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Perspectives on Identity, Decolonial Ethics
and Comparative Philosophy

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Chapter 15

Relational normative thought in *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism

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15 Relational normative thought in *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism

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1 Introduction

Anglo-American and European normative philosophy is essentially individualist in character, while African philosophy is of a collectivist kind. Such general statements are common within the comparative literature on these philosophical traditions. Individualism considers the individual, taken separately, to be of sole and ultimate concern. The most prominent example of individualist normative thought are the various types of liberalism currently predominant in Anglo-American and European philosophy and politics. Collectivism, by contrast, holds that it is the community itself that is of normative concern. With its decidedly communalist orientation, African philosophy seems to be based precisely on such a collectivist approach to normative thought.

Such homogenizing ascriptions, however, are misleading for at least two reasons. First, they risk falsely suggesting a homogeneity among African or Anglo-American and European normative philosophy that ignores the diversity of philosophical traditions that have been and continue to be shaped by controversies over fundamental concepts of normative thought rather than by widespread agreement. Second, the representation of the domain of normative thought as being either individualist or collectivist is too narrow. It conceals a third perspective: Thaddeus Metz claims that African philosophy is best interpreted as neither individualist nor collectivist,¹ as it puts relationships between people at the centre of normative concern, not individuals or communities.

In fact, relational forms of normative thought have attracted increasing attention in the comparative literature. As Sandra Harding has pointed out, African ethics and the Western feminist ethic of care share an emphasis on praiseworthy relations (Harding 1987).² Similarly, Daniel Bell and Metz have highlighted affinities with regard to the crucial importance accorded to harmonious relationships between African and Chinese philosophy (Bell/Metz 2011).³ Some even suggest that Marxist and Christian thought need to be reinterpreted in relational terms (see Metz/Miller 2016: 2). These references certainly testify to the perceived attractiveness of the relational paradigm. If, however, relational normative thought covers approaches as diverse as African, Feminist, Chinese and possibly Marxist and Christian ones, one may wonder: What exactly does relationality mean? What is it that these approaches share? And what, if anything, is particular about relationality as compared with other, non-relational approaches?

This chapter aims to clarify the notion of relationality in normative thought by bringing African relational thought into conversation with a fourth body of literature, over and beyond Anglo-American or European Feminism and Chinese approaches, namely republicanism. More specifically, I will concentrate on the southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and on Neo-republicanism as developed by Philip Pettit (Pettit 1997; Pettit 2012). By picking out two particular contemporary approaches within the African and the Anglo-American or European philosophical tradition, I aim to move beyond simplifying contrasting schemes such as Western/African or Male/Female ethics. What I am interested in is the relational form of normative thought. I will defend neither a particular version of relational normative thought nor the relational approach in general. Rather, I will show how different dimensions of relational thought operate in different ways within the two approaches I compare. Hence, instead of comparing principles or values, I am interested in different *forms* of relational arguments that help clarify what it means to pursue a relational approach to normative thought.

I will first summarize some relational features of normative thought in *Ubuntu* (2.) and in Neo-republicanism (3.). Against this background, I propose a way of systematizing relational thought by distinguishing four dimensions of relationality: the object of normative concern, the grounds of normative concern, the content of normative concern and normative epistemology. While *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism broadly share a relational perspective on the question of what matters normatively and why it does, as well as on how to reach normative judgments, they differ with regard to relational content: Neo-republicanism not only formulates a weaker, negative account of relationality than the positive one advocated by proponents of *Ubuntu*, it also concentrates on a perspective on relationality that has been lacking in the comparative literature so far, the structural one as opposed to the interactional and virtue-based one.⁴ These different perspectives arguably reflect different domains of normativity: the ethical, the moral and the political (4.). To conclude, I sketch some preliminary thoughts on how they relate to one another (5.).

2 Relational thought based on *Ubuntu*

The notion of *Ubuntu*, translated broadly speaking as humanness, is often taken to represent the core of African ethics and worldviews (see Mnyaka/Mothlabi 2005: 215). Yet, what exactly *Ubuntu* stands for is a contentious issue. It is both a highly influential and a notoriously elusive notion. Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi polemically state that “the notion of ubuntu has enjoyed such popular appeal that it can be said that it has become anything to anyone who so wishes to deploy it” (Matolino/Kwindigwi 2013: 201). It therefore seems helpful to distinguish three contexts in which the notion of *Ubuntu* is mobilized: First, *Ubuntu* as an actual and/or reconstructed worldview and practice ascribed to (precolonial) African societies (see Mnyaka/Mothlabi 2005); second, *Ubuntu* as a political discourse, which originated in the fight for liberation in Zimbabwe and South Africa around the idea of mobilizing *Ubuntu* as a resource to forge a new national

identity⁵; and third, *Ubuntu* as a philosophical concept that provides a contribution to philosophical debates, particularly (though not exclusively) with regard to normative issues (Shutte 2001; Ramose 2005; Metz 2007; Murove 2014). In what follows, I focus on the normative side of two philosophical accounts of *Ubuntu*. Both are decidedly relational in being primarily concerned with a particular kind of relationships, namely harmonious ones. Yet, while the first conceives of *Ubuntu* as a perfectionist ideal aiming to develop good character, the second focuses on an account of morally right action.

2.1 Ramose's perfectionist account of Ubuntu

One prominent and highly influential philosophical account of *Ubuntu* is Mogobe Ramose's *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. It starts from the notion of *Ubu-ntu*, understood as be-ing human, that is, as human-ness (Ramose 2005: 37). Ramose emphasizes that this notion of be-ing is a dynamic one; it represents both being and becoming human. In fact, being and becoming human are not distinct and in opposition to each other but rather two inseparable aspects of a holistic view of reality (39). The insoluble link between the "be-ing becoming" and the "temporarily having become" (36) is expressed through the hyphenated writing of be-ing and *ubu-ntu*. The prefix *Ubu-*, evoking the general idea of enfolded be-ing, is oriented towards *-ntu*, that is, towards unfoldment in the concrete manifestation of being (36). Hence, *Ubuntu* does not merely refer to being human in a static sense; rather, it implies the imperative to actually become human: "What is decisive then is to prove oneself to be the embodiment of *ubu-ntu* (*botho*) because the fundamental ethical, social and legal judgment of human worth and human conduct is based upon *ubu-ntu*" (37).

The basic normative requirement of *Ubuntu* is that one affirm "one's human-ness by recognizing the same in others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them" (Ramose 2005: 97). The notion of human-ness – as opposed to humanism – reflects the dynamic understanding of be-ing. It emphasizes that "motion is the principle of be-ing" and that "the forces of life manifest themselves in an infinite variety of content and form" (149) that cannot be fixed by describing them as humanism. The notion of *Ubuntu* responds to this instability of be-ing by calling on individuals to develop and display human-ness through humane relations with others to preserve and maintain cosmic harmony in all spheres of life (46).⁶ Humane relations are characterized by human equality, reciprocity and solidarity, reflecting the idea that "one human being is deemed to be the same thing, namely, a human being in relation to another human being" (99) and by the principle of sharing the joys and sorrows of life, the goods of the earth and personal property (100). Thus, as Ramose summarizes his view, "[s]haring and caring for one another are basic tenets of African morality" (102).

Ramose's account of *Ubuntu* is by no means collectivist. *Ubuntu* does not refer to the community, taken as a normative entity in its own right. In fact, he emphasizes "the individual human being is an object of intrinsic value in its own right" (Ramose 2005: 97). Affirming one's own humanness through the recognition of

humanness in others means considering the individual other as well as oneself as worthy of dignity and respect. This entails thinking of the individual not merely as an object but rather as a subject of intrinsic value in its own right (149), that is, as a “wholeness acquiring rights as such” (151). At the same time, Ramose’s account is not individualistic either. It focuses on how humanness manifests itself within communal relations between individuals. Ramose maintains that an individual only counts as truly human when relating to others, and that means in the context of actual humane relations (99). Treating the individual other with dignity and respect and recognising one’s own humanness in others expresses the idea of individuals as being part of a “oneness” (99). The unceasing movement of be-ing “makes sense only if we recognise that the forces of life do not belong to anyone” (149). Human-ness itself is essentially a shared property. Others do not merely present a context for displaying one’s own humanity. They are part of what it means to be human and to maintain harmony. Hence, what matters is not the individual, taken in the abstract, but rather harmonious relations individuals establish among each other.

Reading Ramose’s account of *Ubuntu* through the categories of Anglo-American or European normative thought, one might be inclined to insist that there is, after all, an individualist thrust to *Ubuntu* given that it is a perfectionist notion, calling on us to realize our distinctively human nature. It might evoke a narrow, self-regarding individualism as the focus on personal growth seems to condone a somewhat self-centred ethic concerned primarily with turning oneself into a better person. Hence, as Metz argues, on such a perfectionist view, ultimately “it is one’s own good that has fundamental moral worth” (Metz 2007: 332). The good of others only seems to matter indirectly, as part of what it means to realize one’s own self.

This criticism, however, is itself based on an individualist understanding of ethics: Whether it is my own good or the good of others that is taken to be of ultimate value, both views remain individualist in the sense of concentrating on the good of individuals. A decidedly relational reading of Ramose’s account of *Ubuntu*, by contrast, emphasizes that communing with others is neither solely for my own sake nor for that of others. The focus is on our shared humanity that we develop through communing with each other and that allows us to preserve cosmic harmony. On this reading, Ramose’s perfectionism is not individualistic in the sense of focusing on self-centred self-realization precisely because developing and affirming one’s humanness is essentially constituted by recognizing our common humanity in others, that is, seeing our own humanity as being bound up in that of others and embodying *ubu-ntu* through communing with them. It is itself a relational form of perfectionism. Realizing one’s *relational self* does not mean giving priority to one’s own good. Neither does it entail prioritizing the good of others. It consists of how one relates to others.

Other authors support such a relational reading of the perfectionist understanding of *Ubuntu*. Murove argues that the notion of *Ubuntu* needs to be understood against the background of the “worldview of relationality” that underpins it, that is, by the “original understanding of a human being as a relational being” (Murove 2014: 37). That in turn means “the definition of *Ubuntu* as humanness

is dovetailed by this presumption – namely, that humanness is our existential precondition of our bondedness with others” (Murove 2014: 37). Developing one’s humanness therefore is not a self-centred endeavour whereby one reaches out to others merely in order to improve one’s own character. Rather, the human aspects of our nature already relate us to others. Hence, humanness can only be understood, developed and displayed through developing this relational aspect of our selves. Similarly, Augustine Shutte emphasizes, “although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded” (Shutte 2001: 30).⁷ Selfishness certainly is not the same as individualist normative thought. One might defend individualism without condoning selfishness, such as when the good of other individuals is deemed more important than one’s own. Yet, the point Shutte highlights is that, from the point of view of *Ubuntu*, the very idea of personal fulfilment can only be understood in terms of social relations with others. Any normative reasoning based on striving to develop one’s own humanness already makes reference to others and their humanness. Relational perfectionism is geared towards expressing and developing the oneness of being human, not the alleged humanness of merely being one.

2.2 Metz’s interactional account of Ubuntu

Perfectionist accounts of *Ubuntu* seem to be dominant in the literature (see Metz 2007: 331). Yet, Metz develops an alternative account based on the fundamental value of harmonious relationships without invoking any perfectionist underpinning. In fact, Metz’s approach does not pertain to character. Rather, he defends “a comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones” (321). His aim in spelling out such an *Ubuntu*-based principle for evaluating right actions lies, ultimately, in comparing and contrasting it with principles advocated in the Anglo-American or European traditions, such as utility or respect (321). The principle he generates from extant literature postulates that an “action is right insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will” (338).⁸ It requires us to commune through identifying with others by sharing a form of life and considering oneself a part of it and through exhibiting solidarity with others by caring for their quality of life. While Metz draws on the same normative content as Ramose, emphasizing the value of caring and sharing with others, he approaches this content from a different normative perspective: Caring and sharing, that is, solidarity and identity are (primarily) a matter of performing right actions, not of living a genuinely human way of life.

One might argue that Metz’s account nevertheless retains a reference to character traits. The notions of shared identity and love (as the combination of shared identity and good will [Metz 2007: 337]) seem to refer to an attitudinal dimension that extends beyond particular acts. After all, while particular acts might well be expressions of shared identity or love, the latter transcend the individual act. We would not speak of an act as a manifestation of love or shared identity if that

affection or sense of belonging was not rooted in a corresponding disposition that outlasts this act. Shared identity and love seem to consist in a disposition to identify with others or to display affection rather than simply to do so on a case-by-case basis. Still, Metz focuses on what they entail for the evaluation of particular acts, setting aside how to evaluate a good character. This change of focus is in part motivated by his rejection of perfectionist accounts. In fact, initially Metz pitched his own preferred view as a “communitarian” rendition of *Ubuntu* that better captures the communalist nature often ascribed to African thought than the perfectionist accounts of *Ubuntu*, which he takes to have an individualist, egocentric leaning (333, 337).

In recent work, however, Metz has emphasized and developed the *relational* nature of his account (Metz 2010; Metz 2012; Metz 2013b; Metz 2016; Metz/Miller 2016). The basic idea is that what is special about human beings is their capacity to be in communal relationships with others. It is this relational capacity that grounds our moral status and thus warrants respect from others, not relationships as such, as he suggested earlier (Metz 2012: 393; Metz 2016: 180).⁹ Right actions are construed as respecting and valuing this status *by relating* to them in a certain way. In cashing out what this means, Metz now puts less emphasis on actually seeking to commune with others; respecting our capacity to commune can take various forms including not degrading this capacity, honouring existing relationships and possibly helping others to commune (see Metz 2016: 186). Yet, his account still differs substantially from individualist accounts in being based on a relational capacity and in being concerned not primarily with how individuals fare, but rather with how they relate to one another. And it is not collectivist as it accords moral status to individuals, not communities.

In fact, it was Metz who highlighted that *Ubuntu* suggests a third way of approaching normative thought. Instead of focusing on facts about individuals, such as their needs, or facts about a community, such as a certain collective identity, it draws attention to the way we relate to one another and thus to the fundamental moral value of a particular kind of social relationship. Metz maintains that it is precisely this relational form of argument that best articulates “the most central strand of sub-Saharan ethical thought” (Metz 2012: 388). In this sense, the relational reading of Ramose’s perfectionist account of *Ubuntu* suggested above is certainly in the spirit of Metz’ own understanding of African normative thought. That, however, means that the crucial difference between their accounts lies not in relationality as such. Rather, the accounts differ with regard to the object of normative enquiry: While Ramose conceives of *Ubuntu* in terms of a relational account of the good person who realizes the valuable aspects of human nature, Metz focuses on a relational answer to the question of what makes an action a right action.

3 Relational thought in Neo-republicanism

Republicanism arguably formulates the most powerful challenge to liberalism within contemporary Anglo-American and European philosophy. The republican

tradition is older than the liberal one, going back to Athens and Rome and the adaptation of ancient political thought in the early modern period. However, it gradually fell into oblivion with the rise of liberalism that went hand in hand with the rise of a commercial class and its interest in not hampering economic activity. Under these new circumstances, the republican emphasis on the common good, collective decision-making and civic virtue did not seem relevant any more. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that philosophers in the European and Anglo-American context started to rediscover the republican tradition in order to develop a systematic alternative to liberal political philosophy (see Arendt 1960; Taylor 1989; Habermas 1996). Currently, the most influential approach within this republican revival is Neo-republicanism, as developed by Pettit.

The core of Neo-republicanism is the ideal of non-domination. Pettit casts it as a conception of freedom and develops it in critical engagement with classic liberal theories of freedom (Pettit 1997: chapters 1 and 2). Classic liberals and libertarians conceive of political freedom in terms of non-interference. The basic idea is that the individual needs to be able to make choices without suffering interference from others. Pettit, by contrast, draws attention away from the number and importance of unobstructed choices and towards how persons relate to one another. He takes freedom to be constituted by a status that protects against the arbitrary power of others. Freedom in the sense of non-domination thus is an account of the free person, not merely of free choice (Pettit 2007).

The notion of domination refers to power asymmetries that deny others equal status and thus prevent them from relating to their fellows on equal terms, being able to look them in the eye without the need to bow or scrape (Pettit 2012: 82). Pettit cashes it out as the “capacity to interfere [...] on an arbitrary basis [...] in certain choices that the other is in a position to make” (Pettit 1997: 52). This conception nicely brings out the two main differences from the liberal ideal of non-interference. On the one hand, non-domination runs deeper than non-interference as it deems the mere *capacity* to interfere as a constraint on freedom, over and beyond instances of actual interference. This wide account of power is meant to capture the intuition that even the slave of a benevolent master who refrains from interfering with her slave remains a slave. As long as she retains the capacity to interfere at will, she dominates the slave (Pettit 1997: 31). The notion of domination is concerned less with what people actually do and more with how their relationship is structured.

On the other hand, the ideal of non-domination is narrower than non-interference: Neo-republicans emphasize that only *arbitrary* interference is problematic. Non-arbitrary interference that is forced to track my interests (Pettit 1997: 52), or as Pettit has put it more recently, that is under my control (Pettit 2012: 245), does not compromise my freedom, as it does not entail being subjected to the will of others. This point reflects the idea that some interference through social and legal institutions may be required in order to ensure that everyone enjoys the status of non-domination (Pettit 1997: 122).

Like the different renderings of *Ubuntu* sketched above, Neo-republicanism is critical of both collectivist and individualist ethics. In contrast to communitarian

positions that are sometimes also referred to as ‘republican’ (see Sandel 1996; Taylor 1989), Neo-republicans do not consider community the core focus of normative thought. In fact, Pettit is very critical of any account that might jeopardize the rights of individuals for the sake of a greater collectivity. He puts a lot of emphasis on devising institutional mechanisms for preventing a tyranny of the majority (see Pettit 2004). Furthermore, he is wary about positive conceptions of freedom that might legitimize coercion in the name of greater, true freedom. Just like the liberal conception of non-interference, he casts the ideal of non-domination as a decidedly negative account of freedom, focusing on the absence of external obstacles to individual freedom (Pettit 1997: 27–31).

However, Neo-republicanism also does not take individuals considered separately as its subject matter. This is what sets it apart from liberalism: On liberal accounts, the free individual is able to make choices without interference from others. Behind this idea, largely dominant in European and Anglo-American political philosophy, lies a conception of the individual considered separately, in isolation from her social relations. In fact, others are conceived of as a potential threat that she needs to be protected against by securing a sphere of uninterfered, unobstructed choice. Neo-republicans, by contrast, hold that the problem is not interference as such, but rather being subjected to the will of others. From this perspective, it is misleading to look merely at how much interference a person suffers in making choices. Instead, we should direct our attention to the *kind* of social relations in which we find ourselves. Thinking about freedom means specifying how we can enjoy freedom in the presence of – and to some extent through – others instead of in their absence.

This is what the ideal of non-domination expresses. It is a relational ideal in that it is concerned with how people relate to one another. Thus, it contrasts with individualist values such as material welfare or non-interference, which focus on the state of the individual alone. Others might, for contingent reasons, be necessary to help realize material welfare, such as through mechanisms of redistribution. Yet, the good of material welfare does not make essential reference to others in itself. Non-domination, by contrast, cannot be enjoyed in isolation from others. And yet it is not a collectivist ideal that risks overriding the individual. Rather, it is decidedly relational in that it can only be realized within relations of individuals to one another.

4 Four dimensions of relational thought

Having sketched the basic relational features of *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism, I will now take a closer look at what it means to think about normativity in relational terms by comparing the two accounts. Note that I am less interested in the substantive differences between the views than in the forms of argument and thus in the way they understand relationality. I distinguish four dimensions of relational normative thought: the subject matter, the grounds, the content and normative epistemology. In all four dimensions, both *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism formulate relational accounts, though they differ most significantly with regard to content.

4.1 *Social relations as the subject matter of normative thought*

Both *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism are relational in the general sense that they take relationships to be the relevant subject matter of normative thought, not the individual or the community as such. This is not a trivial point. One might argue that morality and other forms of normativity are social practices and as such always imply relating to others in one way or another. Material well-being or happiness, for instance, taken as moral concepts, require us to make sure that others enjoy the greatest amount of it – and thus not to steal from or harm others. In that sense, all accounts of morality seem to be relational. Yet, *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism share a deeper sense of relationality. Taking relationships to be the subject matter of normative thought means that the mere situation of individuals (or of groups), for instance, how much happiness (or communal cohesion) they enjoy, as such is neither moral nor immoral. From a relational perspective, focusing on how an individual (or a group) fares, in abstraction from their social relations, misses the point of what is of ultimate normative relevance, namely the kind of relations that pertain between individuals (or groups).

Note that this general sense of relationality does not imply ascribing moral status to relationships themselves. Although this would be one particularly strong way of cashing out the view that relationships are the subject matter of normative thought, it is not the only one – and in fact, it is not the view put forward by the proponents of *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism presented above.¹⁰ Metz initially played with “the idea that relationships of some kinds have basic moral status” (Metz 2007: 333). However, in recent writings he dropped this idea out of a concern with the partiality involved in according extant relationships a special standing. He now maintains that it is the individual who enjoys basic moral status, albeit in virtue of her ability to relate to others in a certain way (Metz 2012: 392–396).¹¹ On Ramose’s account, relationships are valuable; yet they do not enjoy a status over and above the individual as individuals have intrinsic value in their own right (Ramose 2005: 97). Pettit holds that non-dominating relationships are of value because they constitute the status of non-domination (Pettit 1997: 106–109). Yet, the bearers of moral status are individuals. Thus, relationality in this first, general sense is not about the bearer of status but about the subject matter of normative thought.

4.2 *Why to think relationally: relational grounds for relational normative thought*

One may ask, however, why we should think of the subject matter of morality in terms of relationships. This question highlights a second dimension of relational normative thought that refers to the grounds for taking a relational view. A first answer grounds relational normative thought in a relational social ontology. This is Ramose’s view. In fact, on his account, the ontological, the epistemological and the normative are not separated in the way they usually are in the Anglo-American or European philosophical traditions. *Ubu-ntu* is both the fundamental ontological

as well as the fundamental epistemological category – and, one may add, the normative one (Ramose 2005: 36). The inseparable dual aspects of *Ubuntu*, the being and becoming, are an expression of what he calls a “rheomodic” ontology that resists thinking in fragmented categories of being and emphasizes the whole-ness of existence (40–45). It conceives of be-ing as an incessant motion of shaping and reshaping, of being and becoming, of one-ness and whole-ness – and thus of being as interconnected be-ing. This ontological dimension of *Ubuntu* is expressed in *Ubuntu* as a gerund, as a verbal noun that emphasizes the do-ing over the do-er and refers to motion as the principle of be-ing (41).

Ubuntu also constitutes the way we see and know the world. This epistemological aspect is captured by *Ubuntu* as a gerundive, that is, a verbal adjective (Ramose 2005: 36). While Ubu- represents the general be-ing of the world in its whole-ness, -ntu denotes the specific differentiation, the temporarily having become, and thus that which is known. The epistemological aspect refers to this “nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form or a mode of being in the process of continuous unfoldment” (36). However, this specific manifestation is itself part of incessant motion. This is why *Ubuntu* is a *verbal* adjective, not merely an adjective: “[e]pistemologically, be-ing is conceived as a perpetual and universal movement of sharing and exchange of the forces of life” (41). At the same time, the gerundive aspect of *Ubuntu* also expresses its normative dimension: The imperative to become human through affirming, developing and displaying one’s humanness is itself an expression of the continuous flow of be-ing becoming.

Read from the perspective of Anglo-American or European traditions, one might wonder how a relational ontology may ground relational normative content. After all, this seems to be a classic example of the is-ought fallacy: The mere fact that the world is an interconnected one-ness does not seem to imply that we should preserve it as such, or develop our own human nature as relational beings within this world (see Metz 2013a). This criticism, however, needs to be reassessed in light of the complex and dynamic philosophical account Ramose articulates: The idea is not that the relational normative content *derives* from relational ontology. In fact, these dimensions are not distinct in the way the is-ought fallacy suggests. The ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ are both part of a world of motion and interconnectedness. In other words, the relational ontology, which conceives of being as an intertwined whole-ness and thus of the human being as a relational being, is inseparable from relational normative thought as the world the human being is part of is itself conceived of as a normative world. Challenging the link between ontology and normative content in Ramose’s account of *Ubuntu* therefore requires engaging with his relational ontology and the way he posits it as the philosophical foundation of *Ubuntu* as a comprehensive concept.

Metz avoids giving his account of *Ubuntu* a controversial ontological underpinning. Instead, he refers to a relational capacity as grounds for his relational approach to normativity, focusing on the narrower issue of why a certain entity has moral status and thus is the object of a direct duty. Individualist accounts of moral status, he argues, are grounded in properties entirely intrinsic to that entity such as the capacity to experience pleasure and pain – or, if a group is deemed

the bearer of moral status, communal cohesion (Metz 2012: 389).¹² Relational accounts of moral status, by contrast, hold that moral status is “constituted by some kind of interactive property between one entity and another” (390). The relational property Metz proposes as the ground of moral status is the capacity “of being part of a communal relationship of a certain kind” (393), where such relationships, in turn, are characterized by caring and sharing as explained above. It is precisely our capacity for communing with others that calls for being respected and thus grounds moral status. In fact, in his recent work, Metz characterizes relational approaches to normative thought as generally based on such relational properties (Metz/Miller 2016: 2).

Pettit’s Neo-republicanism combines these features, drawing on a relational ontology that he calls holistic individualism as the basis for a pragmatist reconstruction of our relational capacity to reason (Pettit 1993: chapters 3 and 4). Ontologically speaking, Pettit defends individualism, as opposed to collectivism, in holding that the presence of social-structural regularities does not override or outflank our capacity as intentional agents. In spite of being exposed to a number of social regularities, we retain autonomy in the minimal sense of having the capacity to respond to reasons and adjust accordingly (Pettit 1993: 120). Hence, we are able to engage critically with social structures we find ourselves in and retain our individual agency as discursive agents. This defence of a minimal sense of individual autonomy, however, does not imply thinking of the individual as an atomistic, rational entity detached from its social environment. Quite to the contrary: Pettit’s social ontology is decidedly holist as opposed to atomist in that it maintains that we depend non-causally on social relations for the development of distinctive human capacities. The distinctive human capacity Pettit has in mind is precisely the capacity for reasoning.

It might seem trivial to emphasize that we are subject to various causal influences from our parents, teachers, friends etc. in developing our capacity for reasoned thought. Yet, Pettit’s point runs deeper: The idea is not merely that there is a causal link between enjoying social relations and developing the capacity to think; rather, the link is constitutive (Pettit 1993: 170). It is based on the idea that reasoning involves following certain kinds of rules that are intelligible to others. The commonability of such rules, in turn, is a property that makes essential reference to others. An individual “can think commonable thoughts – thoughts that are suitably accessible or scrutable – only in a world where there are others and only in a world where she enjoys social relations with others” (181). Hence, Pettit argues the capacity for reasoning itself is a “social ability”; even if we were to withdraw from social relations, we would still “carry the voice of society” within ourselves; “[i]f that voice were absent, if there were no others to whom the individual thinker was answerable, then scrutable human thought would be impossible” (191). In other words: As thinking beings we are essentially relational beings.¹³

Even if this account of a relational ontology is deemed plausible, one might still wonder how it is linked to the ideal of non-domination. The mere fact of being dependent in a constitutive sense on others does not seem to entail any specific normative content. However, the link between the ontological account of our

relational nature and the relational ideal of non-domination can be reconstructed in two steps. First, a relational ontology entails that ideals for the assessment of social and political institutions are not merely individual values like material welfare that could in principle be enjoyed in total isolation. While a relational ontology might not entail any specific normative ideal, it requires that at least some of our normative ideals be relational in character (Pettit 1993: 302–322)¹⁴ – and this requirement reflects precisely the first dimension of relational normative thought that was to be grounded: the idea of taking relationships as the primary subject matter of normative thought.

Second, the link between Pettit’s relational ontology and the particular relational ideal of non-domination is provided by a pragmatist reconstruction of discursive practices.¹⁵ As conversable beings, i.e. beings who are able to reason, we are liable to have our judgments and actions held to relevant standards and are able to adjust accordingly. We are able to reconsider our reasons and correct them in light of criticism from others. We understand ourselves as having this capacity to be moved by reasons, even when we fail to exercise it. Hence, we also need to ascribe it to others with whom we engage discursively. This ascription, however, implies certain practical norms, as it presupposes that our capacity to be moved by reasons is not undermined in the first place. The notion of non-domination is meant to protect precisely these interpersonal conditions of our discursive capacity.

This discursive capacity in turn is a decidedly relational capacity. It comprises not merely the socially constituted yet intrapersonal capacity to reason, but also our capacity to relate to others in a way suitable for everyone to be taken seriously as a credible speaker (Pettit 2001: 70). This relationality, in fact, goes deeper than Metz’s account. It does not just refer to others as possible agents to relate to; rather, it presupposes some kind of actual relationship. Pettit maintains “a relational capacity cannot exist without the occurrence of some interaction with others. The discursive power or status that someone has so far as their relationships with others are entirely discourse-friendly presupposes that these relationships are actually in place” (Pettit 2001: 71). In contrast to Metz, Pettit conceives of the relational capacity as a certain kind of power we enjoy *in relation to* others, not just as a capacity *making reference to others* that we retain in ourselves even without ever having to relate at all. In abstraction from any relationships, this power *vis-à-vis* others simply would not make sense – even though we would still be able, in principle, to relate to others in discursive ways.¹⁶

Comparing the *Ubuntu*-based and Neo-republican answers to the question of why we should take a relational approach to normative thought, it is striking that both refer to similar kinds of relational concepts, even though they are cashed out differently. While Ramose’s relational ontology is a comprehensive account of how individuals are relational beings, embedded in a web of relations that are themselves normative, Metz argues that it is our relational capacity to commune with others that grounds our claim to be respected as a being able to relate to others. Pettit in turn draws on both kinds of ideas: a relational ontology characterized as holistic individualism as well as a slightly different notion of a relational

capacity that he weaves together in a pragmatist reconstruction of our discursive practices. All three accounts of the sources of relational normative thought are relational, however, in focusing on relational features of human beings, whether these are relational capacities or an ontological account of the human being as a relational being – or both.

4.3 *How to relate: relational normative content*

A third dimension of relational normative thought refers to normative content. Against the background of taking relationships as the subject matter of relational normative thought, this third dimension provides an answer to the questions: How do relationships matter? What kind of relationships matter? In this regard, the *Ubuntu* tradition differs fundamentally from the Neo-republican approach.

Proponents of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* consider humane relationships as the core concern of normative thought. Such relationships are characterized positively in terms of some other-regarding values that should be realized through communing with others and that, ultimately, are an expression of human-ness and thus, *Ubuntu*. That means the core normative content is relational in the sense that it values and calls for actively seeking to commune with others. This is clearly the case in Ramose's account, which calls for developing one's humanity by relating to others in humane ways. Metz's view has shifted from straightforwardly calling for communing with others through caring for and sharing with them to merely respecting our moral status in virtue of our capacity to commune. This respect, however, involves honouring extant relationships as well as helping others to commune. Respecting others thus is a way of securing the preconditions for communal relationships to flourish.

Republicanism, by contrast, starts from a negative account of what kind of relationships should be avoided, namely relationships of domination. The ideal of non-domination does imply certain characteristics of non-dominating relationships, most notably the enjoyment of equal status that is protected by law and supported by corresponding civic virtue. Yet, non-domination does not call for relating to others for the sake of enjoying relationships. It merely requires us to make sure that whenever we do relate to others, everyone can walk tall and look each other in the eye (Pettit 2012: 82). This requires setting up non-dominating institutions that allow us to relate to one another as equals. In that sense, domination rules out total disengagement in the face of existing domination. Yet, whether we should seek to realize any other positively defined values or even seek to establish new relationships beyond transforming those we find ourselves in remains open.

In that sense, republicanism advocates a weak, negative form of relationality. Non-domination is certainly a relational good in the sense that while it is enjoyed by individuals, it constitutively requires to be realized with and through others. Yet, it does not place substantive value on seeking social relations for their own sake. Rather, it gives an account of what kind of relationships to avoid, namely dominating ones. Proponents of *Ubuntu*, by contrast, start from a positive

characterization of valuable relationships and prescribe seeking to commune in such a way with others. In fact, it is precisely actively relating to others through sharing and caring that constitutes the core content of *Ubuntu*. In that sense, *Ubuntu* provides a strong, positive account of relational normative content, turning communing with others into the basic requirement itself.

This contrast between the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism does not just point to a difference in degree but to different kinds of relationality. While proponents of *Ubuntu* focus on how to realize human-ness through particular actions or dispositions of character, Neo-republicanism is concerned with how relationships are structured, that is, on whether they are symmetrical and reciprocal or hierarchical and unilateral. Behind this difference lie contrasting ideas about the object of normative thought. Ramose's perfectionist account concentrates on the virtuous character and corresponding relational dispositions of individuals. Metz's interactional account calls for respecting our capacity to commune, drawing attention to the actions of individuals. Neo-republicanism takes a structural approach to relational thought, focusing on structural properties of relationships. It demands suitable institutions that restructure social relations in a way that avoids subjecting some to domination.

These three different objects of relational normative content arguably reflect the difference between ethics, moral philosophy and political philosophy: While ethics is primarily concerned with the good life and the good person, moral philosophy is about the right and right actions, whereas political philosophy is primarily about social structures and just institutions. Through this lens of analysis, Ramose's normative account of *Ubuntu* primarily articulates an account of ethics, asking what it means to be a good person and to live a good life in light of our shared humanity. Metz, by contrast, takes a decidedly moral perspective on *Ubuntu*, putting the issue of right action at its centre. Pettit, finally, advocates a political approach to relationality that is primarily concerned with social background conditions, that is, social structures and just institutions.

4.4 How to think relationally: relational normative epistemology

The fourth feature of relational normative thought pertains to normative epistemology, that is, to the question of how we are to reach normative judgments. A relational perspective on normative epistemology highlights the role social relations play in normative decision-making and thus endorses some form of contextualism. This holds for *Ubuntu* as well as for Neo-republicanism. Both draw inspiration from an idealized, small-scale historical practice, that of pre-colonial African societies in the case of *Ubuntu* and that of Ancient Rome and early modern city states in the case of Neo-republicanism. And both highlight that normative decision-making is informed by context and actual social relations.

Given that *Ubuntu* calls for communing with particular others, it first requires paying attention to the other's particular history, needs and character, not just to abstract features that characterize him or her as a human being. A normative judgment based on *Ubuntu* does not merely require following abstract principles but rather taking into account what it means to relate to this particular individual.¹⁷

Second, normative demands of *Ubuntu* are themselves in parts a lived experience. On Ramose's account, normativity is inscribed in the unfragmented continuity of the world as a whole-ness and motion as the principle of be-ing. This is why normative judgments cannot be made in the abstract. The oneness of be-ing "should also be understood ontologically to mean that human relations are not and cannot be defined and determined once and for all time" (Ramose 2005: 98). Accordingly, Ramose emphasizes that law is not an abstract demand; it is "always a desideratum arising from concrete experience at a particular place and time" (87). Its goal is to enhance harmony in human relations, but it is itself not fixed; "[l]aw as a lived experience cannot reach a point of finality" (86). In fact, a rule of behaviour can "never become a permanent substitute of the continual unfolding of experience" (88). Normative judgments are themselves part of the lived experience of particular human beings at a particular point in time. This contextuality of normativity, however, does not mean that it is relativist in the sense that there are no context-transcending principles. The idea of humane relations and thus the principles of caring and sharing as "basic tenets of African morality" (102) articulate precisely the overarching value of *Ubuntu*, which is inscribed into the unfragmented continuity of being.

Third, Ramose's undogmatic stance on normativity implies an emphasis on consensual decision-making rather than adversarial conceptions such as those exemplified by multi-party democratic systems or even solitary abstract reasoning. Adversarial modes of decision-making are instances of dogmatism, as they require the participants to take up one position on a matter and defend it, as if there could not be an alternative, possibly even superior one (Ramose 2005: 103). Consensual decisions as called for by *Ubuntu*, by contrast, are based on the attempt to reconcile contending judgments on the matter at issue. This means that the very form of decision-making itself instantiates the requirement of relating to others in a harmonious way.

Finally, the emphasis on the one-ness of be-ing implies that there is no opposition between rational and emotional reasoning, since reason and emotions are mutually dependent (Ramose 2005: 42). The concrete emotions within particular situations play an important role in normative decision-making. In fact, the requirement to commune with others also implies developing corresponding emotions such as empathy. Emotions, therefore, are part of normative content. Moreover, emotions such as irritation, anger, gratitude or sadness generated within a particular relationship are indicators of what is good or bad about this relationship – and thus also what needs to be changed to make it more humane (see Metz 2013b: 84).

Neo-republicanism is also decidedly contextualist with regard to its normative epistemology, albeit in slightly different ways. Given that it does not call for seeking to commune with others but rather for avoiding relations of domination, actually existing relations of domination provide the starting point for normative reasoning. Relations of domination can take a variety of different forms. What exactly the ideal of non-domination requires in a given situation can only be established with regard to the kind of domination that is to be addressed. Thus, on the neo-republican view, paying attention to context does not mean paying

attention to particular others so much as taking into account and starting from the particular relations of domination to be addressed.

Second, Neo-republicanism also holds that normative judgments form part of a lived experience. While the ideal of non-domination states what needs to be avoided, it remains underdetermined with regard to how this is to be achieved. Solutions to a similar kind of domination may differ from one context to the other. They are the answer that a particular political community establishes in order to address a particular form of domination. In that sense, realizing non-domination is a collective achievement in a particular social and historical context. It is itself a lived experience. Third, this is why Neo-republicans also rely on actual political processes and deliberation in order to establish what needs to be done about particular instances of domination. Abstract reasoning only provides a general account of domination and principles for an institutional framework that realizes basic non-domination and thus provides the means to address other forms of domination. What exactly this requires needs to be sorted out through non-dominating procedures, that is, essentially through deliberation. The role of emotions, finally, is less pronounced in Neo-republicanism than in *Ubuntu*. While within the republican tradition itself, at least particular kinds of emotions, especially love for one's own republic, have been emphasized (Mazzini 1907)¹⁸, Pettit himself does not follow this line of argument.

Note that the kind of contextualism found in both *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism does not necessarily imply a particularist approach to normative thought. It highlights the need to pay attention to the context normative judgments are to bear upon. In fact, normative thinking starts from actual human beings or existing relations of domination and asks how to transform them. In that sense, particular contexts one is involved in already provide the starting point for normative thought. However, the ideal of non-domination itself is an impartial, context-transcending one, just as the ideal of *Ubuntu* with its appeal to human-ness is.

5 Conclusion

I started with a brief overview of Ramose's and Metz's accounts of *Ubuntu* on the one hand and Pettit's Neo-republicanism on the other, highlighting the relational features of their accounts in order to provide a systematic exposition of what it means to take a relational approach to normative thought. In a very general sense, all three of them are relational in that they take relationships to be the primary matter of normative thought, not individuals or communities as such. Beyond this general sense of relationality, however, there are three more specific dimensions of relational normative thought: relational normative grounds, relational normative content and relational normative epistemology. Proponents of *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism refer to similar relational grounds, that is, to some forms of relational capacities or a deeper ontology of humans as relational beings. They also share a commitment to contextuality and particularity with regard to normative epistemology, even though Neo-republicans do not necessarily emphasize

the role of emotions and focus more on the particularities of a given context of domination than on concrete individuals themselves. In fact, this latter difference in emphasis reflects deeper differences between *Ubuntu* and Neo-republicanism with regard to normative content: On the one hand, *Ubuntu* positively characterizes valuable relationships and calls for seeking communion with others, whereas Neo-republicanism merely cashes out negatively what kind of relations need to be avoided. On the other hand, Neo-republicanism takes a structural perspective on relationality whereas *Ubuntu* focuses on individuals, whether through a relational virtue-based or a relational interactional approach. These three perspectives correspond to three domains of normative thought: ethics or the issue of good character, morality or the issue of right actions, and politics or the issue of just institutions.

A first set of further research questions pertains to the way the four dimensions of relational normative thought relate to one another. Does taking a relational perspective in one dimension necessarily entail a relational view with regard to the others? How are the different kinds of relational arguments interrelated? It seems for instance that defending a stronger, i.e. ontological claim with regard to the grounds of relationality does not entail taking the stronger position with regard to normative content. In fact, we find various combinations of different relational grounds and stronger and weaker versions of relational content in the literature I cited.

A second set of questions refers to the distinctions I made with regard to the normative content of relational accounts. One may ask, for instance, whether a strong account of relationality with regard to ethics entails a commitment to a strong account in the domain of political philosophy. Or is the weak account precisely the one pertaining to the political sphere while the strong one holds for interpersonal morality and ethics? Another issue is how dispositional, interactional and structural relational thought – or, more generally put, relational ethics, relational morality and relational political philosophy – relate to one another. Does a full account of relational normative thought comprise relational accounts of virtue, right action and just structures?

Given that relational normative thought aims to transform social relations, the three domains of normative thought seem closely interlinked. On the one hand, relational ethics and morality need the structural, political perspective. Focusing on how to relate to particular individuals or on trying to develop one's own humanity will not change the way social relations are structured through power. This holds especially under conditions of deeply entrenched structural injustices such as Apartheid. Without understanding and fighting those fundamental social structures, any efforts to be a good person or to act in the right way will tend to reaffirm those very unjust structures.¹⁹ On the other hand, a structural perspective does not necessarily provide any clue on how to relate to others under conditions of structural injustice, especially when fighting unjust social structures. Hence, it seems that it needs the moral and ethical perspectives in order to assess actions taken under such conditions. Yet, does that mean one relational ideal may provide an account across all three domains?

Working on these questions will not only help flesh out a relational approach to normative thought instead of conflating it with collectivist approaches. With its emphasis on the fundamental importance of social relationships, relational thought might, ultimately, provide a compelling alternative to the individualist liberal paradigm currently predominant in Anglo-American and European philosophy and politics that resonates with normative thought across various different traditions.²⁰

Notes

- 1 Metz uses the term ‘holism’, which he borrows from environmental ethics (Metz 2007: 333). I speak of ‘collectivism’ to distinguish this position from ontological holism (see section 4.2).
- 2 See also Mangena (2009: 20), Sander-Staudt (2011: 51f) and Metz (2013b).
- 3 See also Unah (2014) and Metz (2015).
- 4 The structural perspective on relationality could possibly also be developed drawing on Marxism and those parts of Feminism that focus on structural injustices instead of an ethic of care. In this chapter, however, I will focus on Neo-republicanism.
- 5 See Van Binsbergen (2001), Marx (2002) and Nkondo (2007). For a comprehensive analysis of its role in contemporary South African discourse, see Eze (2010).
- 6 On Ramose’s onto-triadic account of being, this includes relations to the living-dead and the yet-to-be-born as well as to nature (Ramose 2005: 45f). I will focus on cashing out the normative content in purely anthropocentric terms, though it will, obviously, be limited to relations between living human beings.
- 7 See also Behrens (2014: 66).
- 8 For a more recent formulation see Metz (2012; 2016: 178).
- 9 This shift is motivated by developing a deontological account of *Ubuntu* as opposed to the consequentialist one he reconstructed from extant literature in Metz (2007).
- 10 See, however, Behrens (2014) for this view.
- 11 See also Metz (2010: 59f).
- 12 Note that, on my reading, intrinsic accounts can be either individualist or collectivist (what Metz calls holist) with regard to the bearer of moral status. Metz, however, does not distinguish the issue of the bearer of status from that of the grounds of status, characterizing individualism as the “view that properties intrinsic to an entity ground the capacity to be wronged” (Metz 2012: 389) and holism as the “view that the bearers of moral status are groups” (390).
- 13 The holist view does not imply that social relations are sufficient for realizing our capacity for thought; other factors might be involved in developing it. Nor does it entail that social relations are necessary in a transcendental sense. In principle, something else might play the same role. All that the holist maintains is that our capacity for thought superveniently depends on social relations. Yet, Pettit maintains that, given that social interaction is always involved in practice, the abstract possibility of solitary thought is not relevant (Pettit 1993: 179).
- 14 See Gädeke (2017) for elaboration of this point.
- 15 See for the following Pettit (2001).
- 16 Note that the emphasis on actual relationships does not imply according them some kind of normative priority (see Metz 2010: 59f for this concern). They do not ground our moral status; rather, they are the context that allows for having discursive powers and enjoying the status of non-domination.
- 17 See also Metz (2013b: 84).
- 18 For a contemporary account, see Viroli (1995).

- 19 See Biko's critique of liberals under Apartheid for a case in point (Biko 2004: chapter 5).
- 20 I am grateful to Thaddeus Metz and George Hull and to seminar audiences at Wits University and at the University of Cape Town for helpful comments.

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