

The Politics of Philosophy in Africa: A Conversation

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Abstract: The background to the present discussion is the prevalence of political and personal criticisms in philosophical discussions about Africa. As philosophers in South Africa – both white and black – continue to philosophize seriously about Africa, responses to their work sometimes take the form of political and personal criticisms of, if not attacks on, the philosopher exploring and defending considerations about the African continent. Both of us have been the targets of such critiques in light of our work. Our aim in this conversation is not to diminish or deflect such critiques. On the contrary, our aim is to understand them, to make them as strong as possible, and to bring them into the cooler realm of philosophical discussion.

WEJ: Some years ago, my co-discussant, Thad Metz, published ‘Toward an African Moral Theory’ (2007a), and the article became the starting point of a continuing, extensive project of attempting to characterize and defend a moral theory – stated in a single, overarching norm – based on the set of interpersonal practices locally called ‘*ubuntu*’. The present article is a discussion of the political and personal objections that have arisen particularly in response to this project.

The discussion focuses on five moral judgments about the wrongness of Thad’s philosophical project, judgments that Thad has encountered in print or in person on the occasion of publishing or giving a talk. My job here is to philosophically defend these concerns, as best as I am able. Thad’s job is to

respond to them. Insofar as we fail to capture a salient concern or point, we hope that others will contribute to these philosophical reflections.

So, Thad, let us begin our discussion. I would like to ask you three things before we turn to the criticisms themselves. First, would you like to characterize your project in your own words?

TM: When I relocated from the States to South Africa in 2004 and became a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), I judged myself to have a moral obligation to teach more than merely Western perspectives and authors in my courses, which focused on moral, political and legal philosophy. And so I set myself the task of becoming acquainted with the cultures of indigenous sub-Saharan peoples and with the philosophies and related worldviews that emerged from them.

I naturally began with local sources that discussed the beliefs and practices of, for instance, the Zulu, Tswana and Shona peoples, and then I expanded my range to include those of a couple dozen or so traditional peoples throughout the sub-Saharan region. Although I did not dismiss Euro-American writers, I focused principally on Africans recounting what they take to be important facets of their respective peoples' ways of life.

As readers will know, it is standard for English-speaking, and more generally Western, ethical philosophers to lecture on moral theories such as egoism, utilitarianism, Kantianism and contractualism. (Indeed, sadly enough, it is common for Africans doing philosophy below the Sahara to focus exclusively on such theories.) When teaching at Wits, I thought it would be interesting to see

what an African moral theory would look like and how it might compare and contrast with the standard Western fare.

While I definitely found hints of moral theories suggested by African philosophers, theologians and the like (see some quotations below), I did not encounter in the literature many who were systematically attempting to specify one that would both have a clearly African pedigree and be particularly attractive to a contemporary global audience of philosophers. I found that project of interest and decided to undertake it.

My strategy, first published in ‘Toward an African Moral Theory’, involved seeking a principle suggested by the literature that would clearly entail and best explain two groups of intuitions (particular moral judgments that are less controversial than the general principles being evaluated in light of them). One group of intuitions I considered to be ‘global’ in the sense that just about any ethicist working anywhere in the world would hold them, e.g., it is wrong to kill an innocent person for money or to have sex with someone without her consent.

The other group of intuitions were judgments that, from what I could glean from my research, were much more recurrently held amongst indigenous African peoples and philosophers than amongst Western ones (and, indeed, those in the Confucian, Hindu, Islamic and many other traditions). For some examples, intellectuals from many different parts of sub-Saharan Africa have maintained that: consensus should be the default position when seeking to resolve political disagreement; reconciliation should be the aim of criminal justice in the first instance; all able-bodied members of a society ought to pitch in to help one another harvest (or build, etc.), instead leaving individuals alone to take sole

responsibility for their plots; and there is a moral significance to greeting other people, such that it is not merely a matter of etiquette. Such perspectives have been salient in the indigenous sub-Saharan tradition of ethical reflection in a way they have tended not to be in others.

After specifying the key intuitions, I worked through a number of theoretical suggestions from African thinkers that on the face of it promised to entail and explain them, and I argued that one, inspired by the remarks of Desmond Tutu about harmonious relationship being the greatest good, was more promising than the other five to be found in the literature at the time. After publishing ‘Toward an African Moral Theory’, I worked to refine the principle I had tentatively defended there, so that it would still be characteristically African and all the more philosophically appealing. Roughly, this principle is that an act is right if it respects others in virtue of their natural capacity to commune or harmonize, i.e., to be party to relationships of identity and solidarity with others; otherwise, an act is wrong, and especially insofar as it prizes discordance.

And then, well, it didn’t take long before I came to believe this very theory that I had articulated. That is, while I had at first wanted merely to see what the most defensible theory of right action grounded on sub-Saharan mores would look like in comparison to Western theories, over the past few years I have argued that it in fact is more attractive than they are. It captures not only intuitions that are salient in indigenous African thought particularly well, but also does a better job than utilitarianism, Kantianism, and the rest of the West at entailing and explaining more ‘global’ intuitions. Or so I continue to contend.

WEJ: A second preliminary: I think that any discussion of politics in academia needs to begin by addressing the politics of the discussion itself. So, I think that we should speak about the politics of the present paper. We are two white Americans (who have each lived in South Africa for about 15 years), publishing a conversation about *other* persons' judgments about your project. I am uncomfortable with this situation. I believe that this analysis would have been more *important* if one of the people having this conversation were someone to have initially advanced the criticisms.

My defence of my own presence here is threefold. First, I am initially sympathetic to all of the judgments we discuss and rehearse here, and I think that we would have had difficulty finding anyone else (black or white, local or non-local) who was willing to defend them all. Second, I am quite simply interested in exploring and defending these views in my own way, so as to develop my own position on them. Third, I am hopeful that our discussion will spark a further discussion, in the philosophical community, about the politics of doing philosophy in and about Africa.

TM: All that sounds right to me. Here are a couple more reasons to engage in this dialogue, and then to seek to publish it.

For one, surely most of those who have criticized my work and yours have wanted us to pause and to rethink certain facets of our approaches. For us to do so, and do so in a public forum such as this, should be taken as a sign of respect. For another, those who have criticized us, at least as intellectuals with integrity, should also be willing to pause and to rethink, in light of our honest, considered

reactions to them. It seems fair to ask critics to reconsider their positions and, at the very least, the hostile ways they have sometimes advanced them.

WEJ: A third preliminary point: I take it that most political and personal concerns in academia could be seen as attacks on the *character* of the person taking an academic stance. Political and personal attacks suggest an academic's viciousness; they claim that in defending his or her position, the academic is displaying a non-virtuous, even base, attitude toward her subject matter, in this case the peoples and cultures of Africa. When I find it helpful, I will state how I see the criticisms below as holding that your project, and perhaps even you, are non-virtuous in some way.

However, readers should be well aware that you do not, of course, see your project (or yourself) in this way. You see it as expressive of virtue, something like *respect* and *esteem* for the culture that inspired the moral theory you are exploring and defending. Indeed, for you this respect and esteem are now apparently displayed in your sympathy with the position you have been developing. Is that right?

TM: Absolutely.

Rather than ignore African ideas when teaching and thereby give students the impression that only dead white guys can contribute to philosophical debates, I have worked to put African thinkers and thoughts at the core of my instruction.

Rather than to neglect an entire centuries-old philosophical tradition that

exists as a living body of thought, I have worked to learn from it and to incorporate promising ideas from it into my research.

Rather than patronize African philosophers by simply recounting their views or using ‘kid gloves’ when evaluating them, I have taken the tradition seriously as philosophy, viz., as rational thought about fundamental matters, and criticized it where I have found it wanting.

Rather than act as though African ideas have nothing to contribute to humanity’s development, I have sought to ‘export’ many of them to a global audience and to put them into dialogue with other philosophical traditions, mostly the Western but also recently the East Asian (e.g., Bell and Metz 2011; Metz 2014, 2017).

Finally, rather than suggest that the theory I have advanced is solely a product of my own thought, I have acknowledged its sub-Saharan pedigree by often labelling it ‘African’; for me to have called it ‘Metz’s Theory’ would have been a kind of arrogance, even theft.

WEJ: So, let us begin with a first criticism of your project:

- A white person, especially one from overseas, should not talk about African ethics, since he was not reared in an African culture.

This concern focuses on the methodology that you use in your theorizing about *ubuntu*. The usual method of working in ethics is to reflect upon one’s own moral commitments, and to then try to theorize about them in some way or another. You, in stark contrast, are dealing with *other persons’* moral commitments. You gain your data, as it were, second- and third-hand, from

avowals from sub-Saharan Africans and from anthropological discussions of sub-Saharan Africans. You *report on* sub-Saharan avowals, you do not make them yourself. If there is anything behind this first objection to your project, it must drive a wedge between your approach and the reflective methodology that we usually find in theorizing about ethics. There must be something special about our relationships with our moral norms that they should not be ‘reported on’.

If this is correct, then all moral anthropology – as I think you call it at one point – is a dubious affair. The thought here, I think, is that moral anthropology disrespects a truly important element in moral thinking, an element your work at least initially ignored, namely that of avowal. Admittedly, you now profess to have some sympathy with the theory you explore, but you still present it as a theory based on other persons’ sympathies, not a theory based on your own. This is why you call it an ‘African’ moral theory. The moral anthropologist does not speak as a person who avows his findings, and that is a problem in the realm of morality.

The culprit here, as I see it, is the role that our identities play in our lives. In speaking about moral intuitions, as you do in your work, you are speaking about people’s identities. But real-world – not imagined – identities should not be reported on, discussed in the third-person; they should be *expressed*, that is, avowed, by the persons whose identities they are. Our identities are *precious* to us, something we need to protect, nurture, and most importantly, affirm and defend. As a consequence, discussions of moral identities should in all cases involve an agent whose moral views they are, someone who can stand by and for the aspects of her identity being discussed. Identities are, at bottom, something

that should be spoken about only when there is someone present who can stand up for the identity being spoken about. As a consequence, we can take first-person views of moral systems,¹ but not wholly third-person views. Your project violates this norm; you speak about other persons' identities without having them there to stand up for those identities. Accordingly, the vice here, perhaps, is one of neglect.

TM: As you recognize, I do now accept the theory that I had initially presented as the most promising principled reconstruction of the sub-Saharan tradition. And so, even if I had been for a while 'guilty' of 'merely reporting', I no longer am.

However, even at the initial stages I was in fact not merely reporting. When determining which intuitions from the African tradition to use to evaluate competing candidates for a moral theory, I did not take them all on board. For instance, a number of Africans have judged *ubuntu*, in its most basic and literal sense of human excellence, to be available only to Africans or perhaps those initiated into a sub-Saharan culture (see, e.g., Gade 2012). From the beginning, I have judged that any philosophical interpretation of the African tradition that is attractive (at least to a global readership, if not to those who appreciate the deepest values of *ubuntu*) will deem human excellence not to be restricted on such a basis. So, in putting forth intuitions that were more African than Western, I was still employing my own judgment, advancing intuitions that could be appreciated not merely parochially, but also potentially by a much wider audience.

¹ And, perhaps, second-person views, in face-to-face encounters.

Such ‘picking and choosing’ from sub-Saharan worldviews of course raises its own potential problems. But the *present* charge, of distancing myself from the norms and values and of not considering whether I can share them, simply is not true. If anything, I have from the start found the characteristically African moral judgments to be *prima facie* worth exploring, and would not have undertaken the project otherwise; consider that, upon relocating to South Africa, I did not attempt to undertake a theoretical unification of apartheid intuitions! And in commonly calling the theory I have advanced ‘African’, I was not attempting to put distance between myself and the theory, but instead, as noted above, to give credit where credit is due.

Now, there remains in your remarks a further point to which I have not yet replied. It is that, even supposing I were to be sympathetic to the salient African positions that I have advanced, I am speaking about people’s identities that I cannot fully share, by virtue of being an ‘outsider’.

However, in using the term ‘African’ I did not mean to be speaking about living people’s identities, although I can see why interlocutors have reasonably thought that I have been. The term ‘African’ has of course been employed in a variety of ways. The main, theoretically useful way that I have used the term, as well as those like it such as ‘Western’ and ‘East Asian’, is to refer to features that are salient in a locale over a substantial amount of time, similar to the way that I see Steve Biko (1971) using the term ‘African’ in his ‘Some African Cultural Concepts’. In general, I use geographical labels to pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. For me, they denote fairly long-standing characteristics in a region

that differentiate it from many other regions.

The claim that geographical labels such as ‘African’ or ‘sub-Saharan’ can sensibly be used to pick out properties that have been salient in a particular space-time means that I am *not* using them to capture how a contemporary person who calls himself an ‘African’ conceives of himself. In calling a property ‘African’, I am not seeking to explain to a particular individual who he is, and he could well fail to ‘find himself’ reflected in the normative theory I construct, which is grounded on many ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-colonial’ insights into ethics. Using the term for the sake of self-understanding or identity politics is one thing, and using it to pick out a swathe of long-standing beliefs and practices indigenous to a certain region on which to ground a general ethical principle is another.

I unfortunately believe that I have failed to draw this distinction adequately in my various talks and papers. And so when speaking of things being ‘African’, readers and listeners might well have been lead to suppose that I as an outsider am trying to explain to them who they are. But that has not been my aim; that is not the intended function of the moral theory.

WEJ: The question now will be whether you can *avoid* speaking of people’s identities when you are speaking of their moral commitments. My hunch is that you cannot. We will return to identities below.

Let us move on to a second moral critique of your work:

- If a white person speaks about something ‘African’, he’s being derogatory, since the term has been used by the white community in that way in the past.

The idea here is a straightforward application of political correctness: if a word has been used in offensive ways, you get rid of it. That is why we no longer use certain words, for example, to refer to black persons, or women, or people of certain sexual orientations. Those people have told us that they no longer wish to be referred to in those ways, and we respect their wishes in that regard.

Your response to this is a sensible one. You say, 'Well, not all uses of the word "African" are derogatory'. You are right. There is a difference between some words (e.g., a certain word used to refer to black people in South Africa that begins with the letter 'k'), which are *always* used in a derogatory way, and 'African', which is not always used in a derogatory way. However, I do not think that this response is adequate. It misses the force of the thought that *enough* uses of the term have been derogatory that we should get rid of the weapon in people's hands. We can draw an analogy here with real weapons: the reason I want to get rid of handguns in America (and South Africa) is that there's just too much bad stuff happening with them; I simply don't care enough about the good ways they are being used.

I think that the jury should still be out on this issue. On the one side, there are those who say that we should get rid of the word. But, on the other side, what about those of us, we will respond, who want to keep the word so that we can speak about the injustices that have been committed and are still being committed upon Africans as a group? But why, the first camp will rejoinder, should we continue to enable a discussion that has been, by and large, offensive?

In any event, however, it must be up to the people who are referred to as 'Africans' to decide whether they want to continue to be referred to in this way,

as a group. If they decide that they simply do not wish to be discussed by outsiders as a group, or if they want another word to be used in its place, then we should respect that. That is the deep and important point behind political correctness: people have the general right to determine how they are being spoken about. Their wishes here must be respected. 'African' is still a contested term. Until there is a consensus on the matter, you should not use the word 'African' to refer to people on the continent, in either a disrespectful or an apparently respectful way.

TM: Yes, if a person I were calling a certain word did not want me to use that word, then I generally should not use it. I can think of exceptions, e.g., if someone is being an arsehole, there are situations where it can be permissible to call him one. But, often enough, and most clearly with folks who have done no wrong, one ought to defer to the wishes of those about whom one is speaking.

Unclarity about how to proceed arises when the word one is using refers to more than one person, and those people have conflicting views. You have suggested that one ought to wait for consensus. However, consensus might never come, and what to do in that case? The best option seems to use the word the way that a large majority of those being spoken about would prefer, while doing what one can to acknowledge the minority's perspective and go out of one's way to put distance between oneself and any derogatory sense of the term. If there is indeed a sizeable minority, then I accept that should do more of the latter than I have up to now.

However, my impression is that there is in fact *not* a sizeable minority

offended by the use of the term 'African' by any given white person, and that indeed consensus in fact has come, so far as it could ever be expected. A number of people over the past decade or so have given me reason to doubt whether the word 'African' is the apt label for my moral theory. However, I can recall only *one* person doubting (in writing or in conversation or otherwise) that I should use it for *the specific reason that whenever a white person uses the word it is offensive*. For all I can tell, it is qualitatively different from other words, particularly one that begins with the letter 'k' in South Africa.

Of course, some other people surely share this one person's judgment about the word 'African'. But the key issue, I submit, is whether the numbers are so large as to warrant constant acknowledgement and qualification. I have not encountered evidence that they are, although I am open to being presented with such.

Consider that self-described 'Africans' often use the label *when naming themselves to a public audience* and thereby invite those who do not describe themselves that way to use the term in a similar manner. The African National Congress and the African Union are just two examples (and then consider all the self-described 'African studies' journals, centres, conferences, etc.). They have never indicated that white people should not call its members by the name 'African Union' or 'African National Congress' because the word 'African' is in the name. Nor is there any sort of movement to get non-Africans to stop using these names.

Notice I am *not* claiming that so long as a certain group uses a word to describe itself, outsiders may use the same word. I do not believe that; the fact

that some African-Americans at times use a word beginning with the letter 'n' to refer to themselves does not give me ethical license to do so. But notice that African-Americans have never to the best of my knowledge created an organization with this word in its name, which would invite others to call them with that word. In contrast, the word 'African' is routinely used by people who describe themselves as 'African' to name themselves for public purposes.

WEJ: You are surely right that there are only a few people who think that white people should not use the word 'African', but it is not really a response to them to say that they are in the minority. You have not spoken to their concern, which is that the word has been and still is used in a demeaning way.

TM: But not by me, and not by the overwhelming majority of people who use the word to label themselves to non-Africans. Above you suggested that it must be up to the people who are referred to as 'Africans' to decide whether they want to continue to be referred to this way, as a group. I agree, and, for all I can tell, they have decided it is OK, despite the reservations of a minority; otherwise, there would be widespread objection to white people using the name 'African National Congress', but there is not.

WEJ: Let us move on to a third criticism of your work:

- If a white person speaks about something 'African', he's being essentialist.

Your usual response to this objection is sensible enough. You say that you do not

claim that *all* traditionally oriented sub-Saharan Africans² have the moral intuitions that you attribute to them. Rather, you say that these moral intuitions are simply prominent. You take essentialism about sub-Saharan Africans to be the position that *all* sub-Saharan Africans have some characteristic, and perhaps necessarily. You disavow yourself from this position, claiming merely that many of them do, or that they are found more often amongst sub-Saharan Africans than amongst other groups (e.g., Europeans). You make not a universal claim about all Africans, but a statistical or percentage generalization about them.

However, I do not think that objectors really care about your distinction between essentialist claims and statistical claims. The statistical claims are still generalizations, and your generalizations about others lie squarely in the moral realm. It is not acceptable to say, 'Black people have rhythm, but I do not mean all of them'. The concern here, as I see it, is that you are working with something uncomfortably related to a stereotype: 'African people have such-and-such moral intuitions, but I do not mean all of them'. Like stereotypes about sub-Saharan Africans, you allow for exceptions. However, perhaps there is something wrong with making even 'most' claims about other races or cultures in some contexts, including a moral context.

What could that be? Perhaps the problem is that your generalizations could themselves become stereotypes, or could become, for someone, explanatorily related to pernicious stereotypes. I can easily imagine someone

² In spite of the previous point, I will continue to use the word 'African' without scare quotes. I have explicitly noted that 'African' is a contested word, and so scare quotes can be assumed throughout my comments.

supporting his stereotype that sub-Saharan Africans have too many children with your (anthropologically gained) generalization that sub-Saharan Africans highly value family. Or imagine someone supporting his stereotype that sub-Saharan Africans are not good leaders with your (anthropologically gained) generalization that sub-Saharan Africans seek consensus in leadership, along with the (very dubious) claim that good leadership requires decision-making in the face of dissent. Your generalizations about other people's moral identities have an uncomfortable relationship to stereotypes.

I think that there are complicated and sensitive issues here about generalizing across cultures and the dangers of stereotyping. It is a fraught area in which people rightly worry about the dangers of disrespecting other people's individuality. At issue here is not the truth of your generalizations. They may be true. The danger is in the use to which they are being put in your work. As Lawrence Blum writes, 'Some moral distortions are common to all stereotypes – moral distancing, failing to see members of the stereotyped group as individuals, and failing to see diversity within that group' (2004: 251). What Blum claims on behalf of stereotypes holds for generalizations in general, especially those about other persons' identities. Generalizing about peoples' identities creates moral distance, and hides the individuality and diversity amongst the people whom you are describing. Generalizing about the ethical lives of sub-Saharan Africans amounts to a misguided relationship with them. Generalizations about identity, even if true, homogenize a group, and lead us, from the outside, to disregard particularity and difference of identity within the group.

It would have been better, in this regard, for you not to have spoken of

your theory as an ‘African’ moral theory, but rather for you to have spoken of it as a theory grounded in imaginary intuitions, or a theory grounded in certain persons’ intuitions, persons who – it need not and should not be said – happen to be African. It would have been better to call it, say, a ‘Desmond Tutu moral theory’ rather than an ‘African moral theory’.

TM: As I’ve said above, when using the term ‘African’ I am not trying to capture the identities of contemporary people who call themselves ‘African’. Towards the start of your remarks you acknowledge that I am aiming to capture salient features of many cultures in a particularly large space-time, often called ‘pre-colonial’, ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ sub-Saharan Africa, but then later on characterize my project as making ‘generalizations about other people’s moral identities’. I think there is a difference, certainly conceptually and probably morally, about these projects.

I am glad you accept that I am not guilty of the sin of essentialism. If the word ‘African’, as I and social theorists tend to use it, merely picks out features that are characteristic of that place, then it is clearly possible for these features to be present neither universally in Africa, nor necessarily there (nor only there). What counts as ‘African’ can (and of course does) change, at least over a span of time. But you are right there remain deep and compelling concerns. In particular, you have identified real issues regarding stereotyping and, more broadly, failing to treat people as particular individuals or groups.

It is true that I do not focus on differences amongst sub-Saharan individuals and peoples in my published work. I had to focus on them when I was

learning about various thinkers and cultures below the Sahara; for just two examples, I took cognizance of the differences between spirits recognized by the Shona and Ndebele peoples in Zimbabwe, as well as differences between Yoruba and Igbo cosmologies in Nigeria. However, the project of constructing a plausible general moral principle out of recurrent features in sub-Saharan Africa over a long span of time has indeed meant glossing such particularities in my research. The question, now, is whether that evinces a kind of character flaw (and, if so, whether it is nonetheless justified all things considered by some other, moral consideration).

First off, note that I do not believe that the project of developing such a moral theory is immoral by virtue of *my expressing* stereotypes or other derogatory characterizations of African peoples. Notice how you have had to add onto my original ways of speaking in order to raise this concern; you have spoken of ‘someone’ making claims that I simply do not make.

Now, I do accept that *others* could put my research to use for nefarious purposes (as, say, Social Darwinists did with respect to the theory of natural selection), that my work could unintentionally *enable someone* to express stereotypes. And I accept that I have a responsibility to go out of my way to do what I can to prevent that (which I have done in papers and talks on occasion, but perhaps not enough) as well as to rebut misuse if and when it occurs (so far, so good, so far as I know). However, these points are consistent with the idea that I am morally permitted, and not being vicious, to engage in the project of developing a moral theory grounded on salient sub-Saharan mores.

You make the interesting suggestion that instead of calling the moral

theory 'African', I should have called it 'Desmond Tutu's'. That would be a way of acknowledging particularity, you suggest.

However, it is not well described that way. For one, it's not Tutu's *theory*; he is not engaged in the project of systematically advancing a basic principle that plausibly entails and best explains a wide array of less controversial judgments about right and wrong action and that would find resonance not merely amongst traditionally oriented Africans, but more broadly.

For another, it's not *Tutu's theory*; although I have drawn on his remarks about harmony, there are many other thinkers who have made similar comments and whose work I have cited, drawn upon and otherwise considered. For example, others who are naturally read as having placed harmonious relationships at the centre of their peoples' moral thought, and often sub-Saharan thought more generally, include: the South Africans Mogobe Ramose, Nhlanhla Mkhize and Yvonne Mokgoro; the Zimbabweans Munyaradzi Felix Murove and Nisbert Taringa; the Kenyans Henry Odera Oruka and Dismas Masolo; and the Nigerians Egbeke Aja and Pantaleon Iroegbu (citations available on request). And then there are also Euro-American anthropologists, sociologists and the like whom I could cite. The greater the number of people beyond Tutu who have made his point independent of him, the less the point should be ascribed to him in particular, and should be characterized more broadly.

Furthermore, I have repeatedly made a point in my work, including in the first article on African ethics, that there are a variety of candidates for an African moral theory. Although I favour a certain secular conception of harmony as grounding the most attractive one, I have routinely pointed out that there are

welfarist, vitalist and religious strains of thought that exist in the sub-Saharan tradition and that also deserve philosophical attention.

WEJ: Let us move on to a fourth criticism of your project:

- An analytic philosophical method is unAfrican, and is rather a Western ‘scientific’ importation; indeed, it is a colonial suppression of an African method.

Your usual reply to this objection is that it is simply a matter of generalizing intuitions into a single normative statement. What could be simpler, and plainer? This reply is disingenuous. This is not really your fault; it is a problem with the whole culture of analytic philosophy. We analytic philosophers are terrible about wearing our agendas and our methodological tools on our sleeves. We are too ready to say, ‘I’m just thinking clearly, nothing more; anyone could do this’. We forget all about the history behind us which taught us that the very particular things we are doing are worth doing.

We could talk about the methodological *tools* you use: reflective equilibrium is not a universal approach to moral intuitions; you got it from the work of John Rawls. But the tools you use are intimately wrapped up with your aim. You have a seriously focused agenda. You got your agenda - that of boiling down a whole moral system to a single normative statement - from a precise point deep in your culture: Immanuel Kant’s *Grundlagen*. Your project is deeply Western.

The point is that what you end up with cannot be an *African portrayal* of a moral system. It is a Western portrayal – perhaps, a Western appropriation – of

an African moral system. The title of your original paper is starting to look like it overreaches. An 'African Moral Theory' is ambiguous between 'a moral theory based on lower-level African moral norms' and 'a moral *theory* that is African (whatever that would look like)'. The concern is that what you achieve cannot be the latter. The criticism here is: What you are doing is not the way Africans would approach, engage with, or attempt to portray their own moral landscape. It is seeing another culture in the way that Kant saw his own; it is 'Kanting' another culture. However, you felt, and continue to feel, that it is important that you call this theory 'African'. But the *theory* is not African. It is a deeply Western attempt to portray a set of African ethical norms.

Is it wrong for you to do so? As my sympathy with the previous intuition indicates, I have particularist leanings, and so I look kindly on the thought that generalizations like the one you cull from sub-Saharan practices distort moral thought. However, the objection here lies in the possibility that sub-Saharan Africans might also have particularist leanings, and find in your theory a distortion of their preferred way of being in the moral world. This problem, as I see it, arises only in so far as you present your theory *back* to sub-Saharan Africans, for them to accept as a useful and appropriate representation of their moral lives. In doing so, you are asking them to accept a distinctly Western treatment of their own moral system. This is where the concern about suppression of African thought comes into play. In so far as you are vying for position as a contender representation of sub-Saharan African morality, you are shouldering out African's own, distinct representations of their moral landscape.

I think that this concern has considerable force, with regard to how you

describe what you are doing. This brings us back to the question of the appropriateness of the title of your original paper – ‘Toward an African Moral Theory’. This concern – indeed all of these concerns – would have gone away if you had just published your paper as a new ethical theory that you wanted to explore, perhaps starting with your favoured quotation from Tutu.

TM: Two points, here. First, I need to distance myself from the repeated characterization of my favoured theory as a ‘representation’ of African morality. It is not, and was never intended to be. Although there have been some in the literature who have suggested that something akin to my moral theory is in fact an accurate *description* of traditional African morality, I do not present it as that (and, given my distance from appeal to ancestors and related spiritual elements, I could not plausibly do so). Instead, I have said that my favoured principle is *prescriptive*; it is one that ought to be believed as capturing the way people ought to treat each other.

WEJ: Let me interrupt, before you move onto your second point. You *have* to take yourself to be *describing* African moral thought. Otherwise, you would not call your theory an ‘African’ moral theory. It cannot plausibly be an African moral theory if it does not in any way capture African moral thought.

TM: Yes, the theory must be *continuous* with African worldviews in order to merit the label. But that is different from having to accurately represent them in full in order to merit it.

Now, let me return to my second thought. While it is true that there is a noticeable particularist strain amongst African thinkers, it is not the only method that one encounters in the literature. I can cite about a couple dozen different African philosophers, theologians and the like who have approximated the project of systematically advancing a favoured moral theory. Here are some quotations to give the reader a taste:

- 'Individuals are good in so far as they fulfil their duties to promote, support and protect the vital force within the community' (Kasenene 1994: 141, on southern African morality; cf. Kasenene 1998: 21, 67).

- '(E)very Akan maxim about the specifically moral values that I know, explicitly or implicitly, postulates the harmonization of interests as the means, and the securing of human well-being as the end, of all moral endeavour' (Wiredu 1996: 65).

- '(T)he strengthening and the growth of life are the fundamental criteria....Usually, only that kind of behavior which leads to the building up of the community is morally good' (Bujo 1997: 27, on African ethics).

- 'The conclusion that Africans are persistently in search of harmony in all spheres of life is pertinently true of African thought....This speaks to the *ubuntu* understanding of cosmic harmony. It must be preserved and maintained by translating it into in all spheres of life' (Ramose 1999: 59, 64).

- 'In no way is any thought, word or act understood except in terms of good and bad, in the sense that such an attitude or behavior either enhances or diminishes life' (Magesa 1997: 58, on ethics in Eastern Africa).

- '(O)ne should always live and behave in a way that maximises harmonious existence at present as well as in the future' (Murove 2007: 181, on Shona ethics).

- 'African morality originates from considerations of human welfare and interests, not from divine pronouncements. Actions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad....' (Gyekye 2010).

This list is not at all exhaustive, and I cite in my forthcoming book (Metz 2016) many other African thinkers, including Tutu (1999: 35) of course, who make similar kinds of comprehensive claims. Far from importing Kant (or Kelsen, as per Mogobe Ramose's severe criticism of my work), African philosophers themselves have often appreciated the search for system (perhaps including Ramose himself on occasion, it would seem, given the quote above). I view my work as an extension of what they have begun, in a prescriptive direction in contrast to what has often been a descriptive one on their part.

However, suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were importing a non-African method and applying it to an African content. To advance some kind of novel, hybrid philosophy need not be to 'suppress' or 'shoulder out' other approaches. I have not presented my work as the only way to interpret African

normative ideas. I have instead tried to make it clear that I have a specific aim in mind, viz., the aim of constructing a moral theory informed by salient indigenous sub-Saharan values and norms that would give a global audience something to rival Western theories, an aim that I do not suggest that others must adopt.

To be sure, I argue that my favoured principle is the best moral *theory*. However, that is not to imply that it is the best, let alone solely viable, *philosophy*, which might not be 'theoretical' in my sense.

I hope that readers would be pluralists with me and agree that there should be space for a variety of approaches to a subject matter. In particular, focusing on the general should be seen as complementary to focusing on the particular; what is to stop one from doing both, and in light of one another?

WEJ: Pluralism aside, we are dealing with *your* moral theory, and whether it deserves the moniker 'African'. You respond to this criticism by citing African authors who take the Kantian approach to theorizing moral theory. The proponent of this critique of your work will simply say that this points to the legacy of the Kantian approach in African moral thought. These authors, like you, are steeped in Western thought. As you asserted above, Kant looms over African thought.

Your response, in consequence, says little to the original concern. Before Kant, authors did not engage in this pursuit. Plato and Aristotle, for example, did not; Hobbes and Hume did not. How can your theory be an African moral theory when it is so Kantian? And we can press a related question of both you

and Kant: Who is to say that the sub-Saharan African on the street is at all inclined to work with a systematized single statement of the kind that you offer?

TM: I read you as making two criticisms, that my approach objectionably eclipses other ones, and that it does not deserve the label 'African'. So, I think my response above is clearly relevant with regard to the first point.

Regarding the second, it is true that indigenous African peoples, and their philosophers, tended not to engage in normative ethical theorization of the systematic sort for which I aim. And, so, given the way I usually employ the term 'African', as picking out salient features over a long span of time in a certain region (not as the way contemporary people on the street understand themselves), my *method* might well not count. That's a fair point.

However, my ethical *philosophy* is a combination of a certain method and a certain content, and my suggestion is that the latter has such a clearly sub-Saharan pedigree that my philosophy merits the title on balance. I made this kind of point a while back with an analogy (Metz 2007b: 376, from which the rest of this paragraph borrows). Suppose Western science (bracket for now the controversy about such a phrase) showed that a certain plant indigenous solely to South Africa has healing powers. I submit that it would be sensible to call the treatment a 'South African' one, despite the existence of a Western proof that it is effective. Similarly, I am trying to show that a moral principle grounded on norms and values salient below the Sahara desert can be justified by using the methods of analytic philosophy. The method alone, supposing it is 'Western', should not be sufficient to disqualify the defended philosophy as 'African'.

WEJ: Finally, let us move on to a fifth moral criticism of your work:

- A white person should not talk about things ‘African’, since doing so occludes Africans from speaking about themselves.

We end with the most personal concern of the bunch. The best way to read this objection is not really that you *occlude* someone else from working on this topic. As you often say, you do not *prevent* anyone from working on any topic they please, and you have even helped others to develop and publish their own, competing views. Rather, the problem is that you are doing it *instead* of someone else.

As much as I value the work you have done, I guess that I find something to regret in the fact that it was not done by someone else. Philosophy is at its most important (and profound) when it is reflective, and so it would have been better for it to have been a reflective, insider achievement. It would have been a different kind of achievement, but an achievement to be applauded in a way beyond your achievement. This is not to say that you should not have done the work that you have done. This objection need not say that at all. However, it is to lament that it was you, and not someone else, who has done it.

TM: Yes, I feel the force of that last sentence.

It is worth reflecting on why we have this inclination. I presume we do not feel this way, or at least not to the same degree, about the great Italian filmmakers who captured American culture so brilliantly or the German social

theorists who did so upon having escaped the Nazis and moved to New York and California. We do not think that it would have been (much) better had Americans rather made the films and written the books.

The difference is probably that we route for the underdog, the one who has been oppressed, has not received adequate acknowledgement, apology and compensation for the oppression, and indeed has continued to be wronged in serious ways. Part of the oppression has been epistemic, as has been poignantly described by various African thinkers as a process of ‘spiritual genocide’ (Vilakazi 1998: 76), ‘cultural violence’ (Odora Hoppers 2000: 5), ‘symbolic castration’ (2001: 74) and ‘epistemicide’ (Ramose 2004: 156). We want the one *oppressed* to overcome the oppression; it would make for a better narrative for those people’s agency to be what does the job.

In reply, notice that wishing that someone else had undertaken this project does not necessarily mean that my having done so was base or otherwise immoral. To regret and to lament are not to resent (and, so, it is not clear that I need to repent!).

However, one might suggest (as a thoughtful anonymous referee has) that I was lacking virtue in failing to be patient and to let someone else take centre stage. Should I have waited for Africans to articulate and express their own moral vision and to send it to the rest of the world? Did I objectionably deny them a special moment in undertaking my project?

I have three things to say in response. First, my work is plainly not the first to bring indigenous sub-Saharan ideas to an English-speaking audience. Africans such as Bénézet Bujo, Kwame Gyekye, Pauline Hountondji, John Mbiti,

Kwame Nkrumah, Henry Odera Oruka, Mogobe Ramose, Léopold Senghor, Godwin Sogolo and Kwasi Wiredu developed sophisticated philosophies grounded on traditional African perspectives and published book-length statements of them in English in the 20th century (citations available on request). My philosophy is different from theirs, and I have sought to publish in places they have not. However, it is overblown to speak of Metz as having been the first to set foot on the moon of a globalized African philosophy.

Second, it is not clear that my particular philosophy could have been easily done by someone else, at least not soon. My publications are the result of a pretty idiosyncratic background: an activist American teenager who found the early Marx, the Situationist International and the anarcho-syndicalist tradition politically compelling; an undergraduate who heavily studied sociological theory, the Frankfurt School and Kant's three *Critiques*; a graduate student who learned analytic philosophy and came to accept the causal theory of linguistic reference and (following from that) both scientific and moral realism; a young lecturer whose tenure requirements were stiff, requiring him to learn how to publish in certain kinds of fora; a man in love who relocated to South Africa and spent more than a decade there; a professor who deemed himself obligated to teach the sub-Saharan tradition to his African students; and a research professor with time on his hands to write and resources with which to network. And then there are considerations of psychology and character, too. Perhaps it would not have been likely that someone else would have published what I have.

For a third and final point, note that it is difficult to make this present, fifth criticism while also accepting the previous criticisms. There is a tension in

claiming both that my project should not have been undertaken in the way it has been, which the first four criticisms amount to saying, and that my project should have been undertaken but by someone other than me. If the reader finds this last concern to be particularly strong, then she is logically committed to thinking that the previous criticisms are weak.³

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