Metz on Moral Metaphysics: A Critical Notice

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I.   Introduction

In his ambitious and systematically argued book, Thaddeus Metz sets out to develop an African-inspired, relational moral theory of friendliness which, once cleansed of its contentious particularist metaphysics, chimes with widely held moral intuitions among peoples of different cultural backgrounds. Metz seeks to demonstrate the global appeal of his relational theory of friendliness not only at a theoretical level but also at the level of practical application: whilst the first half of the book is concerned with making the theoretical case, the second half explores the theory's practical implications in relation to an array of moral and political issues, including environmentalism, the ethics of education and business ethics. In what follows, I shall focus on Metz' general method of approach, and therefore on arguments developed in the first half of the book. My specific interest concerns Metz' seeming endorsement of a hard version of the fact / value distinction and his related rejection of an African moral ontology in favour of an intuitionistic approach to moral reasoning. In broad outline, my argument will be that, his scepticism regarding ontological groundings of morals notwithstanding, Metz himself ends up appealing to a metaphysical justification of persons' moral status. In so doing he violates the strictures of the hard fact / value distinction which he endorses at the outset of his inquiry. This raises the question as to whether, rather than avoiding them altogether, Metz does not simply swap one kind of ontological or metaphysical grounding for another. And this in turn leads me to ask whether a more sympathetic engagement with African ontology might not have yielded a different understanding of the ways in which African and Western philosophical thinking might draw on and learn from each other.

Before proceeding, a terminological clarification is in order; it concerns the distinction and relation between the two terms, "ontology" and "metaphysics". In Western philosophy, ontology is often glossed as "the study of being" or "the study of what there is", where "what there is" is often more or less implicitly equated with material or physical being, and hence with more or less tangible "facts of the matter". Metaphysics, by contrast, is a wider term that is taken to include ontology as a sub-category within it but is also taken

to comprise other domains of philosophical inquiry, including the study of non-material being (free will, God) as well as, sometimes, value inquiry more generally. In modern African philosophy, by contrast, the predominant operative term is ontology: African philosophers speak of the ontology of the person, or of the ontology of the social order where Western philosophers would be more inclined either to invoke a metaphysics of morals or, indeed, simply appeal to "value intuitions". These differences in nomenclature are not merely conventional but reflect different background conceptions of "the physical", say, or of "the person". More specifically, given the prevalence of quasi-materialism and vitalism in modern African philosophy, African ontologies may comfortably count non-material being as among "the basic furniture of the universe". Given these difference conceptions as to what ontology does or does not legitimately comprise, and given that Western thinkers would often employ the term metaphysics where African thinkers speak of ontology, there is evidently plenty to scope for confusion in meaning and understanding. Indeed, in his book, Metz himself seems to use the two terms interchangeably. Whilst I think that Metz' critique of African ontology may at least partly be a function of his more narrow Western understanding of ontology, I shall here follow him in using the two terms interchangeably. This means, however, that when I speak of ontology, I shall in fact have in mind the wider, African understanding of that term which I take to overlaps with the Western understanding of metaphysics. Otherwise put: I shall assume that an ontology can comprise the same sort of entities and related fields of inquiry that a metaphysics can comprise – specifically, it can comprise the study of non-material and well as material being; the study of facts of the matter as well as of norms and values.

II.   Is, Ought, and Moral Ontology / Metaphysics

According to Metz, many modern African philosophers infer moral principles *directly* from their stated ontological views. By contrast, Metz himself believes that 'nothing moral straightaway follows from any purely ontological view';[1] he believes that if one is going to move from ontology to morals one will require 'bridge premises' that enable one to cross the fact / value divide (and thereby close the is /ought gap). Metz illustrates his claim with reference to what he considers to be Kwame Nkrumah's invalid inference from:

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[1] Metz, *A Relational Moral Theory*, 26.

A: 'All humans are made of matter.' (ontological claim),

to

C: 'All humans have equal worth.' (moral claim).[2]

According to Metz, this inference is invalid because nothing moral about humans directly follows from their material constitution:

> 'from the claim that all humans are composed of matter, one logically *cannot* immediately conclude that all humans have an equal worth. In order to infer the latter, one requires a bridge premise linking the metaphysical and the ethical, but I cannot find such a premise in *Consciencism*.'[3]

Metz goes on to propose a possible bridge premise, namely,

> 'if human beings are all made of matter that is interrelated, then all human beings have equal worth (B).'[4]

But he avers that even if the insertion of this bridge premise between A and C were to render the argument formally valid it does not thereby render it sound. This is because the bridge premise is itself false: humans' equal *ethical* worth is not a function of their *material* constitution. After all, there are many other things that are made of matter without our therefore ascribing moral worth to them.

Given what he says about Nkrumah's invalid inference from ontological statements to moral conclusions, I shall take it that Metz considers ontological statements to be statements about facts of a certain kind; more specifically, facts about the "basic furniture of the universe" – i.e., the hard facts of physics. Metz assumes that evaluative statements are not part of the basic furniture of the universe; their source lies elsewhere. Metz thus subscribes to a hard version of the fact / value distinction – for him, ontological facts and value claims are worlds apart. It is then odd that Metz introduces the idea of a bridge premise at all: clearly, nothing should be capable of bridging the gulf between facts and values even in

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[2] Ibid., p.29
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

principle. At the same time, Metz is actually quite circumspect in his formulation of the gap. In the above-cited remark, he says that no moral conclusion *straightaway* follows from any *purely* ontological view. This suggests that some moral conclusions might follow *indirectly* from a *less than pure* ontological view. Yet insofar as he does endorse a hard fact / value distinction, should Metz not be committed to the stronger claim that *no* moral conclusion *ever* follows from *any* ontological view? This latter must be Metz' preferred view, for he says that, when it comes to moral inquiry, 'one invariably has to take up *irreducibly* evaluative or normative considerations, some of which might be whether we have dignity and what is involved in treating it with respect'.[5] But if one has to take up *irreducibly* evaluative considerations, why suggest the possibility of an indirect relation between facts and values *via* the idea of bridge premises at all? As it turns out, Metz concedes the possibility of what he calls 'impure metaphysics'. These do appear to contain a mix of factual and evaluative propositions, so do seem to allow for inferential connections between (impure) ontology and moral theory. Although Metz sets 'impure metaphysics' aside very quickly, we shall see below that the notion comes back to haunt him.

I in fact agree with Metz that Nkrumah's inference from materiality to equal worth is faulty. However, I am not persuaded that Nkrumah's basic error lies in ignoring the fact / value distinction. Nkrumah's claim that moral egalitarianism uniquely follows from materialism, and his further claim that moral inegalitarianism uniquely follows from idealism seem to me to be politically motivated. I am not sure that Nkrumah's claims about the relation between materialism and egalitarianism would withstand critical scrutiny from any number of philosophical perspectives. These may include the fact / value distinction but they are certainly not exhausted by the latter. I shall therefore set Nkrumah's position aside; he has other fish to fry.[6] What about Kwame Gyekye? According to Metz, Gyekye, too, violates the fact / value distinction when he infers from the 'dual nature' of human selves that we must ascribe to them rights as well as duties. Summarily, Metz reconstructs Gyekye's argument as follows:

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[5] Ibid., 40, emphasis mine).
[6] The fact that Nkrumah's philosophical theorizing was explicitly politically motivated is not in itself a point against it. See Katrin Flikschuh, 'Nkrumah's Philosophy in Action: Between Ideology and Ethnophilosophy' in Martin Odei Ajei (ed.), *Disentangling Consciencism*. Essays on Kwame Nkrumah's Philosophy (Lanham: Lexington Books 2017), 93-113. Contrast Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1983), 141-51.

'P1: the human self is equally the produce of the natural (biology) and the social (culture).

C: Therefore, a correct ethic for us is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties.'[7]

Metz takes P1 to offer a statement of ontological fact. He treats C as a direct moral inference from P1. Metz assumes Gyekye to affirm a direct inferential relation between individual rights and humans' biological nature on the one hand and between communal duties and human social nature on the other hand. As with his criticism of Nkrumah's position, Metz' complaint in relation to his reconstructed Gyekye's view is that nothing moral follows directly from the ontological status of humans as both individual and social beings. He says,

> 'Imagine that individuals were self-sufficient and did not need each other and were not influenced by each other. Imagine that the individual is prior to the community and equipped with a conception of the good totally different from the purposes of community. My claim is: nothing yet follows with respect to the way we ought to treat people.'[8]

The basic thought here is that from the way individuals in fact *are* nothing in itself follows about how they *ought* to comport themselves towards one another. Metz considers the above to be purely descriptive statements about the nature of these imaginary individuals; he does not think that either their imagined 'self-sufficiency' or their imagined proclivity to form non-communal conceptions of the good have any implications for the kind of moral norms which it would be proper to prescribe to such beings. Similarly, from the brute ontological fact that, according to his reading of Gyekye, humans are both social and individual by nature nothing follows about what sort of moral claims they can raise against each other.

I struggle with Metz' reasoning here: I struggle on two counts. For one thing, I find it hard to treat Metz' description of his hypothetical individuals as unambiguously factual: Metz' description of these individuals as 'self-sufficient' and as forming 'conceptions of the

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[7] Metz, *Relational Moral Theory*, p.33
[8] Metz, *Relational Theory*, 39

good' seem to me ascribe to these individuals certain normative features or capacities. Even if the propositional form is factual – 'individuals *are* self-sufficient' – the content is surely normative. In this sense, Metz' ontology of these imagined individuals is value-laden. Secondly, if there were indeed such a self-sufficient, a-social species of morally capable beings, I would find it odd *not* to take their self-sufficient and a-social nature into account when considering an appropriate scheme of morals for them. Surely, there must be some relation between what we take human beings to be like and what we can reasonably expect of them morally.

And indeed, Metz concedes that it is not the case that 'metaphysical claims are never relevant to accepting or rejecting a moral conclusion'; he concedes that there may be 'impure metaphysical views that inherently include normative or evaluative elements'.[9] He cites Aristotle's teleological view of human nature as one example of such an impure metaphysics. I think that both Metz' own imaginary example as well as Gyekye's actual ontology of the self are further instances of such 'impure' metaphysics / ontology. Gyekye considers the human self to be an irreducibly moral kind of being – one whose embodied nature cannot be separated from its moral status even though the latter is not reducible to the former. If Gyekye does hold an impure metaphysics, then by Metz' own admission, moral claims can be inferred from these impure ontological claims. Thus, Aristotle describes the human being as a 'social animal': from this it directly follows, for Aristotle, that humans can flourish only in society. An ethic that did not take humans' social nature into account would be the wrong kind of ethic for beings of that type. Similarly, when Gyekye says of human selves that they are both individual and social in their nature, it directly follows for him that an adequate morality must reflect the dual human need for individuality and sociality. This strikes me as an eminently sensible position. But if Gyekye does ground his moral theory in an impure metaphysics of persons, and if Metz does concede the coherence of impure metaphysics in general, then Metz' critique of Gyekye is premised on a hard fact / value distinction which Gyekye does not and need not embrace.[10]

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[9] Ibid., 41.
[10] See Kwame Gyekye, *African Philosophy Thought. The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1987), esp. Part II, 59-186 – Gyekye there moves systematically (and to my mind cogently) from an ontology of the person to its normative implications.

Why does Metz set impure metaphysics aside so quickly – and why is Aristotle his chief example of a legitimately impure metaphysics? My impression is that Metz believes that whilst one cannot fault Aristotle for having held an impure metaphysics, current impure ontologies can be faulted for their impurities. This is because the pre-scientific Aristotelian worldview was animated; by contrast, no contemporary version of an animated ontology would pass the test of scientific respectability. Given modern science, no contemporary ontology is plausible that contains anything other than strictly factual-cum-material propositions regarding the basic furniture of the universe. Yet even if one accepts that there is "a" or "the" scientific view, much depends on how exactly one conceives of both scientific and ontological facts and on what exactly one takes to be the relation between them. Take Kant, for whom the world of scientifically ascertainable facts is a function of the interaction of mind and matter – concepts and intuitions.[11] The scientific facts as we know them empirically thus have an indelibly anthropocentric and hence normative imprint for Kant: they are products of cognitive judgements of the human mind. This does not mean that a Kantian will not subscribe to some version of the fact / value distinction: the objects of theoretical reason are distinct, for a Kantian, from those of practical reason. But it certainly commits a Kantian to an impure metaphysics that goes all the way down to ontological facts, for the world as it is in itself is wholly unknowable to a Kantian. Or take Hume, who is also often associated with some version of the fact / value distinction. Hume famously did not think that morality could be read off from empirical facts – he would agree with Metz that nothing follows about morality from the way the *empirical* facts are. From the mere empirical fact that A attacks B with a knife and that B now lies bleeding before us we cannot explain our feeling of revulsion over A's act: for Hume, morality is a matter of sentiment, not fact.[12] But presumably it is an 'ontological fact' for Hume that human nature is such that human beings feel revulsion over A's murder of B. Hume, too, appears to be working with an impure metaphysics of human beings when he attributes to them a natural non-factual capacity for sentiments which he in turn treats as the source of human morality. Or, finally, consider Hobbes, who at one level does treat human beings as just one physical entity among others. Hobbes nonetheless considers human beings' ontological constitution to

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[11] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (transl. Norman Kemp Smith, Basingstoke 1992), A50-55/B74-79.
[12] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2007), Bk3.

have a *direct* bearing on an adequate morality for them. Given their desire for life and aversion to death, Hobbesian individuals are ripe for submission under the Leviathan will who keeps all in awe.[13] Either Hobbes works with an impure metaphysics that adds evaluative capacities to his materialist account of human nature, or he violates Metz' strictures when he infers his laws of nature – precepts of reason (!) – directly from humans' material nature.

My point is that to the extent to which Gyekye can plausibly be read as subscribing to an 'impure' metaphysics or ontology – one that combines factual with evaluative statements at the basic level of philosophical analysis – then even though he falls foul of a hard fact / value distinction, he is far from being alone in this. And my sense is that, insofar as philosophers through the ages have violated the hard version of that distinction before, during, and after the emergence of the scientific paradigm, it may be the supporters of the hard fact / value distinction who are in the minority, not impure metaphysicians. Secondly, and relatedly, insofar as virtually anyone subscribes to some version of the fact / value distinction without thereby necessarily agreeing that what constitutes fact and what value can be easily read off that distinction itself, Metz owes us a clearer account of which particular version of the fact / value distinction he himself subscribes to, including an account of the differences and relations between ontological facts, scientific facts, empirical facts and, indeed, moral facts.

III.   Intuitions versus Impure Metaphysics

We saw that Metz does acknowledge that an impure metaphysics, such as Aristotle's teleology, escapes his fact / value critique. An impure metaphysics can legitimately derive moral claims from impure metaphysical-cum-ontological statements. But I also suggested that Metz thinks an impure metaphysics wanting because non-scientific (in the modern understanding of the term). If so, then even if Metz were to concede that Gyekye's approach might be an instance of an impure metaphysics, he would reject it nonetheless. Metz seems in fact to have two reasons for rejecting any metaphysics of the human person – pure or impure – as an adequate basis for deriving a moral theory. His first reason is the hard fact / value distinction: given his view as to what (a pure) ontology comprises – an

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[13] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), Pt I.

account of the *basic facts* about the world – he does not believe that ontological statements can ground or justify value statements. His second reason is that African moral theories as they stand rest on impure ontological foundations that are not widely sharable *because* they fail to track the deliverances of science. Perhaps these two reasons converge: given the deliverances of science, no moral theory is widely shareable that does not respect the hard fact / value distinction. Since Metz' aim is to develop an African-inspired moral theory that is capable of global reach, such a theory must avoid contentious metaphysical grounding. But any metaphysics / ontology that fails to track the deliverances of the sciences is contentious just for that reason. Hence Metz' proposed alternative to ground his African relational moral theory in moral intuitions which he regards as widely shared at least among different Western and African peoples.

The appeal to intuitions by which to ground moral beliefs and principles is a staple of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and a corollary of the hard fact / value distinction. Recall Metz' commitment to 'irreducibly evaluative or normative considerations'.[14] Such considerations are *sui generis* – they have a ground all of their own. Historically, there are two standard ways within the Anglo-American tradition by which to appeal to intuitions in relation to moral argument: a moral intuition can be either felt or rationally intuited. Thus, a Humean will intuitively shrink back from the murder scene, feeling strong disapprobation over someone's killing by another's hand. By contrast, a rational intuitionist, such as G.E. Moore, will cognize the wrongness of the murder as a distinctive *moral* truth. In both cases, the response will be immediate and unambiguous: whether felt or cognized, the intuition will have an air of self-evidence about them. Again, Metz does not make it clear what exactly – aside from unmediated self-certainty -- he takes a moral intuition to be; whether the intuitions are felt or cognized. Given his ambitions to develop an African-inspired moral theory of potentially global reach, Metz may in fact be invoking a third, more recently proposed conception of intuitions as manifesting socially widespread, latently held moral beliefs. This is the view of intuitions at work in John Rawls' political constructivism. The advantage of the Rawlsian view is that, in contrast to either Humean or Moorean intuitions, this third variant claims independence from (pure and impure) metaphysical commitments: Rawlsian intuitions are simply manifest moral beliefs that people in fact share whatever

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[14] Metz, *Relational Theory*, 40

deeper metaphysical reasons they may have for holding these beliefs.[15] Thus, according to Rawls, citizens of mature liberal societies share an intuitive belief in the freedom and equality of persons; they have these intuitions about freedom and equality as a matter of social fact, though different individuals will also have different, deeper reasons for these beliefs. Rawls is not interested in these deeper reasons – he takes the social fact of these shared beliefs as the basis from which to construct his conception of justice as fairness.

Metz' aims for his proposed relational moral theory of friendliness may be quite similar. Like Rawls, Metz aims to develop a moral theory that has appeal to as many persons as possible globally who do not share a common cultural outlook. Like Rawls, therefore, Metz may wish to allow that different people may have different deep reasons for endorsing his free-standing morality of friendliness. For example, a member of the Akan community may be able to endorse the morality of friendliness for reasons of deep belief in the communal nature of individual persons – a New Yorker, by contrast, may do so on grounds of a deep belief that persons have an individual right to being treated with friendliness. The Akan and the New Yorker then have different deep reason for their shared belief that persons should be treated with friendliness – but they share the moral intuition that friendliness is the way to go. Insofar as he does appeal to Rawlsian type intuitions for Rawlsian type reasons, Metz himself must desist from offering deep reasons for the morality of friendliness: his reason must be that his moral theory rests on globally widespread intuitions which different people do endorse as a matter of fact, albeit for different deep reasons.

Yet although Metz sometimes speaks of his proposed intuitions in this conscientiously shallow Rawlsian sense he does not always do so. In chapter 8 of his book Metz introduces the idea of moral status: 'I begin by saying more than I have up to now about what I mean by 'moral status'.'[16] He distinguishes between different accounts of moral status: 'An individualist account of moral status is the view that properties intrinsic to an entity ground the capacity to be wronged or to be the object of a direct duty.'[17] By contrast, a holist or corporate account of moral status holds 'that the bearers of moral status are groups, where a group is a discrete collection of entities that are near to, similar

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[15] Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973), 34-54.
[16] Metz, *Relational Theory*, 148.
[17] Ibid.

to, or interdependent with one another'.[18] In lieu of either of these two positions, Metz proposes a relational account of moral status according to which the latter 'is constituted by some kind of interactive property between one entity and another'.[19] He goes on to say that 'the more a being is by its nature capable of being party to communal relationships, the greater its moral status.'[20]

When Metz discusses the intrinsic and relational properties of particular types of entities, and when he invokes the nature of particular kind of entities, it is hard to avoid the impression that he is doing ontology (or metaphysics). Metz in effect claims that there exist particular types of entities – humans and other mammals – of whom we predicate properties that serve as the basis of our assigning them a certain kind of moral status. More specifically, the morality of friendliness assigns moral status to those entities that possess certain relational properties as a matter of their specific nature. Clearly, Metz is here not staying on the surface philosophically, as Rawlsian intuitionism commends one do. To the contrary, he grounds the intuitions that sum to a morality of friendliness in claims about humans' and other mammals' constitutive (ontological) capacity communicatively to relate to others. But it now looks as though we may have come full circle: from a rejection of pure and impure ontological grounds as possible sources of value, to an alternative appeal to shallow Rawlsian-type intuitions about moral value to a deep, ontological grounding of these values in the purported nature of humans (and other mammals) as a particular kind of entity in the natural world.

IV.   Non-Science-led Ontology

So far I have cast doubt on Metz' general strategy of argumentation regarding the relation between ontology (metaphysics) and morals. I have suggested that despite his endorsement of a hard version of the fact / value distinction and despite his dismissal of African moral theories which fail to respect that distinction, Metz himself ends up identifying the naturally held properties of certain types of entities as the source of these entities' moral status. Minimally, Metz thereby commits to what he calls an 'impure ontology' – i.e. one that, instead of deriving value claims from factual propositions, includes evaluative statements as

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 150.
[20] Ibid., 152.

part of a description of the basic furniture of the world. But if Metz himself falls foul of the hard fact / value distinction, then what he finds objectionable about African moral theories cannot be their failure to cleave to the hard distinction. As noted, my sense is that what Metz finds philosophically indefensible about African ontologies is their apparent inconsistency with the parameters of a scientific outlook upon the natural world. Again, the fact / value distinction is closely related to that outlook; as we saw above, however, the hard version presents a problem even for those who do share the scientific outlook. This is so especially when it comes to at least one type of entity in the world – the human type.[21]

From the point of view of a scientific outlook as standardly construed, the human being is a problematic type of entity in that it appears to be incapable of full integration into a causal explanatory framework. In chapter 8 of his book Metz suggests that human beings are not in fact the only type of being of which we must predicate moral status: other mammals, too, possess status-conferring properties that make their full integration into the standard scientific outlook questionable. The problem with many African ontologies is that, according to them, not only *some* natural kinds are problematic in this regard, but rather *all* of them are so to a lesser or higher degree. More specifically, 'vitalism' is a prevalent African ontology according to which 'vital force is an imperceptible energy that inheres in everything in the world, including what is perceptible and also what seems 'inanimate', including rocks.'[22] Indeed, vitalism frequently includes a belief in ancestral existence, that is, the belief that 'people [will] survive the death of their body by virtue of their vital force continuing to reside in an imperceptible realm on Earth'.[23] It is this belief in the ontological suffusion of material entities with vital force, and in particular the belief in the persistence of unembodied vital force that Metz deems unacceptable from a scientific point of view. He therefore proposes an adaptation of vitalism that does respect the strictures of science: 'Supposing that the perceptible, or roughly the 'physical' or the 'natural' in Western terms, is reasonably taken as common ground amongst a large majority of intellectual traditions, I work with a conception of life grounded on it.'[24] Vitalism thus adapted becomes a moral

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[21] See Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?' in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), 165-81; Hilary Putnam, 'Fact and Value' in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 127-49.
[22] Metz, *Relational Theory*, 79.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

theory that values what Metz calls 'liveliness': 'construals of vitality have sense and force when it is understood in physical or naturalist terms, which I often call 'liveliness'. Metz believes that 'most readers will share the judgement that there is something strongly to be preferred about persons with more liveliness than less'.[25] Vitalism reconceived in terms of 'individual liveliness' is not, according to Metz, an implausible moral position – this is because whilst 'vitalism' posits non-material beings or energy as a constitutive part of the material universe, 'liveliness' seeks simply to promote the vitality of biological organisms, naturalistically conceived. Liveliness is consistent with the structures of science; vitalism isn't.

The trouble is that the morality of 'liveliness' which Metz ends up with, and which he proceeds to compare and contrast with his own favoured theory of 'friendliness' is not one which any of his African interlocutors subscribe to. Whilst Metz takes the view that, once we abstract from the contentious metaphysics of 'vital force', we are left with a moral commitment to persons' 'liveliness', for one who does subscribe to 'vital force' as initially set out it is presumably itself normatively significant that everything in the world is suffused with vital force. To think of human beings as inhabiting the natural world as one animated type of being among many others is rather different from thinking of human beings as possessing a sort of 'vitality' or 'liveliness' that is worth promoting. A vitalist metaphysics will include moral commitments that are very different from in kind from a commitment to promote a healthy life style. Consider just one central example – the case of ancestral existence. To the extent to which a vitalist is committed to the persistence of human personhood beyond biological death, the living will continue morally to interact with the living dead, including consulting the latter, taking their interests into account and expecting some contributions to communal well-being from the living dead in return. Yet a morality of 'liveliness' cannot even *register* the existence of post-mortem persons; indeed, it explicitly rules out their existence. It then seems odd of Metz to suppose that all he has done is present a metaphysically neutral version of vitalism's moral commitments – a version which anyone who is a vitalist could easily endorse.

But is Metz not correct in saying that no contemporary metaphysical position is plausible that fails to accepts the constraints of scientific knowledge? Perhaps, but this once

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[25] Ibid.

more begs the question as to what one takes to be the exact nature and status of scientific inquiry and knowledge. It is not clear to me that there is an obvious consensus on this. If, for example, one takes the scientific outlook to be essentially physicalist, then science arguably cannot account for biological life, given that the latter involves more than physics.[26] If, on the other hand, one includes the biological sciences, then it seems that the scientific outlook will be both more inclusive and less precise in its pronouncements on what there is and why (or how). If one takes science to account for all that exists necessarily, its scope will be narrower than if one takes it to account also for what there is contingently.[27] In Western thinking, the natural sciences are usually understood as aspiring towards a complete causal explanation of all occurrent natural phenomena. On this understanding, vitalism would presumably be ruled out on grounds either of its non-physicalism or, more interestingly, on grounds of its less than thoroughgoing causal determinism.[28] Again, depending on how exactly one conceives of vitalism, the latter seems to include natural entities that defy causal explanation. Ancestors are once more the most obvious example: they are credited not only with non-embodied this-world existence but also with agential powers that cannot be subsumed under a deterministic causal framework. Of course, thus conceived, ancestors are simply one more occurrent entity in the natural world whose agency defies causal explanation.[29] But perhaps vitalism tends to apply some notion of agency to *all* natural entities: perhaps the vitalist universe is fundamentally non-deterministic, hence unpredictable. This would render it inconsistent with dominant (but possibly outdated) Western conceptions of the sciences.[30] But is that enough to render vitalism itself wrong or mistaken?

Vitalism, conceived as a belief in a basically animate universe, does not strike me as obviously irrational. It strikes me as a competitor position to Western science, that may not be wholly incompatible with the latter. Vitalism (though not Western science) may tolerate dual causality, for example, i.e., it may tolerate the possibility of two different types of

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[26] John Dupre, *The Disorder of Things. Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1993)

[27] Khalidi, M.A., 'Natural Kinds and Cross-Cutting Categories', *Journal of Philosophy* 95, 33-50.

[28] For illuminating discussion, see Sophie Oluwole, 'On the Existence of Witches', *Second Order* 7.1 (1978), pp. 20-35.

[29] Especially in so far as they are conceived of as a kind of person, ancestors present no special problem in regard of accounting for the possibility of their agency within an otherwise causally determined world.

[30] Quantum-mechanics apparently works with a non-deterministic framework – though it is far beyond my pay-grade to assess this.

causal explanation in regard of the same phenomena.[31] Alternatively, vitalism might accept the sciences as providing an incomplete explanation of natural phenomena: some natural phenomena are subject to causal explanation, others are not. There is nothing intrinsically irrational about this – it is so only if one is already committed to a view of the sciences as affording us a complete causal explanation of all occurrent natural phenomena that one must reject the vitalist alternative. And yet belief in the necessary completeness of the sciences may itself be metaphysical more than scientific, i.e., belief in completeness may not itself be necessary to scientific inquiry.

V. Some Conclusions

On a Western understanding of the natural sciences as affording a complete and exclusive explanation of all occurrent natural phenomena in the world, an ontology such as vitalism is inconsistent with scientific inquiry. But the reverse may not hold: vitalists may not deem their ontological commitments wholly inconsistent with scientific inquiry. Vitalists may simply reject the Western commitment to the completeness of scientific inquiry as metaphysically laden and as resting on a mistaken assumption about the relation between ontology and scientific inquiry. Vitalists may take a more pragmatic approach, viewing the sciences as useful explanatory method in relation to some but not all naturally occurrent processes and phenomena, or taking the sciences to offer partial but incomplete explanations of natural phenomena. Alternatively, vitalists may hold that different types of explanation are in principle available in relation to different kinds of natural phenomena and processes, or even that different types of explanations are available in relation to the same phenomena. But if a vitalist sees no necessary conflict between vitalism and the sciences as one useful of explanatory framework amongst others, then a vitalist might disagree with Metz that vitalism should be rejected on grounds of its inconsistency with the natural sciences.

My claim here is not that an ontology such as vitalism necessarily *is* consistent with the scientific outlook; my claim is only that from what various African philosophers have

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[31] A.K. Appiah, *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992), 107-37; Ifeyani Menkiti, 'Physical and Metaphysical Understanding: Nature, Agency, and Causation in Afrcain Traditional Thought' in Lee Brown (ed.) *African Philosophy. New and Traditional Perspectives* (Oxford University Press 2004), 107-35.

suggested about the possible relation between vitalism (or quasi-materialism) and the sciences the two may be compatible at least on a modified understanding of the nature and aims of the sciences. And I do think it is worth considering the possible distinction between the metaphysics of science and science as a distinctive kind of epistemological or even simply pragmatic inquiry into 'how some things work'. As noted, claims about the completeness of scientific explanation may belong to the former but not to the latter. It seems to me that unless one is as willing to test the claims of the sciences against those of vitalism as one is to test the claims of vitalism against those of the sciences, one risks bringing to bear unawares one's own metaphysical assumptions in the course of critiquing those of others. This latter is my chief worry regarding Metz' otherwise carefully argued and highly ambitious project. Both with regard to his account of the fact / value distinction in general, and with regard to what, more specifically, he takes to count as fact and what as value and how exactly we can or cannot make the cut between them, Metz seems to me often to carry implicit metaphysical commitments that might as easily be put into question as those held by vitalists whom Metz critiques. When he introduces the idea of moral status, Metz offers an ontological grounding of a kind not dissimilar to what he rejects in Gyekye; when he speaks of the Western conception of the natural as the physical world as the common-sense view he glides over that view's distinctive metaphysical commitments, and when he assumes the standpoint of the sciences he appears to regard them as accurately tracking everything there is as a matter of ontological fact. None of these philosophical commitments are as implausible on the face of things – but they do strike me as commitments that are reflective of a particular philosophical tradition: the Western or more specifically, the Anglo-American tradition. It seems odd, in the encounter of two distinctive philosophical traditions – the Anglo-American and the modern African one – to presume that philosophical respectability demands that the first constitute the necessary bedrock of the second. Instead of requiring of vitalists, say, that they adapt their metaphysics to the constraints of Anglo-American conceptions of moral status, might one not equally see vitalism as posing a challenge to those conceptions and hence as reason to reconsider some of the fundamental assumptions and beliefs of the Anglo-American tradition, say?

Return briefly to the idea of ancestral existence. It is clear that Metz thinks the very idea highly implausible:

Imagine an adherent to African ethics addressing the United Nations. What would she reasonably emphasize as something that sub-Saharan cultures can contribute to global thinking about morality? She should not pitch the idea that relationships with ancestors are at the heart of right action, requiring us to remember them, to sacrifice animals to them, and to share libations with them (…). After all, relatively few of the world's people think much of day-to-day life consists of interacting with imperceptible agents who have continued to live with us in a certain place on Earth after the deaths of their bodies and are still thirsty for beer.[32]

Metz may be surprised to learn that quite a few of the world's people apparently continue to embrace the idea of ancestral reverence – I myself was surprised to learn on my course on African philosophy that Chinese, Japanese, and South American students often batted not so much as an eyelid over the idea of ancestral existence. And it is increasingly the case, of course, that the United Nations *is* being addressed by spokespersons of so-called indigenous peoples who precisely set out their rather different conceptions of what it means to be a responsible agent, especially in an environmentally challenged world. But even if the idea of ancestral or some form of this-worldly spiritual existence, or the idea of an animated universe in general were indeed confined to the African continent it should hardly for that reason alone be rejected as unphilosophical or as morally implausible. To the contrary, suitably thinned out – suitably divorced, that is, from particular social practices and associations with particular lineages – the idea of ancestral existence as integral to a normative conception of the person can extend both our view of what it is to be a person and our thinking about the scope of our moral obligations.[33] Consider Ifeanyi Menkiti's elegant conception of the person as a journey 'from an it to an it', according to which a person's process of moral maturation culminates in the possible achievement of ancestorship, and hence survival of biological death.[34] The ideal of ancestorship offers a point of personal moral orientation much as Aristotle's eudaimon does in his ethics. But more than that, the idea connects the living

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[32] Metz, *Relational Moral Theory*, p.49.
[33] On the idea of 'thinning out' thick ethical concepts, see Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope. Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2006), 103-117.
[34] Ifeanyi Menkiti, 'On the Normative Conception of a Peron' in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2006), 324-31.

with the dead as well as with those yet to come. As such, the idea articulates a strongly relational conception of moral personhood that stretches across generations and that, in contrast to Western conceptions of the person appears to have little conceptual difficulty in conceiving the idea of intergenerational moral obligations, for example. I cannot here further discuss of develop the idea of ancestral existence: my point is simply that, given the centrality of the idea of ancestral existence in many African metaphysics, and given Metz' own interest in developing an African inspired relational account of morality, the idea of ancestral existence might have provided a highly distinctive metaphysical resource in terms of which to reflect on the depth of human relationships even across the divide that separates the biologically alive and the biologically deceased. In that respect, Metz rather high-handed dismissal of the metaphysics of vitalism seems to me to have missed a philosophical opportunity.

Where, more generally, does this leave me with regard to Metz' *Relational Moral Theory*? Somewhat ambivalent, I think: as a fellow non-African theorist who sees value in African philosophical thinking new and old, I admire Metz' concerted endeavour to open up these unjustly neglected reflections on the human condition to a wider audience. At the same time, I wonder whether in the very effort to render this tradition more widely accessible, Metz does not all too often fall back on his own tradition's basic metaphysical commitments and assumptions which he appears, in my view mistakenly, to treat as culturally neutral philosophical ground. These remarks should not deflect from the very considerable achievement of *A Relational Moral Theory*. Even if, in the end, I remain somewhat unpersuaded that Metz' approach has preserved what is perhaps most distinctive about modern African thinking – namely its alternative metaphysics – his book will surely do much to stimulate the urgent need for much greater cross-cultural philosophical exchanges than we have been willing to engage in thus far.