

# A Rejection of Humanism in African Moral Tradition

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*Abstract:* In this article, I motivate for the view that the best account of the foundations of morality in the African tradition should be grounded on some relevant spiritual property – a view that I call ‘ethical supernaturalism’. In contrast to this position, the literature has been dominated by humanism as the best interpretation of African ethics, which typically is accompanied by a direct rejection of ‘ethical supernaturalism’ and a veiled rejection of non-naturalism (Gyekye 1995: 129–43; Metz 2007: 328; Wiredu 1992: 194–6). Here primarily, by appeal to methods of analytic philosophy, which privileges analysis and (moral) argumentation, I set out to challenge and repudiate humanism as the best interpretation of African ethics; I leave it for a future project to develop a fully fledged African spiritual meta-ethical theory.

*Keywords:* ethical supernaturalism, humanism, meta-ethics, moral status, vitality

## Introduction

The debate about whether African ethics is best interpreted as religious or secular is dominated by the latter position. A secular interpretation of foundations of African morality is typically described in terms of ‘humanism’<sup>1</sup> – the literature visibly favours humanism as the best interpretation of African ethics,<sup>2</sup> and this position is accompanied by a direct rejection of ‘ethical supernaturalism’<sup>3</sup> – the view that morality is grounded on some spiritual property and a veiled rejection of non-naturalism.<sup>4</sup> In this article, primarily, I reject the claim that a secular humanism best interprets African ethics. Furthermore, I will content myself, in this instance, to merely motivate, note, not argue for, ethical supernaturalism – I leave it for a future project to develop a fully fledged African spiritual meta-ethical theory.<sup>5</sup>

I reject humanism as a basis for African ethics because it fails to capture some of the prevalent thoughts and intuitions we Africans typically have about our duties towards the natural environment – the idea that, in some sense, we are one substance with nature (Murove 2007) and that some aspects of nature matter for their own sakes to some degree. I observe that a truly African ethics



must cohere with a holistic and supernaturalist tenor that often characterises African ontology, which in turn demands that we accord moral status to some aspects of the environment, like animals, for their own sakes.<sup>6</sup> I show that humanistic moral theories in the sub-Saharan tradition have much more difficulty ascribing fundamental moral consideration to nature for its own sake. This failure on the part of humanism, as defended by many scholars of African (moral) thought, warrants its rejection as it departs from the web of interconnectedness and interdependence that characterises African thought. This failure is interesting given that it appears that these scholars are also committed to granting some moral standing to some aspects of nature (Metz 2012: 387–402), but their human-centred ethical accounts renders them unable to do so.

I first inform the reader about the method of enquiry I will use in this article. This is a philosophical enquiry, in that it seeks to go beyond merely rehearsing anthropological and historical claims about what Africans actually believed, important as these might be. I seek an account that is both African, namely one which draws from indigenous intellectual resources and one that is also philosophically plausible. I appeal to the techniques of analytic philosophy, which are characterised both by conceptual analysis and by evaluation of (moral) arguments. All things being equal, I favour an account that is both African and philosophically plausible. Whilst I grant that humanism may reflect certain features of African cultures, as a matter of anthropological fact, I argue the position is nevertheless philosophically untenable.<sup>7</sup>

To demonstrate the implausibility of humanism within the African moral tradition, I structure this article as follows. In the first section, I define humanism and show how it typically reveals itself in the literature on African ethics by considering the theories of Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Wiredu and Thad Metz, respectively. In the second section, I show how humanistic accounts fail to accommodate a dominant conception of African metaphysics, which I understand to be tri-logical, insofar as spiritual, social and environmental aspects are held to constitute one reality. In the final section, I motivate, though I do not argue, for ethical supernaturalism as a viable and probably plausible alternative to a humanist account of African ethics, insofar as it best accommodates our duties to some aspects of the environment.

### **Defining (Secular) Humanism**

In teasing out humanism, I consider the works of three influential African scholars: Wiredu,<sup>8</sup> Gyekye<sup>9</sup> and Metz.<sup>10</sup> I consider these three scholars based on their influence and the quality of their work in the African tradition. Gyekye defines ‘humanism’ as the ‘the doctrine that sees human needs, interests and dignity as fundamental, thus constitutes the foundation for Akan morality’ (1995: 143). Thus, according to Gyekye, one cannot meaningfully and sufficiently talk about morality unless one has made essential reference to some

human properties, specifically human needs, interests and dignity. We need not now resolve the question of which, among these three properties mentioned by Gyekye, is the foundational property. It suffices to observe that some human property is a foundation for morality.

Like Gyekye, Wiredu defines ‘humanism’ as the claim that ‘it is a human being that has value’ (Wiredu 1992: 194); or, as he puts it in another place, ‘the first axiom of all Akan axiological thinking is that man or woman is the measure of all value’ (Wiredu 1996: 65). According to Wiredu, the source and sit of all value, including moral value, is found in a human person. Metz, on his part, describes his view as ‘ethical naturalism’ (2007: 328), but never quite identifies his view as based on facts about human beings, although he implies humanism – as I will show below.

So, we aptly observe that humanism is a meta-ethical claim – a view about the nature of moral properties – that the source of all moral value is essentially inherent in some human property or fact, hence natural/physical and secular. I note and emphasise that these authors deliberately sever God or any spiritual entity as responsible for the relevant moral property that inheres in human beings. In other words, in the absence of human beings there is no legitimate ground to talk about morality even if God were to be present in the world. All other aspects of reality, the supernatural and the natural (environment) are morally neutral; morality is only possible when there are human beings.

I do not wish to give the reader a false impression that it is not possible to talk of a non-secular humanism in the African tradition, and other traditions. But, here, I am addressing myself to a dominant (view in the literature) but problematic secular humanism that interprets morality purely in terms of some human property. Thinkers like Benezet Bujo (2005), Laurentia Magesa (1997), Augustine Shutte (2001) (and others) appear to be articulating a spiritual humanism. But, it is not a task of this article to consider this spiritual moral vision.

### **Three Humanistic Theories in the African Tradition**

#### *Gyekye’s Humanistic Ethics*

I think it is best to interpret Gyekye’s moral theory as flowing from his ontological conception of human nature, which is dualistic: individuality (autonomy) and community (common good). This interpretation is best borne out in his defence of what he calls ‘moderate communitarianism’, a view he propounds as a response to what he considers to be ‘extreme communitarianism’ (1995: 39). The latter view, according to Gyekye, has been advocated by African leaders after independence and finds philosophical expression in the works of a Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004: 324–8<sup>11</sup>). Gyekye identifies one major problem with ‘extreme communitarianism’: this view

defines a person as entirely constituted by social relations and as a result tends to overlook the individual aspects of a person, which in turn implies that this theory has no place for (individual) human rights (1995: 39).

On his part, Gyekye favours a conception of communitarianism which at heart balances the individual and communal aspects of a human person, a view he believes to be consistent with basic human (individual) rights. In this regard he states:

The restricted communitarianism offers a more appropriate and adequate account of the self ... in that it addresses the dual features of the self: as a communal being and as ... autonomous ... (Gyekye 1992: 113).

In his later statement of moderate communitarianism, he avers:

The view seems to represent a clear attempt to come to terms with the natural sociality as well as the individuality of the human person. It requires the recognition of communality and individuality ... I think the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the *status of equal moral standing* (Gyekye 1995: 41, emphasis mine).

It is interesting to note that Gyekye believes that these supposed ontological properties that constitute a self are also a basis for determining moral value.<sup>12</sup> In other words, humanity itself, or some understanding of what it means to be human, is a function of morality: the human feature of *autonomy* grounds dignity, as a fundamental moral fact, and that of *community* grounds welfare as a basic moral fact.<sup>13</sup> If my interpretation of Gyekye is true, then his is truly a humanistic ethics.

#### *Wiredu's Humanistic Ethics*

To elucidate on his moral theory, Wiredu appeals to an Akan maxim – ‘it is a human being who has value’ (1992: 194) – which when correctly construed amounts to two moral claims:

Through the first meaning the message is imparted that all value derives from human interests and through the second that human fellowship is the most important of human needs (ibid.).

From this quotation it is clear that value – in fact, as an ardent reader would have observed, Wiredu states that *all* value, and I may add, moral value – derives from human interests. Thus, moral value on Wiredu's ethics is derived on some facts, interests or welfare, about human beings – I observe that Wiredu in his writings uses the words ‘interests’ and ‘welfare’ interchangeably (Wiredu 1992: 194; 1996: 65; 2004: 18). The source or foundation of morality is some human property: welfare.

### *Metz's Humanistic Ethics*

In terms of moral foundations, Metz favours a secular ethics, which he describes as 'ethical naturalism'. On face value, it is not clear what natural item in the furniture of the world will serve as a basis for his naturalistic ethical theory. His proclivity towards humanism is indicated by his endorsement of humanistic interpretations by Gyekye and Wiredu (Metz 2007: 328, special attention to footnote 25). Metz's clearest statement of humanism is found in his theory of moral status (2011: 387–402). In this particular article, he defends a 'modal–relationist' interpretation of moral status. On this account, some entity has moral status insofar as it has the ability to commune with human beings in a particular way. The relevant relational property that qualifies some entity for a full moral status is essentially a human feature. Human beings thus serve a basis for determining the moral standing of other entities. Metz defends this conception of moral status thus:

Below I contend that the most promising kind of relationalism is one according to which something has moral status insofar as it has a certain relation to human beings in particular ... (2011: 390).

I advise the reader to note that, according to Metz, the moral standing of non-human entities, say animals, is not a function of their possessing the relevant interactive moral property but a function of how they can commune with human beings who alone have this relevant moral property. We may ask here: why must a possession of moral status (on the part of animals for example) depend on relations with human beings? In the same article, Metz observes:

The theory might appear to be anthropocentric in that it cashes out moral status in terms of certain human capacities. To be able to be an object of a communal relationship, on this view, is analysed in terms of a capacity to relate to normal human beings in a certain way. *And so there is an irreducible appeal to humanity in its conception of moral status* (2011: 390, emphasis mine).

So, Metz explains moral status by appeal to some fact about a human being, that is the capacity for friendliness. Other entities have moral status insofar as they can be included in communal relations with human beings, but, other than that, they have no independent moral standing. On this account of moral status, if there were no human beings then there could be no talk of moral status at all since such a talk depends on some moral property which is essentially human. On this view, even if Martians may have the relevant capacity for friendliness towards other beings, like animals, they nevertheless cannot be objects or subjects of friendship with human beings, for whatever odd biological reason they have no moral status. To have moral status, Metz is unequivocal, there is an irreducible appeal to humanity. I leave it for another project to show the implausibility of this conception of moral status insofar as it is not African and insofar as it fails to provide a satisfactory argument. It is suffi-

cient, however, for the purposes of this article to note the humanistic moral grounds entailed by Metz's conception of moral status.

I now proceed to reject humanism as a meta-ethical theory in the African moral tradition.

### **Rejection of Humanism**

I reject the claim that rightness and wrongness (or, morality) are definable only in terms of some human property(s), be it their interests, welfare or friendliness. My argument is predicated on certain fundamental intuitions that generally characterise African thought – that all reality is interconnected and interdependent. This argument will be successful only if one holds the view that some aspects of nature matter for their own sake, that is on facts independent of human beings.<sup>14</sup> I advance an argument that seeks to restore and protect the moral standing of some aspects of nature, since such an approach best coheres with an African metaphysics, which is typically represented as holistic and spiritual. By 'holism' I am referring to the claim that social (human), natural (environment) and spiritual (God, ancestors and spirits) communities are interdependent and interrelated (Bujo 2005: 424). This view is best captured thus: 'Everything – God, ancestors, humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects – is connected, interdependent and interrelated' (Verhoef and Michel 1997: 395). According to this dominant conception of African metaphysics, there is no place for separating these three categories of reality. The human is not seen as separate and above, but is considered to be an intrinsic part of this interconnected whole (Tangwa 2004: 389).

My major argument is that these humanistic accounts give an interpretation of African ethics that stands outside of this holistic metaphysical understanding. Metz, for his part, completely severs his moral theory from any supernatural considerations, though he believes his principle of right action can inform one about how to relate to these spiritual beings (2007: 328). Gyekye and Wiredu, interestingly, though they advocate a naturalist ethics, withdraw from this African metaphysics when it suits them<sup>15</sup> (for example, see in Deng 2004: 501). Thus, my challenge is to maintain consistency, in that, if Gyekye and Wiredu seek to articulate naturalist (humanist) moral theories, these theories must be consistent with the metaphysics that grounds it. I further challenge Metz seriously to reconsider the African status of the metaphysics that informs his ethical theory, whether it is African or non-African, if it is his quest to articulate a view that has an African pedigree (Metz 2007: 324). To facilitate my argument for rejecting humanism, I employ the following case.

#### *Animal Torture and Humanism*

I ask you to consider these two cases of animal torture. I imagine a Thabo who enjoys microwaving cats just for the fun of it. Or, I imagine Thabo taking

pleasure in throwing chimpanzees or some animal from a tall building. These two cases in my opinion are clear instances of animal torture. It is my strongly held intuition, and of many others, that this act is not only morally wrong but also wrongs the animals in question. But, for this intuition to be acceptable, one must be committed to the claim that animals morally matter for their own sakes, that is they have some moral status – I will define this phrase below.

The heart of my argument is that secular humanism, as represented by these three influential theories, fail to give a plausible account of why Thabo's act of torturing these animals is wrong. If they do give a plausible account, they nonetheless give an unsatisfactory rationale. With regards to this case, I work on the assumption that a plausible moral account in African ethics ought to grant animals some moral status. This is why we who hold an African understanding of metaphysics find the above cases to be morally abhorrent. My position in this regard is grounded on my commitment to a certain understanding of African metaphysics.

'Moral status' is the idea that some aspects of nature, for example, in this case, cats or chimpanzees, are owed some (direct) moral duty on the basis of some moral consideration (Behrens 2011: 87). This talk of moral status serves as a normative parameter that defines what is permissible or impermissible with regards to our treatment of some aspects of nature (Toscano 2011: 14). Metz holds that talk of moral status is two-pronged: on the one hand, it is a claim about the *wrongness* of the act, that is breaking some moral code; and, on the other, it is about *wronging* the entity in question, that is making it worse off (Metz 2011: 389).

Thus, a theory of moral status must specify the relevant moral feature(s) in virtue of which some aspects of nature have moral status and others do not. Some accounts of moral status are *individualist* (they locate the relevant moral property on some internal feature of the entity in question, like memory, consciousness, rationality etc.); some are *holist* (they locate the relevant moral property on the group itself, like the ecosystem) and some accounts explain moral status by appeal to some *relational* property, like care, friendliness or love (Behrens 2011: 70).

The key issue for me with regards to humanism of whatever interpretation is: can it account for the moral status of animals, for example, without appeal to some facts or consequences for human beings? Thus, I am asking, or rather arguing that secular humanism fails to secure the idea that the act of torturing animals is wrong and wrongs the animal in question by appeal to some facts about the animal itself. Humanism, I hope to show, by its very nature does not have the *corpus* to grant animals an intrinsic moral status, that is animals cannot be good in and of themselves, insofar as humanism only grants animals moral standing that is predicated on some instrumental relationship with human beings or by derivation from some human fact. This kind of ethics, I argue, fails plausibly to capture the idea that animals matter for their own

sakes in African ethics. Environmental ethics emerged as a rejection to such human-centred theories of value (Murove 2004: 196).

If all moral value is somehow essentially derived from human beings, it is not clear how and why we can say that Thabo is doing something wrong and is wronging the poor chimpanzees. It appears that common sense morality presses upon us to say something wrong is going on here. One famous line of defence for the animal is Immanuel Kant's claim to the effect that animals, for example, are valuable only indirectly (1996: 296). At the heart of this defence is the claim that torturing animals, on the part of a human being, will harden the heart and predispose one to be so cruel to human beings. One is enjoined not to harm animals as that would hurt her humanity. Thus, 'We disrespect our humanity when we act in inhumane ways towards non-persons, whatever their species' (Lori 2014).

This line of reason is interesting, but I doubt it will do the job. It fails to explain the wrong in question by appeal to some facts about the victim, the animal. The key question is: is the animal being wronged when it is tortured for fun? My intuition is that, yes it is being wronged. The indirect defence does not at all concern itself with the animal; it focuses entirely on the human person. Furthermore, we can suppose, for argument's sake, that Thabo will not develop a cruel disposition towards other human beings, his humanity will be intact. Does this mean the act of torturing animals is justified? The indirect defence, I observe, does not quite do the job of securing the moral status of animals.

I proceed to consider whether these three scholars can offer an account that shows the wrong in question with regards to animal torture, such that the animals matters for its own sake.

The challenge for Wiredu and Gyekye is almost similar, and so I consider them together initially – though I think the best reading of Wiredu is that he advocates what I dub 'humanistic-welfare' and Gyekye 'humanistic-dignity'. One possible response by Wiredu and Gyekye would be to include in their account, of that which has moral status, all aspects of nature that have a capacity for welfare. If they adopt this line of reason, then, what makes some entity morally valuable is its capacity for welfare; and, thus, dogs, human beings, cats morally matter because they all share a capacity for welfare. If they make this move, however, it immediately damages the humanist basis of their views. They must then also be willing to change their positions, to base moral values not on *human* interests/needs but on the interests or the needs of any entity which has the capacity for welfare. It appears that what does the work of accounting for moral status is not some human property per se but the relevant moral property, which can also be had by animals and also extra-terrestrial beings like Martians. Grounding moral status on some capacity for welfare itself is tantamount to rejection of humanism.

The virtue of basing moral status on some relevant moral property and not human beings per se is that it allows animals to have moral status for their



own sake. It is wrong to torture a cat for fun because one would be making it worse off, that is wronging it or not respecting its capacity for welfare. But, Wiredu and Gyekye cannot comfortably take this line of reasoning, more so Wiredu, since it goes against the assertion that all moral value is derived from human beings.

The above argument, however, does more damage to Wiredu's 'humanistic-welfare' than it does to Gyekye's 'humanistic-dignity'. Wiredu's humanism only traces welfare, whereas Gyekye's traces two moral properties: welfare and dignity; thus, Gyekye's ethical account is dualist. The claim by Gyekye would thus be: animals morally matter for their own sakes since they are susceptible to welfare, they have partial moral status, but only human beings have full moral status since they also have dignity. This interpretation of Gyekye appears to save secular humanism. But, I argue that humanistic-dignity is attended by a unique problem: one of lack of *specificity* (is dignity best interpreted as based on a naturalist or supernaturalist property?) and of *identity* (to what extent does his appeal to dignity *qua* autonomy still make his account one that we can comfortably refer to as 'African' humanism).

I start with the *specificity* problem. Gyekye is committed to the notion of dignity as a central feature of a human person but he appears to be non-committal about the metaphysics that grounds this stance (Metz 2012: 63). In his first statement of his commitment to dignity and human rights, he mentions both the Christian conception of dignity *qua* the image of God and the naturalist conception of dignity *qua* autonomy as defended by Kant (Gyekye 1992: 114). If he appeals to a supernaturalist account of dignity then he is involved in a direct inconsistency (Gyekye 1992: 114) since he wants to defend a secular moral grounding; and, if he appeals to autonomy, a natural property, then he is stuck with the fact that he has no *African* metaphysical basis for this conception of dignity. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to borrow ideas from other cultures. My contention, however, is that this borrowing, on the part of Gyekye, results from a failure to articulate an ethics grounded on an African metaphysics. It is this failure that provokes the need to borrow alien concepts.

If Gyekye settles for autonomy as a basis for dignity, for the sake of consistency of seeking a natural interpretation of morality, as his writings do, in his elaboration of a self that is constituted by autonomy and communality, then one is tempted to accuse this account of being not *appropriately* African (1995: 54). Though his account, as characterised by dignity *qua* autonomy, is humanistic, I observe that it fails to be an *African* humanism. I am not claiming that for a view to be 'African' it must be devoid of foreign or alien elements – there is no such a thing as a pure culture. The essence of my argument is based on Gyekye's 'criteria of what would count as genuine African philosophy' (1995: 7). I observe he fails his own test.

Interestingly, Gyekye articulates a criterion of what is to count as a genuine African theory. His criterion stipulates two conditions. Firstly, African philosophy is to be generally derived from some 'African cultural and historical

experience' (1995: 7). This implies that there must be some historical or anthropological basis for grounding a position as African; it must be traceable to some facets of African culture (see also Metz 2007: 323–4). Secondly, foreign or alien elements may also be considered as part of African philosophy; but, this can be the case only if they meet certain conditions: they (foreign items) must in the unfolding of time be so infused in the stream of African culture that they will lose their alien status, that is future generations of African culture must lose sight of their alien status; and, lastly they must be accepted by the general population of the recipient culture rather than merely by its elite (Gyekye 1995: 8).

It is obvious to me that the notion of autonomy, which is a dominant Western moral concept, which grounds an influential moral and political system in its culture, is foreign to Africa (Kant 1996: 434–5). And, it is also empirically true that this notion of autonomy has not met the conditions specified by Gyekye himself before it can rightly qualify as 'African' so as to ground African humanism.<sup>16</sup> I hope with the unfolding of time, this notion of autonomy will take ground. But as things stand, it has not been infused in the mainstream of African culture and it is largely used by the elite philosophers.

Furthermore, my major concern is that Gyekye's approach is not consistent with the Akan metaphysics to which he typically appeals to ground much of his philosophical work (Gyekye 1995: 85–6). Moreover, it is even more disconcerting when local cultural resources have not been exhausted for one to conveniently select an idea that at heart clashes with his ontological conception of a self (Gyekye 1995: 85–102). Gyekye's appeal to a foreign concept would have been justified had he first demonstrated that the African cultural or historical resources cannot proffer a plausible ground for humanism or his quest for dignity and human rights – this exercise, however, is absent in his work. This is surprising given that Gyekye's conception of personhood, or his interpretation of the Akan's ontological conception of personhood, contains promising supernaturalistic categories that could be adduced to ground such an account. But such a task is abandoned and Gyekye hastily prefers 'alien' notions: the Christian idea of the image of God and/or Kant's idea of autonomy.

Thus, Gyekye's humanistic-dignity can explain what is wrong about torturing an animal – that, one is undermining the welfare of the animal in question. But, this account succeeds in being truly a humanistic theory, insofar as it is dualist, as it also appeals to dignity, but it fails to be an African humanistic theory as it flies opposite to a criteria advocated by Gyekye himself of what is to count as 'African'. We are thus stuck with a dualist account that is humanistic, but not African in the relevant sense, as it appeals to a foreign cultural item.

Metz on his part has developed a conception of moral status, which, as I have shown above is human-centred. I now criticise his human-centred theory of value. On this account, animals have moral status because they can be

*objects* of friendly relationships (they can be positively affected by a friendly treatment by human beings and can be made worse off by unfriendly treatment), but they are not *subjects* of such relations – it appears only human can be both subjects and objects of such relations, as such have full moral status, and animals have partial moral status since they can only be objects of friendly relations. This theory of moral status, as it stands, appears to have the *corpus* to tell us what is wrong with torturing animals for fun. Since animals can benefit, as objects of human friendliness, then unfriendliness makes them worse off, therefore it is wrong to torture animals for fun.

I insist however that this theory is implausible as it offers a weak rationale for protecting animals. Consider the case of a last human being on earth, who will be dying in the next few seconds. Imagine a world (W2) with Martians who are like us in every way except that they do not have a capacity for friendship but, only, something like it, call it *friendship*. There are no animals on W2, only Martians. It appears, upon some investigation, that Martians can have communion with animals on earth since they can be objects of *friendship*, but, for whatever reason – I stipulate – they cannot have a relationship with human beings either as objects or subjects.

On the basis of Metz's theory, Martians with their capacity for *friendship* do not have moral status since they cannot be included in community with human beings either as objects and/or subjects. Say human beings go extinct and Martians take over planet earth, on Metz's account, we have no basis to talk about moral status without an essential reference to human beings. The extinction of human beings is tantamount to the disappearance of moral status. Thus, in spite of the entities with a relevant (or close enough) capacity for moral status, since there are no human beings, there is still no moral status. If a Martian version of Thabo tortures an animal for fun, there would be no ground of even talking about the wrong or even wronging of the animal in question despite the fact that these animals can be made better or worse off by Martian *friendship* or lack thereof. The absence of human beings in the equation is decisive in Metz's conception of moral status – no human being, no moral status since Metz insists on an irreducible appeal to humanity. The animal is only protected if there are human beings, not by its own right.

The above objection, with regards to Metz's conception of moral status, is raised to motivate the case for a theory that locates moral status on some intrinsic relevant feature that does not depend on any relation to human beings. Metz's approach to moral status, wherein 'there is an irreducible appeal to humanity in its conception of moral status', makes his theory anthropocentric<sup>17</sup> in a problematic way for African ethics (Metz 2011: 400). This theory makes human beings a necessary feature of the world, a view that has been demonstrated to be false (Ramose 2009: 309–10). This view also commits us to speciesism, a position Metz himself wants to avoid (Metz 2011: 400).

Above, I considered whether the three accounts can account for what is wrong with the act of torturing animals. Wiredu's humanistic-welfare ulti-

mately fails to secure animal's moral standing, if it does, it must forgo its humanism. Gyekye's dualist humanist-dignity account does secure the animal's standing at a cost of being unAfrican. And, Metz's theory does account for the wrongness of torturing animals for fun but not for their own sake, the moral standing of animals depends on the moral standing of human beings.

### **Failure as Grounds for the Rejection of Humanism**

Why is humanism's failure to capture some aspects of the environment essential for its rejection? I argue that this failure is one that reflects the coherence test on the part of humanism. In this sense, the secular version of humanism fails to be 'African' in the relevant sense. I tease out this failure by appeal to a criterion for successful African meta-ethics, as adumbrated by Elvis Imafidon thus:

an all-inclusive metaphysical notion of being permeates the notion of the good in the African traditions ... Every valid norm would by all means promote and sustain equilibrium and stability in the all-inclusive structure of being united by the common essence, force. Norms that do not meet this condition cannot be justified as moral (Imafidon 2013: 48, 49).

I take seriously the claim that 'the good' (all moral value) is a function of an all-inclusive metaphysical notion of being. The failure of these three accounts of humanism follows from their failure to present an understanding of 'the good' in a way that coheres with this all-inclusive structure of being, that is a holistic (spiritual) ontological system that characterises African thought.

Before I further analyse and expand on the criteria set out by Imafidon, I show the reader that this idea that morality flows from an all-inclusive structure of reality is a common one in the African tradition. Africans do not merely advocate what we described above as 'metaphysical holism', they further talk about 'moral holism' – the claim that things are interconnected, but these relations matter morally. For example, Felix Murove, an African philosopher from Zimbabwe who studies the notions of 'ukama' and 'ubuntu', argues that 'African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole whereby what it means to be ethical is inseparable from all spheres of existence ... This relatedness blurs the distinction between humanity and nature, the living and the dead, the divine and the human' (Murove 2009: 29). On the same note, Nel argues 'that the most common feature of this cosmology is the integration of three distinguishable aspects, namely environment, society, and the spiritual. All activities are informed by this holistic understanding ... An act is never separated from its environmental, societal and spiritual impact' (Nel 2009: 37–8). In this thinking, morality ought not to be reduced to one aspect of reality, it must encompass all aspects of reality – the environment, the social and spiritual – something that secular humanism fails to do must serve as a basis for morality.

To build my case further, I need to clarify what Imafidon means by an ‘all inclusive metaphysical notion of being’. I understand this phrase, as I indicated above, to represent a typical understanding of an African ontological system as holistic, both descriptively and normatively (see also Bujo 2005: 424; Imafidon 2013: 40–2; Menkiti 2004: 328–9; Shutte 2001: 22; Teffo and Roux 2003: 196–7). If ‘the good’ truly is to be a function of this holistic understanding of reality, it is problematic, it appears to me, to reduce the good to one aspect of this system – some human feature. A commitment to metaphysical/moral holism resists the kind of *reductionism* that characterises humanism, wherein one reduces all moral to one aspect of the whole, human beings. This reductive approach fails the criteria, as set out by Imafidon, that the good is a function of the interaction of three aspects of reality.

Moreover, this failure is best reflected by these accounts’ inability to plausibly accommodate some aspects of nature in their moral system. This failure is a result, I observe, of working with only one fragment of reality as the basis for moral value.

I further observe that secular humanism exaggerates on its conception of a position occupied by human beings in the African ontology – human beings are generally considered to hold a *central* role (Shutte 2001: 14). These African scholars, I observe, take a leap from the view that human beings play a *central* role, to an untenable position that human beings play a *high (foundational)* role – the role of God. I use the words *central* and *high* informed by a dominant African conception of an African ontological system, which is sometimes represented spherically (Menkiti 2004: 327) and often hierarchically (Bujo 2005: 424; Shutte 2001: 13). In the latter representation, God is located at the apex (‘high’), followed by ancestors and spirits and at the centre is human beings and then followed by lower forms of life like animals, plants and so on. It appears strange to me that a central being can be the source of morality rather than a being that is most sublime and transcendental, God. I am here not making an argument but merely expressing an intellectual concern that this way of interpreting the African system of reality does not strike the chord of my intuition at all, given the dominant conception of African ontology.

I hold the view that the central role played by human beings does not imply anthropocentrism. This view is best defended by these works (Behrens 2011: 2, 33, 49–56; LenkaBula 2008: 375–94). I also reject the view that interprets the central role played by humans to mean that ‘in ethics, man proposes and God reinforces’ (cited in Imafidon 2013: 51, see also Gyekye 2010). The idea that man *proposes ethics* does not necessarily imply humanism, it could just imply, ‘ethical subjectivism’<sup>18</sup> or even ‘cultural relativism’,<sup>19</sup> the idea that man somehow invents morality, which is implied by the notion of *proposing* morality. A charitable reading, however, would imply humanism, where human interests objectively defined determine the right and God merely reinforces or upholds morality (Gyekye 2010).

A more moderate view – one which coheres with an African ontology – does not claim that man is the source of morality but, rather, man is the best entry to morality among the empirical beings. Since the social category stands at the centre of all reality, for the human being, she is the best interpreter of morality. The human community gives us some clues and cues on our quest for harmony among existing entities in the universe (Behrens 2011: 62). In this sense, morality depends on God insofar as he gave human beings a sense of morality or conscience (Gbadegesin 2005: 414–15) or, insofar as human beings have been endowed with some capacity that qualifies them to have a moral perspective that uniquely positions them to connect and respond to the *needs* of other human beings, the environment and the spiritual realm<sup>20</sup> (Cornell 2009: 47–8).

### **Motivation for Supernaturalism**

I reconstruct a robust spiritualist African ethics. I observe that the notion of vitality offers a promising alternative to the humanist accounts I rejected here, both as a meta-ethical and as a normative theory. As a meta-ethical theory, it defines rightness as a function of some (positive) relation to this spiritual energy. On this view, the will of God is not expressed through His commands as found in the divine commands but, rather, the will of God is expressed by maintaining a balance among these ‘spirit-filled’ entities. This meta-ethical view promises at least three normative theories, which attempt to give some account of what counts as positive or negative relation to vitality: a perfectionist ethics – an act is right insofar as it perfects an individual’s spiritual nature; a vitalistic-utilitarian principle – an act is right insofar as it maximises the vital load of the society; and, lastly, a deontological principle of vitality — an act is right insofar as it honours a person’s spiritual energy. This view also plausibly explains why it is wrong to torture a cat or chimpanzee for fun; by so doing, one would be failing to honour the vitality of the entity in question, since it possesses some.

### **Conclusion**

I argued that humanism is not a plausible interpretation of the African moral tradition since it does not cohere with some dominant conception of African metaphysics, which is plainly religious. I demonstrated the implausibility of humanistic ethical theories through their failure to capture one vital aspect of African metaphysics, specifically the fact that some non-human components matter for their own sakes. Or, I argued to the effect that it is implausible to interpret the African moral theories to be anthropocentric, as do Gyekye, Wiredu and Metz, since this fails to cohere with the holistic picture of African

metaphysics I described. I also suggested a preferable theory of morality (the good) that best coheres with an all-inclusive African metaphysics, which is as much spiritual as it is material. The literature as it stands has not yet provided a systematic and rational account of ethical supernaturalism or even non-naturalism. I closed by motivating for a vitality based meta-ethics, that is a view that promises to give an interesting meta-ethical and normative theories, which, on the face of it, appear well poised to explain what is wrong with torturing animals for fun – one would not be respecting the vitality of the animal in question.

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### Notes

1. I use the notion of ‘humanism’ to distinguish a meta-ethical position that is neither supernaturalist nor non-naturalist but one that grounds the source of morality on some fact(s) about human beings. As such, to refer to an African ethics as humanistic is tantamount to referring to it as secular, and to claim that the relevant secular moral property is to be found on some human property, or so I interpret those who defend this view.
2. The following influential African philosophers defend humanism: Kwasi Wiredu (1992: 194); Kwame Gyekye (1995: 143); Thad Metz (2011: 390). The following are not so influential but also advocate humanism: Dzobo (1992: 224).
3. Gyekye (1995: 129–43) and Wiredu (1992: 194–6) offer arguments in which they attempt to demonstrate that ethical supernaturalism is implausible. Metz, on his part, does not give an argument that rejects supernaturalism but endorses the interpretation by Gyekye and Wiredu (Metz 2007: 328) and he also offers considerations that motivate for a secular approach to ethics (Metz 2010: 81–2).
4. Metz (2007: 321) rejects ethical supernaturalism and further observes that if his ethical account is true, it will be enough to reject some, if not all, kinds of non-naturalism. I also inform the reader, so far as I am aware of the literature in African ethics, there is no systematic account that directly advocates and defends an African version of non-naturalism.
5. Space does not permit me to give both an argument against humanism and one defending ethical supernaturalism. I do have an unpublished article wherein I defend one version of ethical supernaturalism, which I can avail on request.
6. It is important to note that in the African tradition the is/ought distinction is not taken seriously; in fact, my familiarity with the literature treats it as no problem at all. For example, Menkiti talking about the biological fact that each person has their own body observes: ‘That sort of given fact is a brute biological fact. But it need not be read as conveying a message that each stands alone. Normative standing is one thing, and superficial biological considerations quite another. I use the word “superficial” advisedly because, on a deeper

- level, both norm and biology do tend to converge' (2004: 324). The idea is that factual claims at a deeper level have a tendency to converge with moral claims. Gyekye also observes that 'Moral questions ... may ... be said to be linked to, or engendered by, metaphysical conceptions of the person' (1997: 36). This view I think can best be understood when we stop insisting on treating African traditional morality within the dominant epistemological canons of Western modern morality, which accepts the is/ought gap. African ethics can best be understood, I insist, within a thought system wherein 'the ontological relationship and significance of existence of being as such within the cosmic world of other beings that are in turn closely morally related. Hence, being or existence in general and morality are closely intertwined among ... most African communities' (Chemhuru 2013: 74). Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that 'it is only in the seventeenth century, when this distinguishing of the moral from the theological, the legal and the aesthetic has become a received doctrine that the project of an independent rational justification of morality becomes not merely the concern of individual thinkers, but central to Northern European culture' (1981: 39). The African moral tradition insists on rejecting this distinguishing of the moral and metaphysical (Imafidon 2013: 48, 49). The separation of these categories makes sense if one removes God as premise, an approach I reject. I leave a thorough enquiry into this issue for another project to justify why Africans should not take seriously the is/ought gap. In that project, I will give a thorough response to Metz (2013: 189–204).
7. My comments and analysis only involve analysis of humanism as is dominant in African philosophy, they may apply to other related forms of humanism in other traditions that share similar features to the humanism rejected here.
  8. Kwasi Wiredu can truly be described as an elder of African philosophy, boasting more than forty years as a professional philosopher. He is a Professor Emeritus at the University of South Florida; he has held a number of visiting professorships internationally; he has served on a number of distinguished committees and his publications record speaks volumes about the quality of his work. It is for this reason that I decided to explore the ethical work of this seasoned African philosopher, who has been exploring various issues in the African tradition.
  9. Kwame Gyekye, in his own right, is an elder of African philosophy. He is a professor of philosophy at the University of Ghana. He has published books and articles in the area of African philosophy. He is famous for his intense debate with a Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti with whom he graduated from Harvard. I picked his account because his ethical and political view of 'moderate communitarianism' has had a great influence on African moral and political philosophy for the past twenty years or so.
  10. Thaddeus Metz is an American scholar who has relocated to South Africa, a Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg. Metz's philosophical contribution to African philosophy or ubuntu is impressive both in quality and quantity; it is thus not surprising that he has been granted an A-rating research status by the National Research Funding (South Africa). I included him in this list firstly because of the quality of work he has done in the field of African ethics. In the space of about seven years or so, he has developed an ethical system that is influenced, among others, by Desmond Tutu, famous for chairing the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and turned it into a philosophically robust view that has interesting implications for bioethics, environmental ethics and political philosophy.
  11. I here only reference Menkiti's (2004) piece since it is a more systematic and accurate expression of his position with regards to the personhood debate than the initial statement.
  12. The is/ought distinction is generally ignored in the African tradition or does not appear to be considered to be a problem, as I noted earlier. Furthermore, I hope the reader has noted that I, unlike Gyekye, used the phrase 'moral value' rather than 'moral standing' since the latter is typically used in bioethical context to refer to moral status.
  13. Gyekye on his part argues that his ethic is only based on one fundamental fact of welfare. I argue (along with Metz) that if one takes into consideration Gyekye's moderate communi-



- tarian view, his ethics is best construed as dualistic: dignity and welfare (common good) as basic moral facts (Metz 2012: 61, 62). My argument for this interpretation of Gyekye is in my Ph.D. dissertation, which is currently being marked.
14. This is the view that informs much of environmental ethics: non-human components matter for their own sake (Brennan 2011).
  15. Gyekye (2010), more accurately, does not rule out completely the supernatural aspects in the domain of morality but merely assigns it the role of reinforcing it rather than grounding it. My problem with this account is that it trivialises the role of the supernatural in morality.
  16. I am not familiar with an African conception of what constitutes individual or even political freedom. Even the one article I am familiar with does not appeal to the common liberal stock of civil liberties or even the notion of autonomy (Siame 2005: 53–67).
  17. More accurately, I understand Metz to be arguing for some kind of ‘weak anthropocentrism’, a claim that non-human components have moral status but it is less than that of human beings (Behrens 2011: 39; Metz 2011: 389). But, I think all interpretations of anthropocentrism fail correctly to capture an African ethics.
  18. This is a meta-ethical value that claims that rightness is a function of a ‘say so’ of a subject or individual. Morality is here determined by the subject.
  19. This is a meta-ethical view that claims that morality is a function of a ‘say so’ of a culture. Morality here is determined by a culture.
  20. In my Ph.D. I defend this particular view, wherein I argue that human beings have a capacity for transcendental care, which serves as a ground-norm against which to distinguish right from wrong actions, a conception of moral status, human dignity and rights.

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