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## Unfriendly Cases for Metz's Relational Moral Theory

### Abstract:

Metz's Moral Relational Theory says that an action is right if it respects our capacity to be party to friendly relationships. Friendliness involves exhibiting solidarity and identification with others. Though Metz's theory often issues intuitively correct moral judgments, I argue that it fails to do so in the cases of female genital mutilation, religious offense, and homosexual romantic relationships. I conclude by exploring whether there are possible replies that can be made on behalf of Metz by examining African conceptions of well-being and flourishing, before turning to ask questions about the role that intuitions play in justifying his theory.

### Keywords:

Thaddues Metz; African moral philosophy; African communitarianism; human rights; ethical intuitionism

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades Thaddeus Metz has emerged as a leader in the field of African philosophy. Particularly noteworthy is his ability to take insights from the African philosophical tradition and bring them to bear on topics typically reserved for Western analytic philosophers. In this regard his most impressive contribution has been a multitude of journal articles and book chapters explicating his relational moral theory. Not only has Metz sought to bring this ethic to a wider global audience, but he also intends it to be a genuine competitor to Western moral theories such as consequentialism and

Kantian deontology. The most comprehensive statement of Metz's moral theory can be found in, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (2022).<sup>1</sup> Metz's theory says that an action is right if it respects our capacity to be party to friendly relationships. It is this capacity that also grounds the value of persons. Friendliness involves exhibiting solidarity and identification with others. According to Metz, one of the advantages of his theory is that it can account for both African *and* global moral intuitions better than other competing African and Western moral theories. Indeed, he primarily chooses to ground the legitimacy of his theory in its ability to issue the intuitively correct judgments on a wide variety of moral issues.

After briefly explicating Metz's moral theory in Section 2, I shift to my main aim in Section 3 which is to show Metz's moral relational theory does not issue the intuitively correct verdict in the cases of (i) female genital mutilation; (ii) causing religious offense; (iii) homosexual romantic relationships. In Section 4 I explore a possible reply in examining African conceptions of flourishing and well-being. I suggest that this can help address cases (i) and (ii) but does very little to assuage worries about (iii). In Section 5 I ask questions about the metaethical grounding of Metz's theory, and in particular about the role that intuitions play in his account. I claim that in order to avoid charges of relativism he needs to say more about the epistemology of moral intuitions.

## 2. Right Action as Friendliness

The moral theory that Metz defends in *A Relational Moral Theory* claims that an action is right if and only if it is *friendly*. Metz uses friendliness as a technical term which represents something like loving or harmonious relationships.<sup>2</sup> Though Metz is careful to explain that his theory implies it is a person's

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Metz takes the book to be his definitive statement of his relational theory (2022: viii).

<sup>2</sup> For other examples of African relational ethics see Tutu 1999; Paris 1995; Murove 2004; 2007.

capacity for relating harmoniously that grounds human dignity (or rights), I will mostly focus on what he says about right action. According to the relational moral theory, an action is right inasmuch as it is friendly. An action is friendly inasmuch as it respects an individual's capacity to exhibit solidarity and identification with other members of the community.

### 2.1 Metz on Identity

Metz explains that the cognition of identification with others involves considering oneself to be part of the group or community. One needs to be able to take on the perspective of other members of the community (Metz 2022: 94). Feelings of belonging and gladness around others are constitutive of the emotions of identification (Metz 2022: 94). Pride or shame will also be felt based on the actions of the members of one's community. Volition ought to aim at joint activities, focused on helping others to achieve their goals, and to do so even if there is no clear benefit to oneself (Metz 2022: 94). The opposite of identification is creating division, while neither identifying nor dividing is maybe alienation (e.g., living in isolation) (Metz 2022: 95).

### 2.2 Metz on Solidarity

Regarding solidarity, Metz claims that it involves acts of service towards other members of one's community (Metz 2022: 95). The cognition of solidarity is about experiencing empathy for others, which implies "knowing what moves [another] person and more generally what makes him tick, even if he does not fully recognize it" (Metz 2022: 96). Practising this will manifest itself in the form of emotional solidarity. The volitional element regarding solidarity involves acting to improve the conditions of others, including helping to develop their moral virtue which extends beyond their own mere self interest. The motivation for acts of solidarity are 'empathetic cognition' and 'sympathetic emotion' (Metz 2022: 96)). Finally, the opposite of solidarity is 'ill will' in the form of acting cruelly and maybe lowering the quality of peoples' lives. Indifference is the expression of neither solidarity nor ill will (Metz 2022: 96).

### 2.3 Friendliness and Principles of Right Action

When taken individually, Metz believes that neither identification nor solidarity do a good job of explaining morality (Metz 2022: 97-98). Though the philosophers working in the African tradition tend to ground morality on harmonious relationships or relating communally (i.e., on friendliness itself), Metz argues that doing this makes it difficult to account for intuitions that suggest the existence of certain inalienable rights. For example, if something like maintaining communal harmony is the most important value, then violence in self or other defence is never permissible. Protecting innocent victims using unfriendly means is also impermissible if doing so would not maximize communal harmony long-term (Metz 2022: 101-103). Finally, such conceptions of African morality tend to limit the community to one's family or clan, thereby denying cosmopolitan or impartialist intuitions (Metz 2022: 103).

In order to avoid these problems, Metz instead locates the value of individuals in their *capacity* to be the object and/or subject of friendliness. Thus, “[i]nstead of deeming relationships of identity and solidarity themselves to be a highest good to be promoted, I [Metz] take the *capacity* to be party to them to have a superlative non-instrumental value and to warrant *respectful* treatment” (Metz 2022: 104).<sup>3</sup> If a person is the subject of friendliness, then she engages in solidarity and identification with others. If a person is the object of friendliness, then other people are friendly towards her (i.e., exhibit solidarity and identification with her). Though possessing the capacity to be either the subject or object of a friendly relationship is enough for moral status, it is only those who can be subjects of friendliness that have a dignity (Metz 2022: 107-108).

Metz summarizes his moral theory with these principles:

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<sup>3</sup> Metz notes that in light of his focus on the capacity for friendliness his view has fairly been characterized as modal. See Samuel and Fayemi 2020 and Horsthemke 2015.

- An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be party to harmonious ways of relating.
- An act is wrong insofar as it degrades those with the capability of relating communally as subjects or objects.
- An action is permissible if it treats beings as special in accordance with their ability to be friendly or to be befriended.
- An action is impermissible to the extent that it disrespects beings with the ability to be part of relationships of identity and solidarity (Metz 2022: 110).

Metz's book is wide-ranging in that it includes not only many more details about the mechanics of his normative theory, but also extensive discussion of its application to various applied questions. However, this summary should suffice for the purposes of raising the counterexamples I have in mind.

### 3. Unfriendly Cases for Metz's Moral Relational Theory

I am now in a position to issue my main challenge to Metz's theory by identifying three difficult or 'unfriendly' cases for it. They are unfriendly for Metz because I believe his theory issues the intuitively wrong moral judgments when assessing them. Though something close to some of the details in these cases may obtain in the actual world, this need not be the case in order to raise my worry. It is enough that they are logically possible because their possibilities pose a threat to the intuitive plausibility of Metz's relational moral theory.

#### 3.1 Female Genital Mutilation

The first case Metz's moral relational theory has some difficulty dealing with is that of the female genital mutilation of girls, which is still practiced in certain African societies. Consider that survey data collected as recently as the 2000s onwards suggests that girls between the ages of 15 to 19 years old

experience the practice at high rates in multiple African countries (Goldberg et al. 2016: 344). I take it as intuitively obvious that this practice is morally abhorrent and that it ought to be abolished in every place in which it is still practiced (or at least I will not argue for this conclusion here).<sup>4</sup> Here is what Metz says his relational moral theory tells us about the practice:

Note that since my conception of communal relationship includes cooperation, it is only practices that have been voluntarily adopted that merit moral consideration. So, for example, clitoridectomy imposed on girls is a tradition that does not merit respect insofar as minors are not competent to make free and informed decisions to undergo the procedure. Furthermore, the relational moral theory does not entail that voluntarily adopted customs should never change—for the solidarity element can sometimes provide all things considered reason not to do what identity would prescribe. Since, for all we can tell, killing innocent people did not in fact serve the function of appeasing the gods, considerations of communality on balance entail that the practice was right to challenge and overturn, even if everyone had been accepting of it for a long while (2022: 135).

However, I think that Metz's theory may have more trouble telling us why the practice is wrong than he surmises in this quote. While it is true Metz's moral theory does not logically entail that voluntarily adopted cases can never change, imagine a possible world where there is a closed society (or almost closed) that practices clitoridectomy on girls. The society uniformly embraces this practice, creating immense unchallenged social pressure to participate in it. Suppose that the older female members of their community also participated in the practice and want the same for the younger members. Further suppose that female genital mutilation often marks the exit of the individual from

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<sup>4</sup> I suppose if a fully informed and consenting adult female wanted to participate in the practice, she ultimately has autonomy over her body and thus should be free to do so. However, it is typically imposed on underaged girls who are under immense social pressure (if they are not outright physically coerced) to participate in the practice. It is this latter case that concerns me here.

the community as a girl and her entrance into it as a woman. It marks her full acceptance into the community as an adult. The practice is celebrated and embraced in this closed society.

In such a society, it is unclear how the solidarity element of Metz's theory could really provide an all things considered reason to abandon the custom. Recall that for Metz, the solidarity element fundamentally involves acts of service and empathizing with others. The challenge posed by this case is that *all* of the girls in this scenario genuinely *want* to participate in the practice. In this way, while Metz would probably want his solidarity component to bar the practice, it appears to dictate the exact opposite. Within this particular community, participating in female genital mutilation is actually an act of solidarity.<sup>5</sup> While Metz is right to want his theory to support a ban of such practices, it fails to do so, at least in this society as I have described it.<sup>6</sup> It is also difficult to see how observing that his case is about minors who by definition cannot consent really changes anything. Just imagine that all of the girls in question are nineteen years old. My intuitions about the immorality of the practice do not change when this change is made to the case. I have the very strong moral intuition, and suspect that many others will too, that the clitoridectomy of girls or young women in this close society is still morally wrong. However, Metz's moral theory permits the practice in such a society if not outright recommends it. Therefore, Metz's moral theory issues the intuitively wrong verdict in this case.

### 3.2 Religious Offense

The second unfriendly case for Metz's theory is about causing religious offense. What does his theory tell us about such cases? In a different work focused on human rights, Metz explains that:

[T]he Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights includes this article: 'No one shall hold in contempt or ridicule the religious beliefs of others or incite public hostility against

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<sup>5</sup> One challenge to African relational ethics is that while it works while in small, closed communities, it is no longer applicable in contemporary society. See Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013 and Metz 2014 for a reply.

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, I do not think that making sacrifices to the gods can be handled very well on his account either, for the same sort of reasons as the ones offered here. Though perhaps one relevant difference in these cases is that killing someone seems to be a paradigmatic case of unfriendliness.

them'.<sup>7</sup> Which approach is correct, if we must respect human dignity *qua* capacity to be party to friendly relationships? Is it “unfriendly” in the relevant sense to be blasphemous where one knows others would be offended? Is there a relevant difference between displeasing others by participating in a gay romantic relationship, which I argued is not unfriendly, and offending others by suggesting in a cartoon that a most beloved prophet is a terrorist? (Metz:Unpublished Manuscript).

While Metz himself doesn't offer a definitive verdict on this case, I believe that it is fairly obvious what his theory says about it, at least if more details are offered. Imagine a society where every single community member but one individual is a conservative Muslim. In such a society, causing religious offense, for example, by depicting a beloved religious figure as a terrorist, is paradigmatically unfriendly. Imagine this one community member insists on spreading this depiction of the religious figure, causing widespread offense. On Metz's theory this type of offense creates division (i.e., the opposite of identifying with others) and it also causes ill will (i.e., the opposite of solidarity). In other words, in such a society it is extremely unfriendly for the one individual to cause religious offense. For now, suppose that Metz's theory has indeed issued the incorrect verdict.

I recognise that intuitions are likely to vary more in this case compared to the previous one. However, if at least *some* religious offense ought to be permitted in *any* society, then his theory issues the wrong judgment in this case because it looks as if *all* religious offense is wrong in such a society. Furthermore, that Metz's own theory is by his own admission ambiguous on cases of religious offense is a strike against it. A superior moral theory would presumably be able to accommodate competing intuitions regarding the permissibility of religious offense. Finally, for those with strong moral

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<sup>7</sup> Islamic Council, *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (1981) <http://www.alhewar.com/ISLAMDECL.html>.



intuitions that at least some religious offense (even if only incidental to some other purpose) is permissible, then for such a person Metz's theory again offers the intuitively wrong answer here.

In fairness to Metz, it is important to recognize that his account preserves rights and so necessarily allows people to act in 'unfriendly' ways. For example, if I am walking down the sidewalk on the way to my favourite local coffee shop, I have the right not to be physically assaulted by you. Disliking my preference for naturally processed beans grown in Africa instead of washed beans from Central and South America is not a good reason to prevent my walk. More seriously, you are not permitted to prevent me from going to the coffee shop because of my gender or ethnicity. In these and more severe cases, I am permitted to act in self or other defence, and therefore in ways that would otherwise be deemed impermissible because they are unfriendly. An important question is whether there are similar types of overriding reasons that could possibly justify some unfriendliness in the case of religious offense. One immediate difference is that there is no physical harm in the case of religious offense. If physical harm or the threat of it is what justifies unfriendliness, then the kind of religious offense in question is still not permitted by Metz's theory.

Finally, think about what else might follow from the impermissibility of causing religious offense. Though in an almost universally conservative Muslim society, causing religious offense is unfriendly, consider that there would necessarily be no free speech, including freedom of press (and other relevant forms of expression) in such a society. If these are rights that one is not inclined to give up, but I am correct that Metz's theory does not permit religious offense, then this is yet another problem for his theory.

### 3.3 Homosexual Romantic Relationships

The third unfriendly case for Metz's moral relational theory is about the permissibility of homosexual romantic relationships. To begin, consider that Metz writes that:

Regarding homophobia, those who have gay romantic relationships are not thereby being unfriendly or otherwise failing to relate communally. Those party to such relationships are not necessarily viewing anyone in ‘us versus them’ terms, subordinating others, harming them, or acting out of cruelty. They are not even necessarily being alienated from and indifferent to others. There is simply nothing immoral with homosexuality, if rightness is friendliness. If anything, insofar as a loving relationship is an intense realization of communality, there is good moral reason to support gay relationships as they suit people’s needs (2022: 142).

Contra Metz, it is actually easy to imagine cases where it is false that there is nothing wrong with gay relationships. Imagine a culture that almost universally eschews such relationships as unnatural, disgusting, and beyond the pale. Suppose that all of the millions of people in this society universally condemn homosexuality with the exception of two men who have fallen in love and are trying to decide whether to act on their feelings. If rightness is friendliness, in such a society then to engage in a gay romantic relationship (especially in public) is indeed unfriendly. In such a society doing so would create widespread ill-will (the opposite of solidarity) and widespread division (the opposite of identity). But if gay romantic relationships are intuitively permissible (as I imagine most professional philosophers these days will want to say), then once again Metz’s moral relational theory fails to issue the correct verdict.

Part of what makes this case challenging for Metz is that it does not need to rely on modal imagination in quite the same way as the previous case. Though there might not be universal agreement about it, many traditional African societies do indeed forbid homosexuality. Such views likely represent the super-majority in certain regions. The practice is still shunned throughout many parts of Africa today with even some African scholars declaring it ‘un-African’. Consider that Molefi Kete Asante writes that “[h]omosexuality and lesbianism are deviations from Afrocentric thought

because they often make the person evaluate his or her own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness....An Afrocentric perspective recognizes its existence but homosexuality cannot be condoned or accepted as good for the national development of a strong people” (2003: 72-73). Some of the motivation behind this comes from the fact that traditional societies tend to highly value life and hence procreation (through ‘natural’ means). For example, Bénédet Bujo observes that:

It has been rightly noted that homosexuality is rare in traditional Black Africa, and the reason for this is precisely the communal dimension: south of the Sahara, the fundamental anthropological conception in Africa is both bipolar and tripolar. One is a human being only in the duality of man and woman, and this bipolarity generates the triad man-woman-child, which leads to full community. Against this background, a man-man or woman-woman relationship would not only be looked on as an egotistic isolationism which dares not take the step to full human existence; it also leads to a sexist discrimination against part of the human race and shows an unwillingness to accept the enrichment that comes from heterogeneity (2001: 6).<sup>8</sup>

That the modal scenario where homosexuality is universally condemned is perhaps much closer to the actual state of affairs in certain places on the African continent, making it an especially pertinent counterexample to Metz’s moral relational theory.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Flourishing, Well-Being, and Self-Regarding Duties

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Bujo notes that a different ethical understanding of homosexuality is possible, but only if it was one arrived at by the community (Bujo 2001: 7). For more discussion of the community regulating norms see Section 5.

<sup>9</sup> More ‘unfriendly’ cases abound. Consider that in many African societies it is considered very unfriendly not to procreate. Bujo writes that “Africans argue against lifelong celibacy along precisely these lines: one who remains unmarried for life withdraws from solidarity with other human persons, offending against the law of life. He is like a magician who ruthlessly destroys life, since a celibate is unwilling to take a share in the growth of life on the biological level and refuses to take his place in the duality of man and woman, which alone constitutes full humanity” (Bujo 2001: 7).

One promising reply on behalf of Metz comes by way of reflecting on African conceptions of flourishing and well-being.<sup>10</sup> On one such influential account an individual cannot be said to be flourishing unless they are developing their normative personhood (e.g., Ikuenobe 2006: Menkiti 1984; Mofele 2019).<sup>11</sup> This is accomplished through exercising other-regarding virtues in the context of community. Though Metz does not belabour these ideas, it is clear enough that on his theory a person can only be properly flourishing if they are acting with friendliness towards others and also receiving friendliness from others. A key theme across various African accounts of well-being is that a person's well-being should be evaluated in light of the extent that their needs are met (e.g., Metz 2019). Minimally, these needs are biological and social.<sup>12</sup> It is plausible that a person's sexual needs are severely harmed by a clitoridectomy. Societies where the practice is widespread, or even in the possible worlds where it is unanimously supported, ought to recognize that this is the case. Once it is recognized that a woman's sexual needs are harmed by this practice, it should be condemned in societies where it is (wrongly) embraced.

What about the case of religious offense? It could be that freedom of expression is a social need that would go unmet if all instances of religious offense were forbidden. Does this need take precedent over a person's need to practice their religion free from offense? How should these seemingly competing interests be balanced against each other?<sup>13</sup> Instead of attempting to answer these questions here, I suggest that they lead to important questions about the case of gay romantic relationships.

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<sup>10</sup> The initial idea for this reply comes from discussions with Thaddeus Metz.

<sup>11</sup> Or at least such a conception of flourishing is implied by normative personhood.

<sup>12</sup> Metz has argued that they should also include existential needs (2019).

<sup>13</sup> I say seemingly because a popular view in African thought is though people may appear to have competing needs they *never* do. Metz himself also recognizes that how this case is parsed fundamentally depends on the balance of harms and benefits in light of various social, psychological, biological, and moral needs.

Metz believes that his theory is flexible regarding the existence of self-regarding duties (2022: 120-123). He explains that:

While the existence of a category of self-regarding duties is more controversial, and hence I included no intuitions about them amongst the key sixteen by which to appraise a moral theory in the first instance [...], one may read the relational moral theory as entailing them. Whatever it is about the capacity of others to relate communally that demands respect can also be found in oneself and presumably likewise merits respect. For those who firmly deny that there are any duties to oneself, they will find more attractive a cousin of the present ethic that would talk of honouring ‘other individuals’ instead of simply ‘individuals’ (Metz 2022: 121).

If there are duties to the self, they reasonably include duties to meet one’s own needs. Now, it is tempting to conclude that this shows pursuing a gay romantic relationship would not in fact be wrong even in a society where it is universally or almost universally condemned. If romantic needs are important, then one has a duty to fulfil those needs when possible. In other words, in such a case failing to pursue a gay romantic relationship would be an act of unfriendliness towards oneself. But why not think this is an instance where a duty to oneself conflicts with a duty to one’s community?<sup>14</sup> An individual in this case may have a duty to be friendly towards themselves. But it remains difficult to see why pursuing a gay romantic relationship is not still a clear instance of unfriendliness towards their community. Suppose the community I have been describing consists of 10 million people. All but the two men who are in love would be distraught by the appearance of such a relationship in their society. Is it really reasonable to conclude that the romantic needs of the two outweigh the needs of the millions of others in their community? Indeed, the health of the community is of paramount

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, many deontologists will claim that such conflicts are apparent, not actual. But even if this is true, it does not clearly tell in favour of Metz.

importance. Though there could be a way to motivate this or a related reply, more is required to do so than what I have offered here.<sup>15</sup> I invite Metz to tell us more about how considerations of well-being and flourishing might help his theory deal with the difficult cases I have posed, if indeed they do so at all.

##### 5. The Scope of Community, Modal Imagination, and Metaethical Grounding

Another way for Metz to respond to these cases apart from appealing to considerations about well-being or flourishing involves the scope of community. Metz might say that the relevant community he has in mind is *every* human who can be the object and/or subject of friendliness. Expanding the relevant community in this way not only allows one to assuage worries of cultural relativism, but it potentially shows how something like the solidarity component of friendship could be used to justify banning female genital mutilation, and also permit homosexual romantic relationships.<sup>16</sup> Metz could admit that it is true *in certain cultures* female genital mutilation is ‘friendly’ and banning homosexual romantic relationships is ‘friendly’. To do otherwise is to be ‘unfriendly’ at least within the context of the culture in question. However, he could further argue that when the theory is expanded to include *every* human in the world, instead of just some particular group of people, that the verdicts that the community issues are less likely to be counterintuitive. Likewise, since Metz says that all (or almost all) humans are worthy of moral consideration given that all (or almost all) have the capacity for friendliness, there is reason to think that the relevant moral community should include all humans.

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<sup>15</sup> Metz explains that “Gyekye believes that there are human rights to life as well as to civil liberties regarding free expression of opinion (1992: 251), bodily integrity (2004: 36), and even lifestyles that the majority might frown upon (1997: 65)” (2022: 31). If human rights grounded in people’s capacity for friendliness are a way out of these cases for Metz, he needs to explain what happens when such rights seem to run up against communal norms. Indeed, these difficult cases and this discussion in general could be formulated as a challenge to a conception of rights or dignity grounded in Metz’s ethic. For more on the interaction between individual and communal rights see Bujo 2001: 163.

<sup>16</sup> It is opaque to me how this applies to the case of causing religious offense.

The problem with this reply is that it is susceptible to a modal objection.<sup>17</sup> For expanding the scope of the relevant community to the entire planet is only of help to Metz if in the actual world most people do in fact reject female genital mutilation as abhorrent and think that homosexual romantic relationships are permissible. This type of sociological contingency about what actions are friendly or unfriendly is suspiciously relativistic. More to the point, it is easy to imagine possible worlds where *every single person* supports female genital mutilation such that to oppose it would be very unfriendly. It is similarly easy to imagine possible worlds where *every single person* opposes homosexual relationships such that to engage in one would be very unfriendly. In such cases Metz's theory gives us the wrong verdict if indeed we still want to maintain that in such worlds female genital mutilation is wrong and that homosexual romantic relationships are permissible.

It is fair to ask whether Metz really intends to ground his moral theory on what might be called the whims of whatever a community happens to find friendly or unfriendly. His discussion of metaethics in 'Chapter Two: Reconsidering Ontology's Relevance' sheds some light on this issue. There Metz explains that "[t]he default position amongst African philosophers is that ethics is to be grounded on metaphysics" (Metz 2022: 25).<sup>18</sup> This does not just mean that ethical theories should try to avoid metaphysical falsehoods. It is the stronger claim that normativity is implied by ontology. As examples, Metz first rejects Kwame Nkrumah's claim that egalitarianism follows from a materialist metaphysics before showing that Kwame Gyekye's attempt to ground normativity in the metaphysics of personhood fails (2022: 26-38).<sup>19</sup> Metz's key criticism of these accounts, and the others they are representative of, is simply that nothing about normativity necessarily follows from ontology.

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<sup>17</sup> There are some similarities here between this worry and the modal problem of evil faced by theists. See Guleserian 1983.

<sup>18</sup> See also Imafidon and Bewaji 2013; Metz 2022a, 72; Mulago 1991.

<sup>19</sup> See Metz 2022: 38-41 for more examples that he rejects.

Metz's rejection of African attempts to ground normativity in ontology, in addition to his own desire to avoid metaphysical controversies, is perhaps partly what leads him to appeal to intuitions instead. It is worth being more careful about the role that intuitions are supposed to play in justifying Metz's ethic. Indeed, a helpful feature of the breadth of *A Relational Moral Theory* is that Metz spends time discussing metaethics and his methodological approach before advancing his normative theory and exploring its application. Metz follows Paulin Hountondji in avoiding metaphysics in order to take a 'normative approach to moral disputes in African philosophy' (2022: 42).<sup>20</sup> He exclusively uses this approach, "usually evaluating general moral principles in the light of particular moral claims" (Metz 2022: 42). He explains that "it appears sensible to think that at least one viable way to argue for a general principle about what makes actions right as opposed to wrong is to consider the extent to which the principle can make sense of particular cases of right and wrong that are less controversial than it" (Metz 2022: 42).

It is important now to know what precisely Metz means by 'principle' or 'particular cases of right and wrong'. I believe it is fair to characterise what Metz has in mind here as an intuition. Consider that he says:

[A]n intuition counts as a judgement that a particular act has some moral feature such as permissibility or a certain degree of wrongness, where that judgement is meant to be less controversial than the principles it is being invoked to evaluate. I do not consider intuitions to be beyond doubt, self-justifying, or anything so strong as a foundationalist epistemology would suggest. Instead, they are beliefs that are firmly and commonly held by most informed interlocutors, and for this reason are sensibly taken as provisional starting points for debate; they are judgements that could be overridden in principle, but only with substantial evidence (2022: 50-51).

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<sup>20</sup> See Hountondji 1996.



He then adds:

Although there is fair debate about which intuitions are reliable (with those about remote possible worlds being *prima facie* more dubious), it looks difficult, if not impossible, to make philosophical headway without them. How else can one provide substantial evidence either in favour of or against a general principle without appealing to its implications for a wide array of particular cases deemed to be less contested than it? (2022: 51).

The justification for rightness as friendliness, then, is that it clearly “entail[s] and best explain[s] many intuitions about morality, and especially ones by and large shared by both the Western and African traditions” (Metz 2022: 51). This makes it clear that Metz’s theory is, at bottom, justified by intuitions. There are common moral judgments which are just intuitions, and he claims that his theory does a good job of explaining (and entailing) such intuitions. Though it is helpful that Metz clarifies the work that intuitions play in his account early on, questions remain.

Though Metz rightly acknowledges that intuitions are fallible, he does not tell the reader anything about the epistemic position required to discover whether their own or someone else’s intuitions are mistaken. In fairness, this is not the main objective of his book. But it really matters to assessing the plausibility of the role that intuitions play for Metz. He appears to imply that the fact that a group of people (e.g., Westerners or Africans) mostly share certain intuitions is evidence for its truth. What if a super-majority shares the same intuitions over some matter? What about an almost consensus? What about a consensus? Does agreement really indicate the reliability of ethical judgments? If yes, then we are right back to where we started. Does this not entail some form of

relativism? The pressure of my hypothetical and not so hypothetical cases is intensified if agreement about moral judgments is an indicator of truth.<sup>21</sup>

I do not believe that Metz is a relativist, nor do I think he is defending a theory that endorses relativism. Indeed, he explicitly addresses the worry about relativism, writing though other African communitarian theories could be characterised as relativistic, his own theory avoids the charge. According to Metz, a community “would be mistaken about what is right and wrong if it did not conceive of them in terms of communality and anti-sociality, respectively” (2022: 137). He continues to explain that though “[t]he relational moral theory might seem to include some subjective and variable elements in it, insofar as sharing a way of life, which is part of a communal or harmonious relationship, does of course vary from society to society. However, such contextualism is not relativist” (Metz 2022: 137-138). Finally, he says that “by ‘sharing a way of life’ or ‘identifying with others’ I [Metz] mean particular kinds of interaction, ones that include, amongst other conditions, thinking of oneself as a ‘we’ and participating with others on the basis of trust and cooperation as opposed to coercion and deception. I do not mean just any custom or tradition” (Metz 2022: 138). What seems to be needed from Metz in order to make these claims ring true for his theory is a more developed account of the epistemology of intuitions. Since the main focus of *A Relational Moral Theory* is to develop and apply a normative moral theory, and not to extensively discuss the theory in the context of metaethics, this discussion should be read as an invitation for Metz to expand and clarify his use of intuitions and therefore not as anything like a refutation.

## 5. Conclusion

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<sup>21</sup> Relatedly, Metz probably wants to say that a society could in principle be acting in an unfriendly way and hence immorally as a group of people without realizing it. But if rightness as friendliness relies on an objective moral standard of friendliness and unfriendliness, where does it come from it? If the answer is that intuitions are a (fallible) way to identify the standard, then we are back to asking the same sort of questions about the epistemology of intuitions.

My goal has been to put pressure on Metz's moral relational theory by developing some 'unfriendly' counterexamples to it. These are cases where his theory appears to issue the intuitively incorrect moral verdict. Focusing on African conceptions of flourishing and well-being may go some of the way to explaining why pursuing unorthodox ways of living are at least to some extent permissible. This is especially so if self-regarding duties exist. However, in a case where an entire society believes gay romantic relationships are impermissible, it is still difficult to see how they could ultimately be permitted (i.e., it is difficult to understand how a couple's romantic desires could override the well-being of, say, millions of other people). Metz's theory is secular and therefore does not rely on any controversial metaphysical claims. Instead, he prefers to test his theory against common moral intuitions, claiming that his theory both entails and explains such intuitions better than others. Though Metz firmly rejects the notion that his theory is susceptible to charges of relativism, in order to demonstrate this, he needs to do more by way of developing and clarifying an epistemology of intuitions. My discussion should be understood as an invitation for Metz to tell us more about his important work. He has done analytic or Anglo-American philosophers a great service in bringing African philosophy to them in a way sure to be understood and appreciated.

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