence or a textbook’ to an unknown person in another country or give one’s son ‘a toy or new shoes’ (2023). Etieyibo points out that the former would intuitively be ‘more important and pressing’, suggesting that on balance one is obligated to do the former and not the latter, if one cannot do both. Again, his need-based ethic accounts for that judgement with ease. However, I submit that much turns on the details. Does one’s son have enough other toys? Does he need new shoes because his old ones are worn through or even just so scruffy as to draw attention at social functions? If readers think, as I do, that these questions are relevant, then they implicitly believe that it is not merely degree of need that should determine how to allocate benefits. In particular, it appears that one can have sufficient moral reason to meet the moderate interests (even if not trivial interests) of intimates before the urgent interests of strangers, meaning that partial considerations loom large when considering the ethics of how to benefit others. I conclude that a firm, like a parent, should indeed consider its long and strong ties as one factor relevant to determining whom it should aid.

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