

# African Liveliness as a Secular Moral Theory: Problems and Prospects

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## ABSTRACT

An important belief in African Traditional Religion holds that everything, both animate and inanimate objects, are imbued with an imperceptible energy known as life force. Since life force is the greatest value, it is the grounds of morality. However, it is undertheorized in contemporary African ethics, with work on personhood and harmonious relationships taking centerstage. I seek to fill this gap in the literature by further developing an entirely secular and naturalistic moral theory of life force that avoids metaphysical controversies and is known as liveliness, which was first gestured at by Thaddeus Metz (2012, 2022). I demonstrate that while a series of objections that Metz levels against liveliness affect teleological versions, they do not apply with equal force to deontological versions. Liveliness, particularly deontological versions, ought to be considered as a contender for the best African moral theory alongside those that focus on personhood or harmonious relationships.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In African moral philosophy theories that focus on normative personhood, or the value of harmonious relationships, tend to dominate the discussion. On the former view, the goal of morality is to develop one's personhood (or character), which is accomplished by exercising other-regarding virtues. On the latter view, the highest value is harmonious relationships and so that is what must be respected first and foremost in moral decision-making. Both of these theories clearly warrant the label 'communitarian' given the central role that the community plays in them.

It is interesting that two of the fathers of contemporary African philosophy in Kwasi Wiredu (1931–2022) and Kwame Gyekye (1939–2019) both seem to have held ethical views that could be explicated in entirely secular terms (see Gyekye 1997; Wiredu 1980). Much of contemporary African moral philosophy appears to follow their lead in divorcing normative commitments from a religious ontology. I submit that contemporary African moral philosophy is decidedly secular and naturalistic.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I suspect that this situation has contributed to the neglect of the idea that life force can serve as the grounds of morality. According to some indigenous Africans, particularly those who adhere to Traditional African Religion (Mbiti 1975), everything is imbued with life force, which is an imperceptible energy. This implies that

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literally everything, both animate and inanimate objects, are in some sense alive. God has the most life force and is ultimately the source of the life force located in everything else. Since life force is thought to be the highest value, it serves as the grounds for morality. The framework for a comprehensive moral theory is clearly in place on this view, but it comes with a rather full ontology.

My goal is to fill this gap in the literature by developing an entirely secular and naturalistic version of life force known as *liveliness*. This account avoids the metaphysical controversies associated with traditional understandings of life force, though much of what I say will also be consistent with such understandings. Although secular liveliness was first suggested by Thaddeus Metz, he ultimately rejects it, concluding that “it is unable to account for a variety of comparatively uncontroversial claims about ethics, including many that will appeal widely to Africans” (2022, 18; see also Metz [2012]). These claims include that it is susceptible to problems associated with welfarism, that it can’t explain why plural voting is wrong, that it doesn’t motivate reconciliatory justice well, that it cannot make clear why certain types of racial segregation are inappropriate, and finally, that it doesn’t show why lying is wrong in itself.

To begin, I explain liveliness as a secular moral theory in more detail, noting that it can be understood either teleologically or deontologically (Section 2). I clarify that Metz’s objections may well succeed in showing that teleological versions of liveliness cannot explain a number of uncontroversial moral judgments. However, he is mistaken that deontological versions of liveliness similarly struggle with such explanations (Section 3). I suggest that much work remains to be done developing liveliness as a moral theory, including assessing the degree to which it can provide consistent and intuitively plausible answers to a variety of topics in applied ethics (Section 4), before concluding by summing up the relevant lessons (Section 5).

## 2. LIVELINESS AS A MORAL THEORY

Traditional African Religion is a form of monotheism that has millions of adherents on the African continent but has been much neglected in the Anglo-American philosophy of religion (e.g., Mbiti 1975; Metz and Molefe 2021). According to an influential swathe of Traditional African Religion, God created the world out of pre-existing material and has placed humans at the center of it. There is a large invisible realm which includes nature spirits and departed ‘living-dead’, among other more malevolent spiritual entities. God is distant from humans and typically communicates his wishes to them through departed ancestors. When a person dies, they become a departed ancestor and remain very much a part of their human community for approximately four or five generations (unless they become an ancestor, in which case they live much longer). What is important for my purposes is that Traditional African Religion asserts that literally everything, both animate and inanimate objects, is imbued with an imperceptible energy known as life force. In some sense, then, everything is alive. While the immaterial souls more familiar in the West are usually thought to be indestructible, a person’s life force will eventually perish (Metz 2022, 79). However, life force is similar to an immaterial soul in appearing to represent a person’s ‘self’ or ‘personality’ (Metz 2022, 80). Finally, God has the most life force and all other life force is derived from him. It is typically thought that after God, spirits have the second most life force, followed by departed ancestors, humans, nonhuman animals, and then nature such as flora and minerals. In this way life force represents what is known as the ‘African hierarchy of being’.

It’s important to acknowledge that not every indigenous African (past or present) affirms the existence of life force nor believes the very same things about it if they do affirm its existence.<sup>2</sup> Still, I submit that it is a belief that is salient to many indigenous Africans or at least their academic exponents and that it impacts their moral thinking in important ways.<sup>3</sup> It is life force (i.e.,

life itself) that is the greatest good and therefore grounds normativity. Metz explains that the work of some contemporary African thinkers on life force tends to “suggest the principle that an act is right just insofar as it produces, protects, and develops vitality, and wrong to the degree that it ends life, fails to protect it, and causes degeneration” (2022, 77). Bénédet Bujo adds, “[e]verything that contributes to maintaining, strengthening, and perfecting individual as well as communal life is good and right” (2005, 428, see also 431). Pantaleon Iroegbu maintains that “[A]ll people and activities that diminish life are in all cultures considered as evil, while those that promote it are regarded as good” (Iroegbu 2005, 447).<sup>4</sup> In the rest of this section, my aim is to explain and expand on Metz’s development of a secular version of life force he calls *liveliness*, though he ultimately rejects it. The benefit of naturalising life force is that doing so avoids the metaphysical controversies associated with Traditional African Religion. This allows for focus to remain on the ethical theory itself, in addition to offering a framing that is likely more palatable to philosophers around the globe. I begin by explaining the more common teleological versions before moving to deontological approaches.

### 2.1 Metz’s teleological version of liveliness

Metz explains that he will “work with a notion of vitality that: is construed in terms of force, not substance; is thought to be perishable, as opposed to eternal; comes in different degrees or kinds; and plausibly varies in value depending on the quantity or quality of it” (Metz 2022, 80). Descriptions of life force:

[T]end to say that human beings are good in some way for exhibiting a superlative degree of health, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, complexity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence. Or they characterize undesirable states as reductions of vitality understood as disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction, disintegration, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression. (Metz 2022, 80)

Notice that such descriptions are actually consistent with an entirely secular or naturalistic ethic. Furthermore, Metz says that he will “presume that most readers will share the judgement that there is something strongly to be preferred about persons with more liveliness than less. They are better (more excellent) people, if not also better off (happier)” (Metz 2022, 80). Metz argues that one ought to care for the liveliness of others, as opposed to just focusing on one’s own liveliness. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that “one should seek to advance liveliness either anywhere one can or perhaps only in others” (Metz 2022, 81). Metz’s worry is that if right action only involves maximising one’s own liveliness, then it will justify intuitively immoral actions. He explains:

For example, a prescription to do whatever it takes to promote one’s own liveliness entails that one ought to commit murder if necessary to stay alive in the long run. Suppose that you need a new kidney to survive and that no one will give one to you. Then, to maximize your liveliness, you would need to kill another (let us presume, innocent) person so as to acquire his healthy kidney for a transplant. Or, if there is a single tiny lifeboat that seats only one person, and there are two of us who have so far survived the shipwreck, then, if I lose the coin toss, I ought to rescue myself anyway, using force as necessary; for only thereby could I promote my own liveliness. (Metz 2022, 81)

So, on Metz’s understanding of liveliness there is a noninstrumental reason against killing an innocent person, which grounds a more impartial or other-regarding ethic than a prescription to maximize one’s own vitality (2022, 82). According to Metz, “one’s basic duty is to act in

ways that are expected to increase the liveliness of either anyone or only others besides oneself” (2022, 82). Observe that this is clearly a teleological version of liveliness, where the goal or end of morality is to pursue the highest good which is identified in liveliness (Metz 2022, 83). I will refer to this view as ‘teleological liveliness’.

## 2.2 Whose liveliness?

On the one hand, it makes sense that Metz’s teleological version of liveliness is developed in terms of only seeking to protect and promote the liveliness in others. For if I exclusively cared about my own liveliness, I may end up degrading the liveliness of those around me in order to increase my own. But on the other hand, it’s puzzling that Metz so clearly separates an individual’s liveliness from the liveliness of the other members of their community. He never considers in any detail the idea that increasing the liveliness of others could be a way for an individual to increase their own liveliness. This interconnectedness fits well with ideas in African communitarianism more generally, which tend to say that a person cannot be thought of as properly flourishing unless all of the members of their community are flourishing too. My point here is just that ‘purely self-regarding’ in the way Metz uses the terms is incoherent on the African view inasmuch as an individual cannot genuinely care for themselves without also caring about the rest of their community. An individual cannot pursue their own liveliness in isolation from the liveliness of the rest of their community.

While pursuing one’s own liveliness in isolation from community is problematic, Metz’s purely other-regarding description of the normativity of liveliness leads to a different set of counterintuitive results. Such a description fails to explain the fact that even though an individual is connected to their community, they can still have legitimate goals that are distinct from the goals of other members of their community. Though some working in the African tradition embrace the idea that individual goals necessarily reduce to communal goals, I firmly reject this notion. Members of a community may share many of the same desires and goals, but it is implausible to think they are necessarily identical such that even when they appear to be different that below the surface, their goals are really the same. For example, it is permissible for me to spend time and money on my education which increases my own liveliness, even if doing so does not directly benefit my community (see Molefe 2019, 60).

Of course, Metz may fairly respond that if an individual’s liveliness is indeed so inextricably intertwined with their community’s, they could not in fact spend resources on their education unless doing so demonstrably helps their community. In other words, if the view I want to offer says that both one’s own life force *and* the life force of others matters, then one cannot in fact pursue goals that do not align with one’s community. If this is right, then the alternative description I offer reduces to Metz’s view that right action should be construed in terms of concern only for the liveliness of others. This would mean that it suffers from the same problem in being unable to account for the fact that individuals can have different goals. I do not intend to settle this matter. My point in highlighting this tension is just that the proponent of teleological liveliness will have to grapple with this issue, particularly if they want to uphold the idea that individuals can in fact have different goals from the other members of their community.

## 2.3 Metz’s deontological version of liveliness

Though Metz rightly notes that teleological accounts of liveliness are the most common in the literature, he observes that there is an attractive respect-based deontological version “according to which we have a dignity inhering in our liveliness and wrong actions are those that degrade it” (Metz 2022, 83). Metz asserts that this approach can avoid the objection to teleological liveliness which says that it justifies killing an innocent person to save other innocent people, etc. (Metz 2022, 83). Also notice that construing liveliness in deontological terms helps to avoid

the apparent tension between individual versus communal interests. I am justified in pursuing my educational goals because I have inherent value based on my liveliness. Provided I am not degrading the liveliness of others, there is nothing wrong with pursuing my own goals. I will refer to this view as ‘deontological liveliness’.

Instead of surveying Metz’s evaluation of liveliness against a set of African and global moral intuitions (criteria he also uses to evaluate his own moral theory), in the next section I’m going to show why the objections that Metz levels against teleological liveliness do not also apply to deontological liveliness. My discussion therefore provides indirect support for the plausibility of deontological liveliness.

### 3. REJOINDER TO METZ’S OBJECTIONS TO LIVELINESS

Metz levels a series of objections to liveliness, noting that “[a]lthough an appeal to liveliness as the ground of moral theory deserves much more attention than it has received from moral philosophers, professional ethicists, and related thinkers around the world, [...] it is vulnerable to serious counterexamples” (2022, 84–85). Though he phrases these objections in terms of teleological liveliness, he says that they “usually apply with comparable force to the deontological one” (Metz 2022, 83). However, I believe that this claim is too quick. The objections levelled by Metz to teleological liveliness do not apply with equal force to deontological liveliness. In addressing these objections, I point to ways forward in developing a successful secular moral theory of liveliness.

#### 3.1 Welfarism

Metz believes that liveliness cannot explain why certain types of welfarism, something widely accepted in the African ethical tradition, is correct. To be more precise, there are three things that Africans tend to eschew (on the basis of welfarism) that liveliness will struggle to explain (Metz 2022, 85). These are the *pro tanto* wrongness of (1) vast inequalities in wealth even if everyone’s basic needs are met; (2) pursuing wealth primarily through competitive instead of cooperative means (even if the former creates more wealth); and (3) rejecting longstanding cultural norms and practices, even when they don’t directly meet anyone’s needs (and even if there are good reasons for rejecting them) (Metz 2022, 70–71, 85).

This objection is the one most directly about meeting widespread ethical intuitions of Africans, as opposed to what Metz often calls ‘global’ moral intuitions. The simple reply, therefore, is that while Metz is concerned with developing a theory that accommodates both African and global moral intuitions, I am not. I could just admit that a secular version of liveliness may well accommodate some African moral intuitions, but I am primarily focused on developing a theory that meets global moral intuitions. In this sense, then, my theory is less African than the one developed by Metz. Indeed, it could already be considered so in virtue of not appealing to the more robust metaphysics of life force found in Traditional African Religion. This objection therefore doesn’t necessarily provide a reason to think liveliness as a moral failure is false, at least if priority is given to more global intuitions.

However, I believe that deontological liveliness can indeed go some way towards explaining the *pro tanto* wrongness of the three commonly accepted moral beliefs mentioned above. First, consider vast inequalities in wealth. It could be that an extremely wealthy person ought to recognise the dignity inherent in other individuals based on their liveliness by sharing more of their wealth. This could mean helping others to achieve their goals, which would increase the liveliness of the individuals being assisted but also plausibly increase the liveliness of the wealthy person too, even if everyone’s basic needs are already met. Liveliness might not be able to show why there should be no inequalities, but it can go some way toward showing why the wealthy ought to share their resources even beyond ensuring basic needs are met.

Second, liveliness can also help explain why pursuing wealth primarily through competitive means is wrong. More carefully, it can make clear why it is wrong to pursue wealth through a thoroughgoing *laissez faire* capitalism. Such an approach may not respect the inherent dignity of every individual, instead suggesting that they are mere ‘competitors’ that need to be defeated. Admittedly, liveliness may not be able to explain why a competitive approach with rules and regulations ensuring the dignity of every individual is not to be preferred to purely cooperative ventures if the latter generates more wealth (and does so for everyone).

Third, the wrongness of rejecting longstanding cultural norms and practices can to some degree also be explained by liveliness. For rejecting such norms is likely to create division and strife within one’s community, thereby degrading the liveliness of community members. However, liveliness can also explain why maintaining cultural norms must be balanced against respect for each person. For example, if homosexual behaviour were to violate cultural norms such that it would create division in a community, such division might have to be accepted as a consequence of recognising the dignity (i.e., the liveliness) of each individual. In locating the most important value in a person’s liveliness, instead of in, say, the harmony of the community, this theory of liveliness is indeed plausibly less African than other theories. However, it points a way forward to navigate the tension between the value of community versus the individual through means not available in other theories.

### 3.2 Consensus seeking in the political realm

One defender of liveliness in Bujo has connected it to consensus-based decision-making in the political realm. Metz clarifies that:

His [i.e., Bujo’s] central reasoning is that consensus amongst at least informed representatives, an ideal springing from traditional African chiefs having routinely consulted with popularly appointed elders before making a decision, is most likely to reveal the truth about how to promote liveliness. The ‘palaver’, as Bujo calls it, ‘shows that norms can be and have to be found in a communal manner, hence free of domination and in dialogue’ (1997: 37). (2022, 85)

But Metz is sceptical of the idea that consensus seeking amongst equals will in fact promote liveliness in the community, and do so better than alternatives. The first problem he identifies is the simple fact that it is incredibly unlikely that the insights gleaned from consensus will be better than those to be had from a supermajority of, say, 80% or 90%. Just consider that the time lost in attempting to establish a consensus could potentially decrease the liveliness of those waiting on the relevant political decisions (which could be important policies) (Metz 2022, 85).

The second problem arises regarding what Metz calls ‘plural voting’. According to Bujo, the ‘palaver’ requires the input of *all* members of the community (1997). However, notice that “seeking consensus in such an egalitarian way would be wrong, if, as is plausible, giving the same number of votes to the uneducated as the educated would prevent liveliness relative to what would be obtained by giving the uneducated fewer votes than the educated” (Metz 2022, 86). Thus, it appears at least possible that, contra Bujo, inegalitarian decision-making could produce more liveliness. Metz concludes even on deontological liveliness, “while I [i.e., Metz] accept that there is something degrading about plural voting, it is hard to see why it would degrade people’s liveliness” (2022, 86).

This may well be a problem for Bujo’s understanding of life force, but I deny that it is a problem for the secular theory of liveliness in general. There is nothing in liveliness qua moral theory that suggests it necessarily prescribes egalitarianism.<sup>5</sup> It could be that plural voting increases the liveliness of community members, including of those who receive the least amount of voting power. This is one reason to reject Metz’s intuition that plural voting is morally problematic. In

other words, I think the proponent of liveliness can reasonably ‘bite the bullet’ on this matter. Again, what this type of response would do is make the theory of liveliness less African (all else being equal) than other theories purporting to explain why plural voting is impermissible. This is so inasmuch as indigenous African cultures tend to favour consensus-based decision-making, and also eschew plural voting. However, none of this would show that liveliness as a moral theory more generally fails.

For proponents of liveliness who are more inclined to accept Metz’s intuition that plural voting is degrading of liveliness, I think there are plausible ways out. Metz is too quick here in claiming that the plural voting would not degrade a person’s liveliness. Suppose egalitarian decision-procedures would indeed tend to favour the least well off and least well-educated. What Metz doesn’t figure into his analysis is the fact that an individual’s self-esteem could very well be lowered by knowing that their vote was worth the least in their society, if anything at all. Knowing that one has the least say, particularly through no fault of their own, can reasonably be thought of as degrading. If this is right, then the deontological approach to liveliness would prohibit plural voting. The end of increasing liveliness in the community is not justified if the means of doing so degrades the liveliness of certain individuals.

### 3.3 Criminal justice

African theories of justice typically favour reconciliatory approaches, which tend to focus on a good outcome for both the wrongdoer and the victim albeit in a way that disavows the wrong that was done (Metz forthcoming a, forthcoming b). But according to Metz, liveliness typically justifies approaches to justice that focus on deterrence, not reconciliation. He writes:

Although it is clear that a prescription to promote liveliness in society would forbid punishing on grounds of retribution, it is unclear that it recommends seeking reconciliation between offenders and their victims as the alternative. If the basic aim were to promote liveliness and hence to prevent other-regarding crime, such as murder, rape, and theft, then it appears that a state should often inflict severe penalties on individuals so as to deter them and others from committing it or lock people away so that they cannot re-offend. That is, vitality seems to justify deterrence and incapacitation, not so much reconciliation. (Metz 2022, 86)

Furthermore, a teleological version of liveliness cannot explain why the guilty ought to be punished. This is because

[i]mposing a penalty on one person so as to instil fear in others or using punishment to incapacitate differ substantially from imposing a penalty on a guilty person to prompt him to compensate his victims, to reform his character, and more generally to facilitate a mending of ties between him and his victims. (Metz 2022, 86)<sup>6</sup>

Contra Metz, I submit that it is false that liveliness could not prescribe reconciliation. For reconciliation tends to prescribe that the wrongdoer ought to admit what they did, issue a public apology, and otherwise make amends with their victim. If the victim’s liveliness has been degraded by the wrongdoer, why couldn’t this type of reconciliation serve to restore their liveliness? Likewise, Metz himself has defended a theory of reconciliation that includes constructive punishments where such punishments should compensate the victim, and ideally, reform the character of the wrongdoer (see Metz forthcoming a, forthcoming b). If his own approach to reconciliation is correct, then reconciliation could indeed serve to help prevent further wrongs. Finally, deontological liveliness may ground inherent dignity or rights in virtue of each

individual possessing liveliness. It could be that reconciliation (that includes constructive punishment) is important in respecting victims in virtue of their life force.

I agree with Metz that teleological versions of liveliness have difficulty showing why retributive justice or more utilitarian approaches that appeal to deterrence are inappropriate. This amounts to another reason to favour deontological liveliness. Suppose that a person is intrinsically valuable inasmuch as they possess the *capacity* for liveliness (as opposed to say, rationality or autonomy).<sup>7</sup> On this view, retribution would be unjustified because it degrades the liveliness of the wrongdoer. A wrongdoer can have their liveliness degraded in self or other defense, but the justice that comes after the act in question must respect their liveliness. This is consistent with punishments that degrade liveliness only if they are directly connected to restoring the liveliness of the wronged party. The more utilitarian approaches that favour deterrence are also unjustified on deontological liveliness. Deontological liveliness entails dignity (or inherent value or rights) such that an innocent person cannot have their liveliness degraded even if doing so would prevent future crimes. The type of constructive punishments prescribed by Metz are meant to compensate victims (which restores their liveliness) and ideally, reforms the character of the offender (which subsequently serves to restore and increase their liveliness).<sup>8</sup> Deontological liveliness answers Metz's challenges to liveliness regarding justice, in addition to nicely accommodating the intuitions that come with his own version of reconciliation.

### 3.4 Racial segregation

Another objection Metz levels is that a “principle urging us to promote liveliness appears to permit racial and ethnic discrimination when it comes to romantic relationships, which is wrong by most contemporary philosophies” (2022, 86). Yet there are ways a state could forbid interracial marriage without necessarily degrading anyone's liveliness. Metz asks the reader to:

[I]magine that a racist state did not punish those who were to intermarry. Suppose it rather defined a valid marriage as one incapable of obtaining between members of different races and ethnicities. Mixed couples who have vowed to live together in romantic, long term relationships simply could not count as ‘legally married’. Despite the absence of punitive or ‘restrictive’ law in H.L.A. Hart’s (1961) influential terms, the state’s segregationist ‘facilitative’ law would remain wrongful, indeed, a human rights violation. However, supposing the separated population groups had enough people within them for everyone to find a fertile spouse, it appears that no one’s liveliness would be undermined. (2022, 86–87)

It might be reasonably objected that this lack of state recognition would actually be degrading to a person's liveliness. Indeed, that Metz cashes out liveliness here just with respect to fertility and procreation is puzzling. For he has sought to construe liveliness in secular terms, not as an imperceptible energy as it is understood by adherents of Traditional African Religion. Fertility may well be part of a secular version of liveliness but so are many other features, including the idea that depression and anxiety degrade liveliness. It is reasonable to think an interracial couple that is disrespected by the state in this way would cause them to feel depressed, anxious, and insecure.

However, Metz asks his reader to further suppose that the state enforced general race segregation such that romantic relationships across racial lines rarely, if ever, occurred, with most people holding that they're immoral. In such a society, a person's liveliness would not be degraded by unfulfilled romantic desires that would not develop in the first place (Metz 2022, 87). Now, the proponent of liveliness “might plausibly suggest that ‘separate but equal is still unequal’, meaning that such segregationist policies would likely result in lower self-esteem on the part of the race deemed inferior” (Metz 2022, 87). However, imagine that the racial segregation is not



based on the idea that one race is superior but rather as a way of maintaining the races' unique cultures. Metz claims that in this scenario it is difficult for liveliness to say why such segregation is wrong, even though it is in fact wrong (Metz 2022, 87).

I submit that if each person has intrinsic value and should be treated with respect on the basis of their liveliness or perhaps on their capacity for liveliness, then this type of segregation may still be unjustified. For part of protecting a person's liveliness may include respecting something like Mill's harm principle. The type of paternalism and interference involved with the kind of racial segregation described by Metz, even if it is genuinely well intended, might not be permissible. The point is that it's plausible to suppose that if persons were respected in virtue of possessing life force, such racial segregation would not be justified in the first place.

More importantly, this objection also brings to the fore interesting questions about what precisely constitutes the relevant 'community' when examining ethical theories stemming from the African intellectual tradition. Some have criticized contemporary proposals of African communitarianism or *ubuntu* as being infeasible in large modern-day societies (e.g., Matolino and Kwindingwi, 2013). Indeed, part of the criticism is that an ethic that is so intertwined with members of one's community is only workable in smaller villages or tribal contexts. It makes little sense in large modern-day urban centers. I will not adjudicate this objection here as even if it does apply to certain versions of African communitarianism, it does not touch deontological liveliness in any meaningful way. On deontological liveliness, all (or almost all) humans have the capacity for some degree of liveliness. The relevant moral community, then, includes *every* (or almost every) human. If every community member has dignity (or inherent value or rights), then it is impermissible to segregate individuals based on race, even if the motivation for doing so is genuinely benevolent.

### 3.5 Lying

Finally, Metz argues that there are cases of lying that are intuitively impermissible even though liveliness cannot explain why they are wrong. Metz asks the reader to "consider the case of a spouse who systematically cheats on her husband behind his back, and is so careful and conniving that he has no chance of finding out. It appears she would be enhancing the liveliness of her lover and herself, while not reducing that of her spouse" (Metz 2022, 87–88). Even if it were stipulated that the deception could never be discovered such that the faithful spouses' liveliness is never threatened, it still seems wrong (Metz 2022, 88). Finally, notice that if it is the discovery of the lie that degrades liveliness, then it is the *belief* that one has been deceived that causes degradation, not the lie itself. This makes it difficult for liveliness to explain why the lie itself is wrong, since it appears to be beliefs about deception that causes a degradation in liveliness (Metz 2022, 88).

Yet again this objection is more serious to teleological liveliness than to deontological liveliness. For on deontological versions, lying to a person is disrespectful regardless of whether that person ever becomes aware of the deception. This suggests that something other than merely decreasing a person's liveliness is needed to explain why an undiscovered lie is still wrong. However, such an explanation is possible in terms of liveliness. A lie disrespects a person who possesses dignity (or inherent value or rights) in virtue of liveliness or perhaps simply in virtue of having the capacity for liveliness. Deontological liveliness can therefore explain why lying is wrong even if it is undetected and so may never *directly* decrease the liveliness of the person who is deceived. The lie is still fundamentally disrespectful. Finally, Metz never considers that lying itself may well degrade the liveliness of the liar. If they have a conscience, their liveliness will be harmed by their deception. While the existence of psychopaths poses a problem for this explanation, they are not a problem that is unique to liveliness (i.e., they pose a problem for many different moral theories).

### 3.6 Tentative conclusion

In responding to these objections, I submit I have shown that the challenges Metz raises to teleological liveliness do not apply with equal force to deontological liveliness. In answering these objections, I have indirectly strengthened the case for deontological liveliness. It deserves more consideration in future discussions of African ethics.

## 4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

For Metz, liveliness isn't the greatest or smallest value. Instead, he believes it is our capacity for communal relationships which is the highest value while recognising that part of such relationships can involve increasing the liveliness of others (Metz 2022, 89). He explains that "action taken with the aim of improving others' liveliness is partially constitutive of the fundamental duty to treat individuals as having a moral standing because of their capacity to be party to communal relationships" (Metz 2022, 89). What grounds the value of liveliness is that it "is partially constitutive of the fundamental duty to treat individuals as having a moral standing because of their capacity to be party to communal relationships" (Metz 2022, 89).

But why not think that the value of harmonious communal relationships is constitutive of treating people well because they have the capacity for liveliness? One potential benefit of such an approach is that it can help to alleviate the persistent tension between individual and communal goals that can be observed throughout much of African communitarianism. A person's liveliness can be increased by pursuing projects that are important to them such as their education. However, such projects cannot be undertaken if they degrade the liveliness of other people. Presumably, an individual project such as education will eventually indirectly benefit the liveliness of the wider community of people, though that only needs to be an incidental consequence of the project, not the goal. Communal activities increase a person's liveliness and so are valuable but so are other projects that are more individualistic in nature. Thinking of harmonious relationships as grounded in the value of liveliness therefore has at least some initial plausibility. This topic deserves further exploration in future work in African moral philosophy.

Other future work would apply liveliness as a moral theory to a wide array of topics in applied ethics including procreation, abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, artificial intelligence, data security, scarce resource distribution, among many others.<sup>9</sup> I submit that the proof is in the pudding, so to speak, which means that much of the success or failure of liveliness as a moral theory depends upon how well it can answer applied questions. It should be measured by the extent to which its answers to different ethical questions cohere with each other, in addition to whether such answers are intuitively plausible. Though much work has been done exploring how certain versions of African communitarianism answer questions in applied ethics (particularly African personhood), less has been done applying liveliness to applied topics. Indeed, while some have explored life force in relation to applied ethics, there is virtually no work examining how a secular understanding of liveliness answers various questions in applied ethics. There is therefore the potential for much future work in exploring liveliness as a full-blooded moral theory.

## 5. CONCLUSION

My goal has been relatively modest. After briefly explicating life force as a secular moral theory known as liveliness, I surveyed a number of objections to it located in the work of Metz. He believes that liveliness is susceptible to problems associated with welfarism, that it can't explain why plural voting is wrong, that it doesn't motivate reconciliatory justice well, that it cannot make clear why certain types of racial segregation are inappropriate, and finally, that it doesn't show why lying is wrong in itself. In surveying these objections, I demonstrated that while they might apply

to teleological versions of liveliness, that contra Metz, they do not apply with equal force to deontological versions. The primary reason for this is because deontological versions of liveliness say that a person is inherently valuable and so deserving of respect in virtue of possessing liveliness or perhaps in virtue of their capacity for liveliness (as opposed to the capacity for rationality, or autonomy, or Metz's own communal relationality). My discussion shows that liveliness as a moral theory deserves greater attention. Not only are there a whole host of applied ethical issues that it could be appealed to for answers, but it also ought to be systematically evaluated against more prominent theories in African ethics including those that focus on normative personhood and harmonious relationships. Ideally, developing it further would also propel it to be evaluated on a global stage against better-known theories in the Anglo-American tradition.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. For notable exceptions see [Magesa \(1997\)](#); [Murove \(2007\)](#); [Bujo \(1997\)](#).
2. Placide Tempels's well-known *Bantu Philosophy* is commonly identified as the first place where a Westerner recognises the importance of life force to African peoples as a philosophical system (1959). However, Tempels was a missionary, whose goal was to learn about the beliefs of indigenous Africans in order to more effectively convert them to Christianity. While his general point that life force is incredibly important to many indigenous Africans is insightful, his work has widely been criticized as painting the beliefs of Africans in broad brushstrokes, and so failing to recognise important differences in religious practice and beliefs across the continent.
3. I am confident that this is true, but the specific degree to which it is true is ultimately a matter for empirical scrutiny (i.e., just how many indigenous Africans in the past have believed in life force, and how many believe in it today, in addition to its connection to morality could be examined by social scientists).
4. See also [Kasenene \(1998, 140\)](#); [Mulago \(1991, 125\)](#); [Uzukuwu \(1982, 202\)](#).
5. Or more carefully, such a connection is not obvious, and an argument would have to be offered in order to show the connection.
6. For Metz's objections to the retribution and deterrence theories of justice see [Metz \(forthcoming a, forthcoming b\)](#).
7. Metz's own African inspired ethic says that individuals are valuable inasmuch as they possess the capacity for friendliness (i.e., the ability to be the object or subject of solidarity and identity (2022)).
8. Having said that, if they are valuable in virtue of their capacity for liveliness, then there are ultimately limits to the punishments. For example, a torturer cannot be tortured. Notice too that such a punishment is not *constructive*.
9. For example, Metz has so carefully applied his own African-inspired moral theory to address a way array of applied ethical topics (see Part III of [Metz \[2022\]](#)).
10. Thanks to Perry Hendricks and Thaddeus Metz for comments on an earlier draft.

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