

Jecker and Atuire's African reflections on being a person:

More welcome non-western thought about moral status

Thaddeus Metzⁱ

Philosophy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to Professor Thaddeus Metz; th.metz@up.ac.za

I view Nancy Jecker and Caesar Atuire's *What Is a Person?: Untapped Insights from Africa* [1] to be yet another important contribution from the Global South on the topic of moral status, i.e., what entitles a being to moral treatment for its own sake. In the past 15 years or so, notable works on this topic have appeared in English from those working in the indigenous East Asian,ⁱⁱ South American,ⁱⁱⁱ and

ⁱ Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ⁱⁱ Recent works in Confucianism aim to extend to aspects of nature the concepts of humaneness, harmony, familial relationship, and cosmic order, which traditionally have been centered on human beings. A useful annotated bibliography of Confucian environmentalist works (running up to 2006) is Berthrong J. Confucianism and ecology, <https://fore.yale.edu/files/confucian.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Those working in the *buen vivir* (good living) tradition often maintain that the Earth as a whole has a moral status, a view distinct from the claim, familiar from the land ethic and deep ecology, that particular ecosystems do. In fact, *buen vivir* has been so influential in South America that Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador have accorded Constitutional rights of protection to the Earth. For some philosophical analysis, see Waldmueller J, Rodríguez L. Buen vivir and the rights of nature. In Drydyk J, Keleher L, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Development Ethics*. London: Routledge, 2019: 234–247.

African^{iv} traditions, but they continue to be sorely neglected by mainstream and influential discussions. For some illustration of this point, consider that no non-Western view is cited, let alone critically discussed, in the two major entries on the topic in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2, 3]. In their book, Jecker and Atuire mine particularly the sub-Saharan tradition for insights and put them into revealing debate—not merely comparison or dialogue—with salient views from the classical and contemporary Western traditions.

Indeed, Jecker and Atuire purport to demonstrate that ideas from sub-Saharan ethics and metaphysics plausibly account for a long-standing intuition that Western theories have not been able to capture after hundreds of years, viz., that all human beings have a full and hence equal moral status from (at least) birth to death (pp77, 113, 208). As is well known, Kantians (and social contract theorists) cannot easily accord full moral status to those lacking rationality to the requisite degree, while sophisticated utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer cannot do so in respect of those lacking the capacity for higher pleasures or global desires, respectively. Cruder forms of utilitarianism, focused merely on pleasure or desires as such, founder on the cases of adult humans in persistent vegetative states and anencephalic infants, which are likewise a problem for Kantianism. Of course, one might appeal to the presence of a soul in all living human beings, but Jecker and Atuire instead usefully strive to provide a new secular theoretical ground. They argue that certain ideas about human relationality salient in the African tradition can provide an attractive non-religious basis for the intuition that even “marginal cases” of living and born human beings have a dignity or, in their terms, count as “persons.”

Specifically, according to Jecker and Atuire, the central way to become a person is to be in a relationship with other human beings, something that each of us purportedly is always already in.

^{iv} See for instance several of the contributions to Chemhuru M, ed. *African Environmental Ethics*.

“Human beings have equal moral status, each standing equally in a certain relationship with all humankind” (p64). That phrasing might sound as though Jecker and Atuire are appealing to the common idea of being a member of *Homo sapiens*, but that is not quite the view, at least as standardly construed. Jecker and Atuire are adamant that their account of moral status is not genetic or even biological in a narrow sense of appealing to the intrinsic properties of an organism (pp64-65, 80). Instead, for them, there is a “a family-like tie” (p65) that every living human being has that accords it a dignity, where this relationality is robustly objective and universal, e.g., is not dependent on others recognizing us as persons or on us fulfilling obligations towards others.

It appears to this reader that the key family-like tie is described in various ways in the book. Sometimes the claim is that a given human being has descended from other human beings, with talk of “filiation” being salient (pp104-105). Other times the claim is that we “are the same kind of being and . . . share a human kind of life” (p75; see also 101). Still other times the claim is that every one of us has mattered to someone (pp80-81, 104). With more space, I believe one could show that these criteria are not extensionally equivalent and are also explanatorily distinct. In other work, it would be of interest to do so, while running with Jecker and Atuire’s suggestions to consider which one of these relational criteria does the best job of capturing the intuition they are after.

Another way forward would be to cast doubt on the intuition for which Jecker and Atuire are trying to account. This reader, while accepting the category of dignity, doubts that an anencephalic human infant in fact has one (for being unable to relate or be related to in certain ways different from what Jecker and Atuire have in mind [4, 5]). It is fair to say that we have indirect duties in respect of it and perhaps even that it has a moral status making it the object of some direct duties, either of which strategy would entail that we may not treat it in any way we might please, say, as something akin to the material in a compost heap. However, one can fairly doubt that it has a full moral status or one equal to that of a “normal” case.

Of course the worry that Jecker and Atuire would surely raise about making this sort of exception is that still more exceptions invariably arise, ones that are sometimes more difficult to stomach. Alzheimer's patients come to mind. However, it might be that the difference between being a person (with a full moral status) and having a partial moral status, which Jecker and Atuire routinely acknowledge in the book, would do enough of the work. The trick would then be to demarcate degrees of moral status amongst human beings while clearly avoiding the sorts of mindsets, prescriptions, and policies characteristic of elitist normativities such as those of Friedrich Nietzsche and, well, Nazism.

In this brief critical notice, I have not been able to address the many other interesting topics that Jecker and Atuire take up in their book.[¶] I have focused on the way they theorize the moral status of human beings, but they have original and sophisticated (even if naturally contested) relational ideas about the standing of animals, non-living parts of nature, aliens, robots, and even zombies that will make readers think. May this symposium, aptly dedicated to their book, draw attention not only to it but also to moral thought from the Global South more generally.

References

[1] Jecker NS, Atuire CA. *What Is a Person: Untapped Insights from Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025. Page numbers cited in the text refer to this book.

[2] Jaworska J, Tannenbaum J. The grounds of moral status. In Zalta E, ed. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grounds-moral-status/>.

[3] Gruen L, Monsó S. The moral status of animals. In Zalta E, ed. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/>.

[¶] For an overview of the book, see Jecker NS, Atuire CA. Author meets critics. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme-2024-110178>.

[4] Metz T. *A Relational Moral Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022: 163–165.

[5] Metz T. Defending a communal account of human dignity. In Molefe M, Allsobrook C, eds. *Human Dignity in an African Context*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023: 23–42.