

**ON *DE FACTO* MORAL FRIENDS AND A TWO-LEVEL,
MULTIMODAL ACCOUNT OF MORAL
CONSIDERABILITY: A CRITIQUE OF METZIAN
RELATIONALISM**

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Wandile GANYA

Department of Medicine

University of Cape Town

&

Centre for Medical Ethics and Law

Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Email: wandile.ganya@uct.ac.za

ORCID No: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4042-0670>

Abstract

This paper aims to ground an argument for a widened scope in regard to the motivations or reasons accounting for moral considerability. Such a scope, it is here argued, would account not only for human persons but animals, ecosystems, hypothetical artificial moral agents and so-called Martians as well. And it does so by first distinguishing between two categories of entities: members of group X, and entities not of group X. This basic distinction is then employed to articulate the groundwork for a two-level, multimodal account of moral considerability and gives signification to the idea of *de facto* moral friends. To achieve this, it appropriates much of its central tenets from the affluence of African philosophical, and intellectual heritage, on this occasion, the notion of Ubuntu. Lastly, this paper assumes the viewpoint of metaethical X-centrism, alternatively, metaethical anthropocentrism in constructing moral claims.

Keywords: De Facto Moral friend, Duties, Metaethical Anthropocentrism, Multimodal account, Moral Considerability.

Introduction

In generality, the enterprise of moral judgement suspends upon the province of entities that enjoy moral considerability. It is unsurprising

to submit that the concept of moral considerability assumes much centrality in the formulation of many moral theory and principle, which inform moral judgement. The claim that an entity p has moral considerability entails a value proposition that p is deserving of moral status. And the precipitate of such a claim is that p can be wronged, and in virtue of this, is owed *non-instrumental* duties. This is the definition with which I shall understand moral considerability in this paper.

Indeed there is a wealth of literature published on moral considerability in general. However, there is comparatively very little extant literature within African philosophical discourse on moral considerability and the problems raised within emergent technologies. To this point, accounts of moral considerability in African philosophical literature have, for unclear reasons, tended to distil African moral thought into precipitate monistic schemes. This work, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by advancing what I have denoted as a two-level, multimodal account of moral considerability, which seeks to unfold moral motivations to account for the moral considerability of both members of group X and non-X entities. And although seminal work on an African theory of moral considerability already precedes this groundwork, namely Thaddeus Metz's modal relationalism thesis, I maintain that the two-level, multimodal thesis proposed in this paper better understands the complexity of African moral thought and further, plausibly withstands objections levelled against Metz's modal relationalism thesis.

This paper proceeds as follows: I first describe what I call the *likeness criterion of moral considerability*, a generic criterion applied by property-based accounts, and thereafter describe two conceptual categories subsumed under the class of property-based accounts of moral status. Having established this, I describe a two-level, multimodal account of moral considerability. In the last two sections, I defend this thesis against that of Metz's modal relationalism and, in the same light, draw some worthy distinctions between the two. And lastly, I employ this thesis, albeit parenthetically, in the context of accounting for the moral considerability of entities arising from emergent technologies such as human embryo-like structures, hypothetical artificial moral agents such as humanoid robots and environmental ethics.

The Likeness Criterion of Moral Considerability

Reflection on the moral considerability of entities such as animals, embryos and mature human persons has often tended toward property-grounded accounts. That is, it is either an anthropo-egoistic threshold concept of moral considerability or a gradational account. In both of these theoretical schemes, moral considerability is understood according to the properties or capacities an entity p possesses (HACKER-WRIGHT 2007, 449-455; WARREN 2000, 53-57). Standard property-grounded accounts understand moral considerability to entail an entity that is capable of being wronged or the facticity that p generates for us reasons for one to treat p in certain ways, for p 's own sake (SHEA 2018). Such reasons are often adduced from the consideration that what ought to entail the wherewithal to become a member of group X entails the fulfilment of certain *sui generis* or intrinsic properties of X. And these would include, among other things: self-awareness, rationality and sentience. This I shall denote the *likeness criterion of moral considerability*, which assumes the form:

if p is like X,
then, p is a member of X

Admittedly, this formulation allows for one to hold that there may indeed be gradations of moral considerability, that is, there are degrees to which p is like X, and as many have argued, this realisation gives credence to the idea that we can therefore treat p differently to those members who satisfy completely the criterial properties to become a member of X albeit observing at the same time their basic moral priorities. In other words, the likeness criterion of moral considerability helps us disambiguate between moral patients and guides the manner in which we assign moral privileges.

General Conceptual Categories of Moral Considerability

The forgoing makes evident to us that there are indeed two ways we ought to think about moral considerability: (1) as a criterial threshold concept concerning members of group X; and (2) a scalar quantity concerning what I refer to as *de facto* moral friends of group X whom may not of necessity share common intrinsic properties with members of group X but command moral considerability because it is both our

duty and within our moral nature to do so. Examples here include animals, advanced humanoid robots and synthetic human embryo-like structures.

Said differently, there are two perspectives with which one may broadly come to understand approaches to the problem of accounting for moral considerability. The first is a view taken from the order of perspectives emanating from entities of group X, or what I denote the X-centric approach, which as intimated above, often assumes a criterial threshold concept of moral considerability; a position I assume and develop in a later section of this paper. I understand the X-centric view as assuming that the right way to conceive of moral considerability is through a first-order understanding of the nature of X. The second view is taken from the order of perspectives emanating from without, that is, a supersensible view in the broadest sense of the word, abstracting moral considerability for entities not belonging to group X – the non-centric view. I understand the non-centric view here rather circumspectly within the parentheses of *de facto* moral friends as described above.

The deficiencies of a solely property-grounded account of moral considerability are evident. Plainly they are unable to ascribe moral considerability to non-human entities by virtue of the nature of their anthropo-egoistic orientation. The corollary of this is that in paradigmatic cases, entities that we may ordinarily hold that they ought to be granted moral considerability are either not accounted for or suddenly “lose” their moral status. This is true for animals and the ecosystem. Albeit the idea of *de facto* moral friends raises a new set of problems which I shall forthrightly illumine in the latter course of this paper in the form of preliminary questions for a later investigation, the very idea of a *de facto* moral friend brings to bear a revitalised set of moral motivations that can assist in conceptualising the basis for our moral obligations to a diverse plurality of moral patients we encounter in non-paradigmatic cases both hypothetical and extant. Examples include entities such as embryo-like structures, advanced humanoid robots arising from emergent technologies, and hypothetical extra-terrestrial beings.

A Two-Level, Multimodal Account of Moral Considerability

It seems pertinent to begin our discussion here by first stating a plain observation, and that is, our apprehension of morality, including moral

considerability cannot be divorced from prejudgements derived from human sensibilities, intuitions, sociality and contextual experiences. In other words, our apprehensions have always been anthropocentric (BODDICE 2011). We can only understand morality in the first-order perspective, that is from what I shall denote the metaethical X-centric viewpoint, where X stands for any given group of entities (humans, synthetic moral agents, Martians and so forth) and only by mediate extension can we account for the moral considerability of entities not from group X. I consider this a fundamental fact in that one cannot genuinely speak to the moral needs, interests, desires and well-being of another entity that is not of group X from a view from nowhere. This is an admission of the ineluctability and necessary ontological and phenomenological starting point from which our basic grasp of morality proceeds.

Our understanding of morality, I argue, comes from the prejudgements we make of what our own basic needs, interests, desires, and wellbeing look like, and by extension, our moral actions toward *p* are therefore governed by the assumptions we have made about what *p*'s basic moral priorities, desires and intrinsic value attributes supposedly look like. If it is deemed that *p* is like us, then *p* will be treated as a member of our group – the likeness criterion of moral status.

Albeit a hypothetical case is conceivable where *p*'s actual basic moral priorities and intrinsic value attributes may be incommensurate with ours, what is important for a metaethical anthropocentric or X-centric position assumed here is that *p* is indeed a *de facto* moral friend of X and therefore deserves moral considerability for two reasons: Firstly, as an extension of our benevolence and friendliness toward another. And secondly, endorsing our value for engendering non-exploitative relations with others because doing so, that is, discharging our other-regarding obligations and virtues is the perfect expression of the sort of creatures X entails. And formally expressed:

For an entity *p* to have moral considerability is to be regarded in such a manner that determines the deontic status of another's action toward it, not because of a *sui generis* (or intrinsic) property possessed by it, but because our treatment

of it in such and such a manner is co-extensive with our own wellbeing or true self as a community of moral agents.

This account, however, is not to be mistaken with hybrid multi-criterial theories of moral considerability (STONE 2018), which, ordinarily, seek to combine a variety of property-grounded accounts of moral considerability into one framework. Here, I am describing a moral reality that exists rather than positing an abstraction adduced from an estranged moral world. This, among other things, is what makes a two-level, multimodal account of moral considerability attractive. It is an account whose intuitions evolve from a concrete moral reality or lived experience; hence, the moral injunctions that flow therefrom are not artefacts we can dispense with freely.

The idea of a *de facto* moral friend is indeed a notion germane to many an African philosophical orientation to moral thinking. It is concretely subsumed under the notion of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a term derived from the indigenous Xhosa and Zulu languages of Sub-Saharan Africa which means “humanness” and its essence is better expressed in the following Xhosa adage, *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, and its direct English translation, *a person is a person through other persons*, or as Mbiti once averred, “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am” (MBITI 1969).

Philosophical accounts of moral considerability have hitherto framed African moral thought in terms of two disparate theses, often electing the priority of one moral scheme over another. These theses, I argue, are predicated upon unimodal concretions grounded on partisinal readings of Ubuntu. To wit, they adduce their philosophical canons from either the concept of community and relationality or a kind of African virtue ethics (VAN NIEKERK 2007; KAYANGE 2020). I posit herein that this categorical separation is mistaken. And defend rather the proposition that understands Ubuntu as a syncretic framework whose superstructure is fundamentally constituted of three ideologies that share an innate complementarity with each other: ethics of community (or relationality) and responsibility, virtue (self- and other-regarding) and consensus-based discourse praxis.

Below I adumbrate a set of basic axiological propositions that, upon the whole, should derive the totality of our intuitions about Ubuntu; that organise to form the desiderata for a commodious

African moral reality I have referred to above, albeit not purposed to be an entirely exhaustive list.

- A. A moral community primarily aims to secure its members' basic moral priorities (or alternatively, the common good) (GYEKYE 1997).
 - i. Basic moral priorities are non-derivative and hence are irreducible to particulate moral propositions, they are ends in themselves;
 - ii. These basic priorities are universalisable and in fact transcend all moral motivations and value propositions expressed within a given moral community;
 - iii. In this sense, a minimum conception of morality entails the coordination and reconciliation of individual interests in a community of moral agents according to basic moral priorities.¹
- B. To have moral considerability is therefore to be a patient deserving of basic moral priorities.
- C. Maintaining good social relationships secures the basic moral priorities and general well-being of the individual. Said differently, an arrangement of our individual interests in a manner that gives priority to the relationships we share with each other entails a normative moral-political framework in response to individual issues, to engender a good society and meaning in life (MOLEFE 2017, 2).

¹ The notion of basic moral priorities, or alternately, common good I describe herein runs akin with Innocent Asouzu's complementarity thesis and synthesis of common good where I understand the common good as the "ultimate common foundation that gives legitimacy to all human actions...the common good refers to the authenticating foundation of interpersonal relationship in society, expressible in all those socio-empirical goods and services we own in common whose upkeep is necessary for well-coordinated and contented existence" (ASOUZU 2023a, 141).

- D. The community does not have moral ontology, only individuals do (MOLEFE 2017, 3, 8-10).
- E. The self-realisation of *p*'s true humanity is effected by *p* upon discharging his/her other-regarding duties to others; and the wellbeing of self.²
- F. Achieving true humanity entails the attainment of moral perfection.
- G. It is personhood rather than individual rights that secure a life of dignity for the individual.
- H. Consensus is the maxim by which moral agents coordinate discourse to procure basic moral priorities within a given social reality.

The fundamental task of a moral theory is, therefore, to determine for us “what makes something a reasonable cost to bear for the sake of others”(LAZAR 2019, 92). Applied ethics ordinarily requires normative standards of right action. And on talking of the moral considerability of a thing, I argue, Ubuntu ethicists ought not to orient this question in a manner that seeks to identify or speciate what property a non-*X* entity possesses to be granted moral considerability. To orient our moral philosophical investigations along these lines would indeed be an invidious abdication of our other-regarding nature; one that is indeed not germane to African ethical discourse. To avoid this problem, I have introduced a two-level, multimodal account which distinguishes two kinds of entities with which we have different relations. The first category refers to *de facto* moral friends wherein entities that are not naturally from group *X* may be classed. I am not interested here in discovering *p*'s intrinsic value contingent upon human considerations. And neither am I interested in reasons to

² One reviewer curiously enquired whether this in any manner relates to Asouzu's complementarity thesis. Albeit this point is of little consequence to the central argument presented in this paper, I am nonetheless all the more happy to consider E to be in consonance with Asouzu's complementarity thesis (ASOUZU 2023b).

ground p 's moral value from problematic in itself or for its own sake arguments. What I mean by this is, the notion of *de facto* moral friends does not require reference to intrinsic value judgements to establish p 's moral considerability.

In this category, one does not apply a property-based account to find reasons to ascribe moral considerability. Instead, the form our relation takes toward *de facto* moral friends, it is argued, is perhaps a non-exploitative relation which seeks to protect p 's basic moral priorities whatever these may be as understood from the inescapable view of being a member of group X. Because treating p in this manner is consistent with our true self or Ubuntu; an enterprise which conduces toward our moral perfection (confer E and F above). With this formulation, we can then scrutinise a great diversity of entities that ought to matter morally, including animals, humanoid robots and the environment.

The second category is then what I call a full member of X who satisfies the likeness criterion. Here all the demands of property-based accounts would ordinarily apply. Hence I shall not discuss this category any further.

Modal Relationalism

The basic structure of property-based conceptions of moral status, such as the capacity for rationality and friendliness may logically be constructed as follows:

1. To have property A consequently grants entity p the status B;
2. Therefore, B is because A;
3. And by contraposition, it must also be true that if not A, then not B.

And to formulate this within the rubric of Metz's modal relationalism thesis:

- i. An entity p with the capacity for friendliness or capacity to be part of a sharing relationship with us has moral status;
- ii. It is granted moral status because of its capacity for friendliness or capacity to be part of a sharing relationship with us because possessing such a capacity provides us with reasons to help it or that the sharing relationship which results

therefrom is an end-in-itself and therefore motivates our actions to help another;

- iii. It follows therefore that if p does not have the capacity for friendliness, then p does not have moral status (METZ 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2011)

Metz employs something akin to the likeness criterion introduced above to grant moral considerability. Further, he holds a gradational account of moral considerability which assumes that entities have varying degrees of moral considerability contingent upon their capacity to enter into sharing relationships with humans or their capacity for friendliness (METZ 2010a, 2011). There are indeed obvious objections to this thesis. One being the problem of quantification, which Metz does not clearly address in his thesis. Stated plainly, if moral status is contingent upon the degree to which an entity satisfies some moral property, then how ought we to measure the variance of a moral property? How are we to measure and distinguish between so-called varying degrees of friendliness *qua* Metz's thesis? Even if Metz were to proffer such a metric, I would argue still that its discovery would not absolve his thesis of a much broader problem: What criteria are we to use and upon what grounds are we to decide upon such criteria? In answer to this problem, Metz appears to have in mind the idea of friendliness and sharing relationships conceived according to human standards. Other possible formulations of friendliness that do not derive from the human standard are discounted. This lends us to the second objection.

Metz's thesis seems to be exclusionary. For it precludes entities that we would ordinarily concede that they do possess moral status. And hence remains suspect of the same philosophical limitations as individualism and holism; the same theories he is arguing against (METZ 2011). Molefe gives a fuller argument in this regard which I find is worth reproducing in some detail below:

Human beings have a capacity for friendship₁ and Martians have a capacity for friendship₂ – there is no discernible difference between these two kinds of friendships except that one is possessed by human beings and the other by Martians. And, I wish to add one major consideration about human beings and Martians. These have the same capacity

for sharing a way of life and caring for others' welfare. Except, crucially, that these two entities, for some strange biological reason, I stipulate, cannot enter into any kind of interaction with each other.

If Metz is truly committed to the view that moral status is accounted for by an essential reference to some human feature (ability to commune with human beings), then it should follow that Martians have no moral status. However, this is a strange implication for Martians not to have moral status given that they have the relevant relational capacity, except that they lack a non-moral feature of not being human and do not have the ability to relate to human beings – but can relate with other entities both positively and negatively. (MOLEFE 2017, 200-201)

The exclusionary implications of (iii) in the context of animals, the environment and hypothetical moral agents demonstrate the ineptness of such a theory to help us deal with emergent problems in the contemporary moral world. Further, its reliance on capacity to ground moral considerability is indeed at variance with the African mode of being-in-the-world (SAMUEL & FAYEMI 2020). Contrary to Metz's thesis, in my argument for *de facto* moral friends, I hold: It is not the case that if not A, then not B; thereby avoiding the exclusionary corollary of (iii).

If I have understood Metz's view correctly, I situate his chief mistake on two levels. His outright rejection of a plausibly good reason for moral motivation within African moral thought, to wit, the fact that *p* would help another solely because doing so would promote one's own true self (METZ 2010a) – confer proposition E and F. He maintains that it would seem false to suppose this.

For one, it seems false to suppose that the only basic reason for one to help another is that doing so would promote one's own true self or valuable nature; something about the person who could be helped seems relevant to a complete explanation of why one might have a duty to help him. (METZ 2010a, 56-57)

And this “something about the person” Metz (2010a) refers to is the capacity to enter into sharing relationships or friendliness with humans. Metz’s monistic reading of Ubuntu deprives him of a profound appreciation of the concept’s normative and descriptive aspects, and complexity.

Further, Metz’s insistence on sharing relationships deprives his theory of an element of justice, underpinning my idea of *de facto* moral friends. As such, he cannot explore other valuable forms of relationships, such as non-exploitative relations, which do not demand any capacity other than deriving its dictates from our duty toward others, both human and non-human entities “inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of a possible abridgement” (COETZEE & ROUX 2003, 287) of our individual interests. I am defending this minimum of altruism as a good enough reason for moral motivation. It is the same accommodative expanse I want to posit against Metz’s modal relationalism.

Future Considerations

Innovation in early human development research has brought into light the engineering of human embryoids, that is, embryo-like structures derived from pluripotent stem cells (KOPLIN & MASSIE 2021; SAWAI, MINAKAWA, PUGH *et al* 2020). This raises new bioethical issues regarding the moral status of such embryo-like structures, including a diversity of new legal and policy issues. Would it be permissible to destroy such synthetic structures with the potentiality to develop into a foetus and mature human being? Should these entities enjoy full legal protection? And if so, why and how would these look like?

The ubuntu ethicist would regard human embryos and embryo-like structures as *de facto* friends of the human species or moral community in a similar sense, and for the same reasons s/he would accord a like status to an animal, humanoid robot and the ecosystem. The fact that human embryos and embryo-like structures, for example, would be considered moral friends of the human species allows us to legitimate permissions and prohibitions to certain kinds of experimentation with human embryos or embryo-like structures based on the duties, but not rights, owed to them. This opens up a new set of philosophically nuanced questions as to:

- a. Whether there is a normatively significant difference between a moral *friend* and a so-called *full member* of a moral community? In other words, do they assume differential moral privileges?
- b. In the case that our friend *p* possesses agency, ought she to acknowledge our basic moral priorities thereby reciprocate our other-regarding virtues and obligations toward her?
- c. Under what circumstances, if at all permissible, may we legitimately “unfriend” *p*?

Albeit I do not attempt to respond to these questions in this paper, I do trust the multimodal account proposed in this paper does somewhat redress age-old intractable problems on moral considerability debates and perhaps, even given its fallibility, modestly inspires new modes of thinking on waking concerns in emergent technologies without courting absurdity.

Conclusion

I have argued in this preliminary work for a widened scope in regard reasons that should account for moral considerability. I have proposed a two-level, multimodal account which also considers *de facto* moral friends, such as embryo-like structures and artificial moral agents among others, as entities deserving moral consideration. To demonstrate the utility of this thesis, I have contrasted it with Metzian modal relationalism highlighting its unimodalism and inadequacy in dealing with the problem of moral considerability in both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic cases.

Declaration

This is the author’s independent work and the opinions expressed herein are wholly those of the author and not of the author’s affiliations.

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