African Communitarianism and Difference

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Abstract

There has been the recurrsent suspicion that community, harmony, cohesion, and similar relational goods as understood in the African ethical tradition threaten to occlude difference. Often, it has been Western defenders of liberty who have raised the concern that these characteristically sub-Saharan values fail to account adequately for individuality, although some contemporary African thinkers have expressed the same concern. In this chapter, I provide a certain understanding of the sub-Saharan value of communal relationship and demonstrate that it entails a substantial allowance for difference. I aim to show that African thinkers need not appeal to, say, characteristically Euro-American values of authenticity or autonomy to make sense of why individuals should not be pressured to conform to a group's norms regarding sex and gender. A key illustration involves homosexuality.

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Introduction

Indigenous sub-Saharan values are characteristically communitarian, that is, they tend to prescribe the protection and promotion of harmony, cohesion, consensus, interdependence, community, clan, culture or nation. Philosophers disagree about whether this supra-individual normative focus is good for its own sake (as in Ake 1987; Tutu 1999: 35) or valuable merely as a means towards something else (e.g. Gyekye 1997: 35–76; Bujo 2001). Regardless of that point, the notion that 'the community is prior to the individual' in some way has been central to most African value systems, at least as philosophers from south of the Sahara desert have constructed them over the past 30 years or so.

There is a stark contrast between the communitarian approaches to ethics typical of African philosophy and the individualist values so prominent in Western philosophy, such as pleasure, desire satisfaction, autonomy, independence, rationality, creativity, authenticity and uniqueness. In the light of this contrast, philosophers with Western roots are often concerned about what they see as the 'dark side' (in the words of Louw 2001: 20; Pembroke 2017: 232) of African ethics, regarding a failure to account adequately for the importance of personal liberty and individuality more generally. In addition, there are thinkers from Africa who have voiced similar concerns, explored below.

In this chapter my primary aim is to provide an interpretation of the African ethical tradition that addresses this concern. Of course, there have been many strains of thought about morality in Africa, and one strategy could be to appeal to less prominent, individualist variants (e.g. Oguejiofor 2007; Molefe 2017). However, my goal is instead to provide an understanding of 'the community is prior to the individual' that is sufficiently respectful of difference and, furthermore, to do so without merely positing, as others have, that the individual is not fully constituted metaphysically by the community (e.g. Gyekye 1997: 35–70) or that the community also metaphysically depends on the individual (e.g. Lajul 2017: 43).

In particular, I draw on the relational understanding of right and wrong action and of good and bad character that I have developed over the years (in, for instance, Metz 2010a, 2011, 2012a, 2013, 2014). At the centre of this ethic is a requirement to prize people in virtue of their capacity to commune, that is, to be party to relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life. I argue that this ethic adequately accounts for the importance of individual difference, for instance when it comes to homosexuality, while still being relational and having an African pedigree to a robust degree. I aim to show that African thinkers need not appeal to, say, characteristically Euro-American values of authenticity or autonomy to make sense

of why individuals should not be pushed to abide by a group's heteronormative or gendered expectations.

The rest of this chapter proceeds by first pointing out how characteristically sub-Saharan values appear unable to ground respect for individual difference. I sketch a variety of African communitarian norms that appear incompatible with otherness and also distinguish between four sorts of incompatibility, namely, legal coercion, unequal opportunities, social pressure and perceived obligation. Next, I present the communal moral theory that I have championed as an interpretation of the African ethical tradition. I then apply the Afro-communal ethic to the four respects in which African norms appear incompatible with individuality and show that it can avoid them all, often using homosexuality as an illustration. In the final section, I discuss some respects in which critics might not be fully satisfied with the resolution I have offered. For example, some liberals would point out that the Afro-communal ethic requires participating with others, forbidding isolation from them, and many Confucians would note that although this ethic permits difference, it does not require it and also permits sameness. I conclude that those in the African tradition would be reasonable, at this stage of philosophical debate, to stand their ground against these objections.

Incompatibility Between African Values and Individual Difference

In this section I demonstrate the need to address the tension between characteristically African values, insofar as they are communitarian, and individual difference, for example, with regard to sexual orientation. There are several facets of the African tradition that make it appear as though such a tension has existed and is unavoidable. I canvass the most prominent sources within that tradition responsible for the tension, ranging from gendered accounts of education to duties to uphold customs, as well as specify different forms the tension could take, from legal prohibition of certain behaviours to informal social criticism. I do not yet seek to resolve the tension, saving that for a later section.

Sources of Incompatibility

One reason for thinking that African norms are incompatible with difference is the recurrent maxim that 'the community is prior to the individual' or, rather, the ways that it has often been interpreted. For example, there are those, such as the well-known Nigerian political theorist Claude Ake (1987), who deny that the African tradition accepts individual rights to liberties and hold that it instead prizes group rights. If groups, such as a clan or a nation, alone have rights to integrity and flourishing, then individuals are obligated to do whatever it takes to support them, leaving little space for difference. Ake remarks that African peoples 'do not allow that the individual has any claims which may override that of the society' (1987: 5).

This approach is likely to extend to sexual orientation, which the influential Afrocentric theorist Molefi Kete Asante approvingly points out. He remarks:

> Homosexuality and lesbianism are deviations from Afrocentric thought because they often make the person evaluate his or her own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness. . ..(G)ays and lesbian communities often place their sexual preferences and orientations before their nationalism. . ..An Afrocentric perspective recognizes its existence but homosexuality cannot be condoned or accepted as good for the national development of a strong people. (2003: 72, 73)

Other times the idea is not that the individual has no separate interests, or at least rights, apart from advancing the group, but that the interests of the latter, or of one's fellows as an aggregate, are invariably weightier than the interests of the individual. A South African public policy analyst, Gessler Muxe Nkondo, suggests this when he advocates:

> the supreme value of society, the primary importance of social or communal interests, obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual. This social ideal depends on a notion that proposes a general theory about the ontological priority of society over the individual. (2007: 90; cf. Mbiti 1990: 209; Ikuenobe 2006: 83)

Here, the idea appears to be that since the individual could not exist without society or is dependent on society for his identity and the options available to him, society is morally more important, such that whenever there is a clash, the individual should lose out. Presumably, then, if one's gay sexuality were to upset others or were otherwise contrary to their wishes, one should avoid gay behaviour, suppress one's gay desires and even try to get rid of them.

Another source of the concern that African communitarianism is incompatible with individual difference has to do with personhood. As is well known, it is common in the sub-Saharan tradition to maintain that personhood is, at least in large part, something that is acquired over time. One's basic aim in life should be to become more of a person or a real person (and, traditionally speaking, ideally so much of a person as to become an ancestor). Sometimes the thought has been that, in order to develop one's personhood, one must adopt and support the norms of the society in which one has been reared.

The influential Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) is often read as holding this sort of view (e.g. Manzini 2018), but he is far from the only one whose work suggests it. Consider some quotations from Dismas Masolo, a Kenyan intellectual historian of African philosophy, who at times claims that, for the sub-Saharan tradition, personhood is a matter of: 'incorporating into their lives some of the values deemed by society to be worth pursuing as goals' (2010: 96); functioning 'in the service of socioculturally imposed ends' (2010: 154); adjusting 'one's conduct in accordance with known or assumed expectations of other members within any relational circuit' (2010: 206); shifting 'the focus of their conduct from self to the group where the maintenance of shared values takes precedence' (2010: 206); and being 'expected to protect the customary ways through adherence to them'

(2010: 243). More stark are the remarks of Columbus Ogbujah, a philosopher based in Nigeria:

> In most African traditional cultures, the idea of the individual person is, for the most part, tied to the idea of the community. . ..Each community embodies a traditional culture which is sacrosanct to all members. . ..The primary requirement of tradition on the part of the individual is total compliance with the specific beliefs and customs prevalent in the community. . ..Here, the interest of the community prevails over that of the individual. (2007: 132, 133; see also Ogugua 2007)

It is not clear that Ogbujah is entirely approving of this perspective, as he does at one point acknowledge the risks to individuality. He is, at least, expounding a certain communitarian approach salient in the African philosophical tradition.

As two scholars have recently noted, if one's basic aim should be to acquire personhood and if personhood is acquired by conforming to social norms, then, where social norms are gendered, this African ethic allows only a cramped space for difference in respect of gender (Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014). Social norms have in fact been gendered when it comes to education and work in some traditional sub-Saharan cultures (e.g. Adeyinka and Ndwapi 2002: 18, 21; Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003: 431–432), but the point applies much more broadly to any society that might base the distribution of opportunities on the fact of being male or female (where that is not itself a qualification or a matter of redress). Similar remarks go for sexual orientation.

There are some who argue that homophobia in sub-Saharan Africa is largely a function of British colonial laws and Christian teachings from the United States and elsewhere (e.g. Dugmore 2015). I doubt that these external influences entirely explain anti-gay sentiment in Africa, since there would probably need to have been indigenous 'receptors' in order for these influences to have continued in the post-independence era. However, the deeper point is that the origin of homophobia is not relevant: a value system according to which personhood varies according to the degree to which one has conformed to the expectations of the majority must license homophobia when that is, for whatever explanatory reason, the majority's view.

The ideas that the community is ontologically and morally prior to the individual and that personhood is to be acquired by supporting a society's mores are foundational values amongst some African philosophers and their peoples. They are meant to ground all or at least many other normative categories. It is not only at that level that one encounters tension between African values and individual difference. It is also found when it comes to mid-level principles, norms that are not foundational but are meant to cover more than one area of life, as well as appraisals of particular actions.

For an example of a relevant mid-level principle, there is the recurrent idea that when there is disagreement about how to proceed, the default position should be to reach consensus amongst all those affected. For some scholars, including some contemporary African theorists, the need for consensus fuels an unwelcome drive

for groupthink. In a trenchant passage, South African intellectual Themba Sono suggests, amongst other things, that for sub-Saharan cultures:

> to agree is more important than to disagree; conformity is cherished more than innovation. Tradition is venerated, continuity revered, change feared and difference shunned. …Civilisations of consent demand consensus. …and are thus prone to coercive pressure. (1994: 7)

Michael Eze (2008) has also, with philosophical sophistication, advanced the view that seeking unanimity foreseeably (even if unintentionally) silences minority voices.

Turning, now, to specific cases regarding what is deemed right and good, consider the central norms and values listed by the magisterial historian of African cultures, John Mbiti:

> [B]e kind, help those who cry to you for help, show hospitality, be faithful in marriage, respect the elders, keep justice, behave in a humble way toward those senior to you, greet people especially those you know, keep your word given under oath, compensate when you hurt someone or damage his property, follow the customs and traditions of your society. (1990: 208–209)

Similarly, note that Yvonne Mokgoro, a South African jurist who has championed the ideal of *ubuntu* (a Southern African catchword for morality), says, 'Group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation and collective unity have, among others been defined as key social values of *ubuntu*' (1998: 17). There is little in these quotations suggesting that realizing one's deepest desires or living in a unique way are permitted, let alone that they are good for their own sake to any degree. Instead, the exclusive focus is on the interests, needs and expectations of others, with talk of 'customs', 'traditions', 'conformity' and 'unity' suggesting there is little space for idiosyncratic expression and association.

The above quotations have focused on generalizations about indigenous African cultures. If one were to take less of a bird's-eye view of the continent, and instead focus on distinct sub-Saharan peoples, one at a time, it is likely one would find some exceptions. However, one might well also find more specific instantiations of the broad patterns suggested above. For example, one social scientist judges that in the Maasai culture:

> the cult of the collective is extreme. When I asked a local chief, 'What do you do when you have someone who has exceptional talent in some skill, such as musical ability?' his answer was disapproving: 'We don't like it. He would not be a good *murran* (warrior)'. …(W)here the group was closer to the tourist trail and where the clan occasionally performed entertainment for cash, musical talent was valued as instrumental to the ability to purchase materials for decoration and ritual. This variation serves to underline the rule that utility to the collective is the criterion for valuing individual differentiation. (Nicholson 2005: 259–260)

It is not just difference with regard to gender and sexual orientation that appears not to be accorded much leeway by much African communitarianism, but vocation as well.

So far, I have appealed to accounts of foundational values, mid-level principles and judgements of particular actions that are salient in discussions of African communitarianism and have sought to show that they do not accommodate much individual difference, where that includes the ability to obtain an education or job that is not tied to gender or to have romantic relationships with someone of the same sex. Notice that I have not yet been *criticizing* these aspects of African communitarianism; for all I have said so far, it could be that, say, the Maasai have been right to prefer warriors to musicians. The key point has instead been that *if* one is a friend of difference, then it is hard also to be a friend of the views that social interests are invariably stronger than individual ones, that personhood is constituted by adherence to a given community's standards, that unanimous agreement must be achieved at all costs or that overriding goods include upholding traditions and being deemed useful to society.

Four Ways to Suppress Difference

It is worth distinguishing specific ways in which individual difference might be poorly recognized by a society organized according to the above norms. In my attempt below to find an interpretation of African communitarianism that is supportive of otherness, I aim for one that avoids all four of the following respects in which individuality might be suppressed. These sites are meant to be illustrative and suggestive of broader issues and not to be exhaustive. (For just one instance, I do not discuss a state that denies certain legal opportunities, e.g. to marry people of the same sex.)

First, gay sexual behaviour could be criminalized, as indeed it is by nearly 40 African states (Dugmore 2015). A Parliament could denounce homosexuality as immoral or un-African, make it against the law, impose stiff penalties and robustly enforce this statute. One could also imagine that this country's executive leaders were to routinely say things like gay people, whose heads the state 'will chop off', are 'worse than pigs' (Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe quoted in Manayiti 2013), or are 'vermin' (Gambian President Yahya Jammeh quoted in Allison 2014), or are 'disgusting' (Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni quoted in Landau et al. 2014) or, if they dared to present themselves, would be 'knocked out' (South African President Jacob Zuma quoted in Hawker 2015).

The combination of censure by public representatives and state coercion makes this a particularly intense way to suppress sexual difference, but there are others that would also be burdensome. For example, even if homosexuality, for example, were not criminalized, the law might permit those who run universities and corporations not to admit those who are gay and to dismiss those who are discovered to be. Or the law might allow those in charge of allocating educational and work opportunities to do so on a gendered basis, so that, say, women are prevented from becoming

firefighters and men from becoming nurses. Although it would not be the legislature doing the active discriminating, the effects on people's livelihoods could of course be substantial. In addition, the fact that the public would not go out of its way to use the law to protect equal opportunities for these people would suggest its tacit acceptance of the way they are treated.

A third way in which a value system could license the suppression of difference could be through social pressure. Even if the law permitted gay sex and prohibited discrimination against gay people when distributing competitive goods such as education and jobs, they would not be as free to be themselves as they could be if people were denigrating them or isolating them on a day-to-day, informal basis. If others routinely called gay people names, told them to adopt a different lifestyle, gave them disapproving looks, did not invite them to social events, refused to look at them and so on, the effects would be impairing, despite not emanating from an organization such as the state, a university or a corporation. It would be the collective effects of the behaviour of many individuals that would be responsible for cramping sexual difference, in the way that, for instance, many Americans in the mid-twentieth century treated those in interracial relationships.

Fourth, and finally, a value system could be incompatible with difference in virtue of being believed. If, say, gay people in Africa believed that their foremost duty were to advance the black nation or to uphold traditions that are heteronormative, they would be less inclined to enjoy homosexual relationships. Worse still, they would tend to suffer from psychological splitting, in which they might not recognize that they are gay and could become hostile towards gay people in an unconscious effort to suppress self-awareness.

In the following I aim to provide an interpretation of African communitarianism that avoids all four respects in which difference, at least in respect of gender and sexual orientation, could be occluded. I do not explicitly argue that the above forms of African communitarianism are false or unjustified, instead mainly seeking an instance of it that is much more consistent with individuality than they are. However, insofar as the communal ethic I advance below is both attractive and friendly to difference, then it is implicitly the case that the other, difference-unfriendly forms of African communitarianism are objectionable for being incompatible with the ethic.

An African Ethic of Communion

In demonstrating that a communitarian ethic with an African pedigree need not occlude individual difference, I do not reject the salient sub-Saharan idea that certain ways of relating should be pursued for their own sake. I appreciate the suggestions that 'in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship' (Kasenene 1998: 21) and that with regard to indigenous sub-Saharans '(s)ocial harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good' (Tutu 1999: 35).

Instead of rejecting a basic relationality, I take a cue from the young Karl Marx (1844), who once remarked, 'Above all we must avoid postulating "society" again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual *is the social being*'. I work to

show that there are crucial differences between protecting a society and interacting in prosocial ways, between supporting a community and entering into communion, between upholding an extant way of life and coming to share a way of life and between maximizing others' perceived or subjective well-being and advancing their objective well-being to a reasonable degree. In this section I expound an ethic that is informed by the latter distinctions and then, only in the following section, show that it accounts well for difference.

According to my favoured reading of the African moral tradition (in the following borrowing from Metz 2017a, 2018), an agent is obligated to treat persons as having a dignity in virtue of their capacity to be party to communal relationships. Again, one is to treat people with respect insofar as they are capable of both being communed with and communing. Although I work to avoid using the word 'community', since that is sometimes taken to signify something holist or corporatist, and not relational, I can accept a certain, normative reading of the maxim that 'the community is prior to the individual': one can become a real person, i.e. exhibit moral virtue, only if she relates communally with others.

By 'communion' I intend to capture much of what others sometimes mean by 'fellowship', 'harmony', 'cohesion' and the like. More specifically, I mean the combination of two logically distinct relationships that are often implicit in African characterizations of how to live well. Consider these quotations from a range of African thinkers about sub-Saharan ethics:

> Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all. (Gbadegesin 1991: 65)

> Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group. (Mokgoro 1998: 17)

> The fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good. (Gyekye 2004: 16)

> (T)he purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness. (Iroegbu 2005: 442)

> If you asked *ubuntu* advocates and philosophers: What principles inform and organise your life? What do you live for?….the answers would express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community. (Nkondo 2007: 91)

Sometimes these characterizations of what to aim for in life do speak of 'community', but that is not essential to what I draw from them, which is instead a distinction between two ways of relating. On the one hand, there is considering oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing a way of life, belonging and experiencing oneself as bound up with others. On the other hand, there is achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, acting for the common good, serving others (in one's community) and being committed to the good of others (in one's society). Elsewhere I have worked to distinguish and reconstruct these two facets of a communal relationship with some precision (e.g. Metz 2013, 2017b). For an overview, consider Fig. 1:
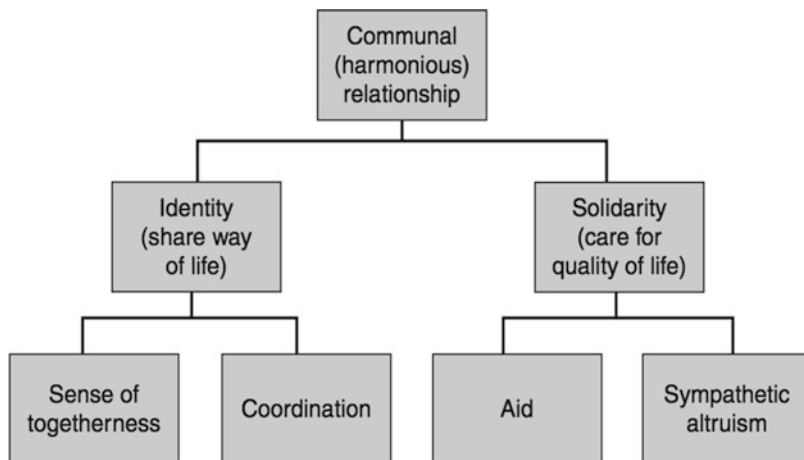
Fig. 1 Schematic representation of communion

It is revealing to understand what I call 'identifying' with others or 'sharing a way of life' with them (i.e. being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of cohesion and cooperative behaviour consequent to them. The attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as in a relationship with others and to refer to oneself as a 'we' (rather than an 'I'), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what others do, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of others' nature and value. The cooperative behaviours include participating with others, being transparent about the terms of interaction, acting on the basis of trust, allowing others to make voluntary choices, working to realize others' goals and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that 'this is who we are'.

What I label 'exhibiting solidarity' with or 'caring' for others (i.e. acting for others' good, etc.) is similarly aptly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behaviour. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented towards other people's good, including an empathetic awareness of their condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The actions are those likely to be objectively beneficial, that is, to meet others' biological and social needs, and not merely to promote their pleasure or desire satisfaction. In addition, they are actions that are (or at least could be) done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person.

By the Afro-communal ethic advanced here, it is not a relationship exhibiting both identity and solidarity that confers a moral status but rather an individual's natural *capacity* for it. Typical human beings, for example, have a full moral status or a superlative final value, i.e. a dignity, insofar as they are in principle *able* both to commune with characteristic human beings and to be communed with by them. This

account of moral standing imparts a robust form of impartiality to the moral principle, such that it is not merely those in a communal relationship with us that matter morally but instead anyone who *could* enter into one.

Having explained what it means to have a dignity in virtue of the capacity to commune, I now specify some of what is involved in treating it with respect. Respecting or honouring a person insofar as she can be party to a communal relationship with us in the first instance means communing with her, rather than ignoring her, let alone subordinating and harming her, which are the discordant or anti-social opposites of communion. Hence, insofar as the capacity to commune has a dignity, sometimes honouring it will include actions that seek to promote the capacity, i.e. creating more people, as well as its actualization, fostering communion with them.

However, the pursuit of such outcomes should not be 'consequentialist' or 'teleological' and instead must be 'deontologically' regulated, in at least two ways. For one, actual communal relationships of which one is a part have some priority relative to not only possible relationships one could have but also the actual relationships of others. To honour communion pro tanto prescribes sustaining one's own ties of identity and solidarity, even if cutting them off would result in marginally more (sites of) communion (whether for oneself or for others). Such is a philosophical reconstruction of the special obligations often accorded to kin and clan in traditional African societies (on which see Appiah 1998). So, although everyone has a dignity by virtue of being capable of communion, when it comes to positive duties to aid, there is some moral reason to do more for those with whom one has already communed.

For a second respect in which the Afro-communal ethic is deontological, honouring the capacity for communal relationship entails that it is normally wrong to seek to realize it (even amongst one's own relations) by using a discordant means against innocents, where discord consists of relationships that are the opposites of communion, i.e. acting on an 'us versus them' attitude, subordinating, harming and doing so consequent to hatred, cruelty or the like. Respecting others insofar as they are capable of communion normally means not aiming to foster it by being extremely discordant with those who have themselves respected communion. However, it can mean being comparably discordant towards those who have misused their capacity to commune, if it is necessary and likely to get them to stop or to compensate their innocent victims (for discussion of this principle in the contexts of self-defence, protection of others and capital punishment, see Metz 2010b).

Putting things together, a principle of treating people with respect in virtue of their capacity to commune entails that wrongdoing, in respect of innocents, is normally a matter of either failing to commune with other people, and so being indifferent to them, or, worse, being discordant. The latter means that those who have not misused their capacity to commune are treated as separate and inferior, subordinated, treated in harmful ways and acted upon consequent to viciousness or similarly negative attitudes. These anti-social ways of relating to those who have done no wrong (viz. have not initially failed to honour people in virtue of their capacity to commune) are arguably what makes it wrong to torture, kidnap, rape and engage in similar human

rights violations as well as other kinds of wrongdoing such as lying, breaking promises and stealing. Such a fundamental account of the nature of wrongfulness is different from, and a plausible rival to, the Western moral theories that it is constituted by degrading autonomy, failing to maximize utility, violating rules that would be reasonable for all to accept or breaking God's commandments.

Beyond the account of communion having emerged from reflection on the remarks of African intellectuals about how to live, the African credentials of the ethic are further established by the fact that it captures well the moral value of many salient traditional practices south of the Sahara desert (or so has been argued elsewhere, e.g. Metz 2017b). For example, it is well known that many indigenous African peoples have mainly sought out reconciliation between the offender and his victims (including those indirectly affected) when a crime was committed, instead of, say, deterrence or retribution. In addition, they have routinely employed collective harvesting and other forms of labour; rather than leaving it to an individual or his family to undertake a large job, all able-bodied members of a village would chip in to lend a hand. These and related ways of living are plausibly understood as grounded on a prescription to treat people as special in virtue of their relational capacity; they are well-conceived as ways of prizing relationships of enjoying a sense of togetherness, participating on a cooperative basis, engaging in mutual aid and doing so out of sympathy and for one another's sake.

Compatibility Between the Afro-Communal Ethic and Difference

In this section, I argue that the ethic expounded in the previous section avoids the tension between African communitarianism and individual difference laid out in the one before it. In particular, I return to the four key respects in which difference, particularly with regard to gender and sexual orientation, could be suppressed, arguing that the Afro-communal ethic does not license any of them. In a nutshell, my claim is that since there is nothing inherently subordinating or harmful in a woman being a firefighter or having sex with another woman, these actions (and ones like them) are not wrong and should not be censured.

Legal Coercion

Recall what is probably the starkest respect in which sexual difference could be suppressed, namely, by being denounced by a country's politicians and criminalized, with rigorous enforcement and harsh penalties. The Afro-communal ethic that I have advanced is not pacifist and instead is meant to justify the use of coercion and other forms of interference with a person's life under certain circumstances. However, failing to bend to norms governing gender and sexuality is not one of them.

The clearest occasions when coercion is justified is if it is, roughly, an essential way to rebut the failure to commune, perhaps by refusing to participate and aid, but particularly by dominating and hurting others. Although it would usually treat a

person disrespectfully to act in an extremely discordant way towards him if he himself had not been discordant, it would not be disrespectful to do so if necessary and likely to counter a comparable discord on his part. If the only way to get someone who is subordinating and harming to stop doing so, or to compensate his victims, were to impose a similar degree of subordination and harm on him, it would not degrade the capacity for communion he has misused; instead, it would be a way of honouring that capacity in his victims.

Now, those who have gay romantic relationships are not thereby being discordant or otherwise failing to relate communally. They are not necessarily isolating themselves from others, let alone oppressing anyone or making anyone objectively worse off in terms of their biological, psychological or social needs. Therefore, state coercion in the form of punishment and threats thereof are unjustified by the Afro-communal ethic.

There are of course those who would object that gay sex spreads disease, such as HIV/AIDS, or fosters paedophilia, which they posit as serious harms. However, what matters for the Afro-communal is whether these associations are in fact true, not whether people happen to say they are true or even sincerely believe they are true. And there is no good evidence that they are true (for just one recent statement, and by researchers in Africa, see Academy of Science of South Africa 2015).

Yet another concern about harm is the prospect of incurring God's or the ancestors' wrath for disobeying commands regarding sexual behaviour. Some would contend that gay people are failing to do what they can to protect society from angry agents in an imperceptible realm ('spirits') and are therefore failing to honour communion. However, I advance the Afro-communal ethic as secular, as a moral theory that potentially anyone from around the world could find attractive regardless of any metaphysical views they might hold transcending naturalist forms of enquiry. And from that perspective, there is again no good evidence that gay sex does incite God or ancestors to cause earthquakes, droughts, floods or plagues. (Another strategy would be to fight fire with fire, by appealing to religious counterevidence, which I leave to others more closely acquainted with, say, oral histories of specific indigenous African peoples.)

Prima facie more compelling from within the ambit of the Afro-communal ethic is the objection that having gay sex would fail to support, and indeed would undermine, a heterosexual way of life that has been shared for a long time by a certain society. If part of treating people with respect means communing with them, then, since that includes identifying with them, one has some strong moral reason to act as they do and not to upset long-standing norms, so the present objection goes.

It is tempting to suggest in reply that gay sex is a private matter and for that reason would not be inconsistent with a public culture. What people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms does not affect others, so a fan of sexual difference might first respond. This response is inadequate, however, insofar as one wants an account of individual difference that would permit an 'outward' or 'open' form of homosexuality. If gay people should be just as free as straight people to display their affection in public, to have their relationships recognized by the state and to be portrayed in a positive light by the mass media, then a 'closeted' response will not suffice.

Instead, there are other, stronger reasons for thinking that participating in a gay romantic relationship would not wrongfully undermine communion, properly understood. For one, sharing a way of life need not mean pursuing the same specific ends. Participating with others on a cooperative basis does not require adopting the same particular aims in life, and it could instead mean that people do what they can to help each other reach their respective goals. After all, think of an extended family, the quintessential illustration of communion in the African tradition. One brother wants to be an engineer, one cousin wants to be a homemaker, one uncle wants to brew beer, and there is no thwarting of a shared way of life simply in virtue of people pursuing such different vocations. Similar remarks go for pursuing different romantic relationships. A shared way of life exists if people think of themselves as a 'we', take pride and shame in each other's accomplishments and failures, like being together, interact with one another, and do so on the basis of trust, openness and agreement.

In addition, let us focus more closely on the aspect of agreement that is inherent to sharing a way of life, as construed here. Sharing a way of life does not consist of everyone living the same way, or else the colonial imposition of European lifestyles would have counted as an aspect of communion. Instead, genuinely sharing a way of life means coming together and staying together of people's own accord; that is part of what is notably valuable about a marriage, one of the most intense forms of communion. Where gay people (and their allies) reject a culture according to which only heterosexual relationships are accepted, then that culture is not in fact 'shared' in the relevant sense.

At this point, one might accept that living the same way is not necessary for sharing a way of life but contend that it would enhance it (something I have admittedly suggested in past, e.g. in Metz 2013: 85). Even if one can respect people's capacity to share a way of life without living as they do, and instead roughly by coordinating one's interaction with them on even-handed terms, it seems there would be a more intense sharing of life if one lived the same way. In reply I argue that even if that were true, it would not entail that gay people would wrongfully undermine communion, for two reasons.

First, although gay people would not be living the way that straight people do, nor would straight people be living the way that gay people do. If living the same way is good to some degree or would demonstrate all the greater a prizing of communion, it remains an open question whether it should be the majority or the minority who changes (or even whether everyone should seek a place closer to the middle of the spectrum of sexual behaviour!).

Second, even if one is granted for the sake of argument that there would be a more robust sharing of a way of life in one sense if everyone had the same kind of romantic relationships, there would be much less of it in another, weightier sense. One of the most intense forms of communion is romantic love, and that would be seriously thwarted if gay people did not act on their natural desires and instead covered them over in an effort to impart unity to the broader society. Relationships of romantic love, and similarly intense forms of communion, include people exhibiting robust concern for one another, doing what will benefit each other in the light of their

respective particularities. Hence, participating in gay romantic relationships is not on balance immoral for being discordant and so does not justify a discordant, viz. coercive, response by the state.

Unequal Opportunity

Even if the state did not restrict civil liberties when it comes to gay romantic relationships, remember that it could still allow other parties not to award socio-economic opportunities on that basis and others. Another way that difference could be suppressed would be for those in charge of allocating certain positions in schools or businesses not to give them to people because they are gay or female, for instance. Whereas in the previous sub-section I needed to show that the Afro-communal ethic forbids using the law for a certain purpose, here I need to show that it requires using the law, specifically to prohibit discrimination in the distribution of education and occupation.

As per the principle advanced above, the Afro-communal ethic justifies legal coercion and related forms of discord most clearly when necessary and likely to rebut a comparable initial discord. I therefore work to show that failing to allow others to obtain a degree or a job simply because of their gender or sexual orientation is discordant, a serious failure to respect people in virtue of their capacity to commune. That is not hard to do.

By the Afro-communal ethic, all agents must treat others as having a dignity in virtue of their capacity to be communed with and to commune. More specifically, they must treat people with equal respect, supposing that their communal nature has reached a certain threshold. Where institutions have a substantial influence on the course of people's lives in a society, they must, in turn, operate according to a principle of equal opportunity, roughly awarding positions on the basis of qualifications. Doing so is the only way to treat others as equals, particularly when it comes to caring for their quality of life; for positions not only foster goods such as self-esteem and wealth for those who hold them, but also enable those who hold them to actualize their own, special capacity to aid others (on which see Metz 2015). Failing to let a person become a firefighter merely because she is a woman is a failure to treat her as having a dignity in virtue of both her ability to be cared for and her ability to care for others. Unequal opportunity of this sort is instead degrading of these capacities and hence licenses a coercive response from the state, such as allowing, at the very least, civil suits that would effect reparation.

One might, with some irony, try to object to this argument in the ways that libertarians in the West do to the enforcement of equal opportunity. Libertarians maintain that forcing a business owner to award a job on the basis of qualifications objectionably interferes with his ability to make an autonomous choice with his property. It is his job, and so he may give it to whomever he pleases and for whichever reason, so the objection goes. Analogously, one might suggest that forcing a business owner to award a job on the basis of qualifications objectionably

interferes with his ability to commune, in the sense of his right to identify and exhibit solidarity with whomever he likes in the workplace.

I accept this reasoning when, and only when, it comes to mom-and-pop stores or small private universities (see Metz 2015: 200–202). When an institution does not have many staff and wants to impart a certain ethos in its institutional culture, and when that institution, or a collection of them, has very little influence on the allocation of socio-economic goods, then considerations of communion probably allow it to depart from equal opportunity (for one who might disagree, see Bilchitz 2011a, b). Under those conditions, it would be like an individual choosing a romantic partner, where, although certain forms of discrimination might be wrong (or at least a vice) when making such a choice, since doing so would not prevent others from living well, the state would also be wrong to use force to rebut it. However, where a small number of decision-makers determine whether lots of people in a society are able to access positions that are crucial for their ability to be communed with and to commune, equal respect for the latter's dignity requires those in control of the resources to provide an equal chance to access them.

Social Pressure

In the previous sub-section, I acknowledged that people should be left alone to choose with whom to have as a romantic partner. Does the logic of that position mean that people, outside of a public or otherwise large-scale institutional context, should consider themselves free to interact with others however they like?

Notice that, as it stands, the question is poorly framed. It could be asking whether the state may rightly prohibit people from being sexist or homophobic in their day-to-day interactions with others or whether behaving that way is permissible. I address the latter, moral issue first, before proceeding to the former, legal one.

When it comes to social pressure, such ostracism and criticism, it is a kind of discord and so is governed by the principle already considered in this chapter, namely, that evincing serious discord towards another person is normally justified as a way to rebut his own initial serious discord. If a woman is a firefighter or is in a lesbian relationship, she is not thereby being discordant, as per the previous two sub-sections, and it would therefore be wrong to treat her as anathema.

One might suggest that it is only a small thing to share the word of God with her or to avoid sitting next to her when out for lunch at a restaurant. That does not seem to count as 'serious discord'. However, it becomes a heavy burden when many people do such things on a routine basis. The collective effects amount to substantial interference and harm, and so participating in a pattern of behaviour that foreseeably has those effects is wrong, by the Afro-communal ethic.

It does not obviously follow from this ethic that one is obligated to seek out gay friends or female firefighters or the like. There is a difference between not actively befriending those who are different, or even discretely avoiding them, on the one hand, and conveying negative attitudes in the way one interacts with them, on the other. The latter is what is most clearly discordant and wrongful. (It is worth noting

that discrete avoidance is at least a manifestation of bad character to some degree, even if it does not wrong those who are avoided. It is a vice because, even if someone who is different is not entitled to your companionship, choosing not to become his companion because he is different is a failure to see him as special in virtue of his human, communal nature.)

Turning now to whether the state may use force to rebut such a wrong, much turns on empirical matters. Would force be necessary to get people to stop making homophobic comments, or might education be sufficient? Would force be likely to help get them to stop, or would it provoke a backlash? Would force be comparable to the degree of discord they are dishing out?

It appears to me that, in some cases, the use of force is justified. In particular, I suspect the Afro-communal ethic justifies South Africa's law, specifically its Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, that, at least on one reading, prohibits people from conveying ideas that could reasonably be construed to demonstrate a clear intention to be hurtful or to promote hatred. Directing homophobic or misogynist slurs against particular individuals, even if not likely to incite violence, should be plausibly be made against the law. It is worth imagining, for a moment, what it would be like to be constantly subjected to them if one is not.

Perceived Obligation

The fourth way that difference with regard to at least gender and sexual orientation could be occluded that I address concerns the individual's treatment of himself. If a woman were to believe that her duty is to be an obedient wife and homemaker and a gay person were to believe that her desires are bad, they would be less inclined to be as much of themselves as they would be otherwise, both behaviourally and psychologically. The guilt, shame and related emotions would inhibit them from living the lives that would resonate with their deepest selves and would also constitute forms of self-harm.

As previous discussion in this section has sought to demonstrate, there is nothing discordant or otherwise wrongful about a woman being a firefighter or a lesbian. With such ways of life, there is no inherent failure to prize others' dignity in virtue of their capacity to commune, no degradation of anyone's ability either to identify with others or to exhibit solidarity with them.

If anything, for a woman to fight fires or to have a lesbian lover would be manifestations of communion and so respectful of others. By the Afro-communal ethic, work is particularly important insofar as it is a way for a person to exhibit solidarity with others. Not just any form of labour will do, e.g. a cigarette manufacturer is not acting in beneficent ways, ways that are likely to meet others' needs or enable them to live objectively good lives. In contrast, a firefighter is patently engaging in work that cares for others' quality of life. And, then, a romantic relationship is one of the most intense realizations of communion possible, perhaps characteristically rivalled only by a parent-child relationship. It is a way of relating in which a sense of togetherness, cooperative participation, mutual aid and altruistic

sympathy are all particularly strong. None of these dimensions of relationship is contingent on the sex of the beloved.

Concluding Remarks: Unresolved Issues?

In the previous section, I argued that an ethic prescribing respect for others' capacity to commune is compatible with substantial support for individual difference, often invoking homosexuality as an example. However, there are some prima facie reasons to think that the union is imperfect, to which I respond here.

First off, I had noted above that some scholars have thought that the demand for consensus in the face of political and related disagreements tends to oppress minorities; they are pushed to share the same views as majorities, so the objection goes. The Afro-communal ethic appears vulnerable to this way in which difference could be suppressed, since it, I have admittedly argued elsewhere (Metz 2011: 549–550, 554–556, 2012b: 70–72), supports the view that consensus-seeking is apt.

I submit that there is some real irony in this objection, since, on the face of it, the advantage of seeking unanimous agreement, and not resting content with majority rule, is precisely that minorities would have a much greater voice in such a polity (see, e.g. Wiredu 2000)! The potential problem would not be with a requirement that all agree to a certain policy, and it would instead lie in *pressuring others to agree* when they do not. And this latter orientation can be avoided in consensus-oriented decision-making. Readers have likely been in academic committee meetings, which typically look for consensus in the first instance. Often enough, those who are in the minority and cannot yet sign onto the majority's inclination are able to stand their ground and are not threatened, exploited, shamed or the like into agreeing with it. Instead, discussion often continues until either the minority comes around or the majority changes what is on offer to obtain the minority's consent.

Here, it is important to notice the difference between coming to share the same judgement, i.e. adopting the same policy for the same reasons, on the one hand, and not having such serious problems with a policy to prevent it from going ahead, on the other. Consensus of the sort justified by the Afro-communal ethic prescribes only the latter, as a way to relate cooperatively and to do what is expected to be good enough for all, including minorities whose interests would likely be neglected by resting content with majority rule. Insofar as the relevant sort of consensus does not essentially include the same judgement, it would not tend towards groupthink.

A second reason for suspecting that the Afro-communal ethic does not adequately recognize individual difference is likely to be voiced from the liberal tradition and particularly its self-ownership and libertarian strands. Any ethic that deserves the label 'African' is probably going to require (cooperative) participation. The Afro-communal ethic I have advanced does prohibit one from isolating oneself in the sense of never engaging in projects with others and never going out of one's way to improve others' lives. However, one might have the intuition that it is all right to live as a hermit, if that is one's choice.

For all I can tell, this intuition is not widely shared by those steeped in sub-Saharan cultures. In addition, upon reflection even those in Western traditions can probably recognize a kernel of truth in the characteristically African demand for cohesion. When it comes to *morality*, it is plausible to think that one must share of oneself, that the dignity of others matters to such a degree as to require one to offer them one's time, effort, talents and resources. The Afro-communal ethic is not being advanced as a comprehensive account of how to live, and so it is open to suggest that there are other, non-moral values that support isolation and that might sometimes even override moral values. When it comes to right and wrong, however, people plausibly have duties to come closer together.

A third, and for now final, concern about my proposed reconciliation between Afro-communitarianism and individual difference would be natural to come from two quite divergent sources, the East Asian Confucian tradition and the Western existentialist one. Both of these traditions tend to value difference in itself, whereas the Afro-communal ethic appears not to value difference in that way.

For many Confucian philosophers, harmony is the ultimate good, with harmony consisting of different elements coming together and being integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out and something new is created (e.g. Li 2014). One of the most influential sayings from *The Analects* is, 'The gentleman seeks harmony not sameness, the petty person seeks sameness not harmony' (translated by Chan 2014: 91). Think, for example, of a soup in which water, carrots, onions and other vegetables are brought together; the ingredients retain their distinctness, but they are combined in a way that is novel and productive.

Interestingly, parts of the Western existentialist tradition share with the Confucian tradition a focus on the final value of difference. Themes of individual authenticity, autonomy, uniqueness and creativity are salient, where these are often taken to be basic goods that merit pursuit for their own sake (for just one, recent statement, see Tshivhase 2013).

In contrast to views that take difference to be worth pursuing as an end, the Afro-communal ethic roughly takes relationships of identity and solidarity to be. The key point is that while these relationships, I have argued above, *permit* difference, they do not *require* it. Although one may coordinate one's behaviour with others in an attempt to realize one's own goals that differ from theirs, one may instead decide to adopt others' goals as one's own. There is nothing in the ethic that prohibits one from copying others, conforming to extant norms and putting others' interests ahead of one's own, if one freely chooses to do so.

In reply, I again emphasize the distinction between a moral theory, or at least one focused on other-regarding duties, on the one hand, and a complete account of how to live, on the other. There is intuitively nothing *immoral* if a person were to neglect his own individuality and instead to take over other people's norms, standards or goals. He would not be *wronging others* in doing so. I share the judgement that he would not be living the best sort of life, but doubt that the problem is that he would have done something that merits guilt, resentment or some other sort of morally informed response. Confucians are particularly likely to disagree. However, let the

cross-cultural exchange on that point begin. (For written comments on a prior draft of this chapter, I thank David Bilchitz, Elvis Imafidon and Siseko Kumalo.)

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