


## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## African Traditional Religion and moral philosophy

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### Abstract

The article provides a philosophical explication of an African religious moral philosophy. Often philosophers repudiate the view that African Traditional Religions (ATR) can embody a religious moral philosophy. Theologians, on the other hand, tend to believe that ATR can, but they often do not provide a systematic account of such an ethical system. The article demonstrates that ATR can embody an under-explored moral philosophy. ATR refers to indigenous religious ideas, beliefs, and practices of the indigenous people below the Sahara. The article will invoke the metaphysical and moral concept of vitality as the basis to construct an African religious moral philosophy. (It is worth noting that this article merely constructs, but it does not defend, this ethical system.) Vitality is the spiritual energy that originates, maximally inheres and defines God, and God has since distributed it to all that exists, albeit in varying degrees. By ‘moral philosophy’, the article focuses on (1) meta-ethics (it proffers a vitality-based account of the moral terms right and wrong); (2) normative theory (it expounds on the perfectionist and deontological principles of right action); and (3) applied ethics (it invokes a vitality-based conception of moral status to explore environmental ethics and select bioethical themes).

**Keywords:** Bioethics; deontology; environmental ethics; moral philosophy; moral status; normative theory; personhood; religion

### Introduction

The article offers a philosophical construction of an African religious moral philosophy. The account developed here is ‘African’ insofar as it is constructed from theoretical resources derived from what scholars of African thought call *African Traditional Religion* (henceforth, ATR). Roughly, ATR refers to religious ideas, beliefs, and practices associated with indigenous peoples below the Sahara (Wiredu (1998); Oladipo (2004); Lugira (2009)). Theologians and philosophers, motivated by the desire to explain, clarify, and justify the view that African cultures have their own distinctive religious views and practices, have proffered ATR (Mbiti 1990). These ideas, beliefs, and practices generally pre-date the encounter with the colonizing and proselytizing religions like Islam and Christianity. The ethical system anticipated here is ‘religious’ insofar it is grounded in the fundamental metaphysical and moral property of vitality, which ATR (at least in our view) postulates as the defining feature of God. Roughly, ‘vitality’ is the most basic metaphysical property

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that emanates from God and is a pervasive feature of all aspects of reality. Our aim involves systematically constructing a moral philosophy based on the supernatural property of vitality.

By 'moral philosophy', at least for the purposes of this article, we limit our focus to three ethical questions or even debates in the literature in African philosophy. First, we will consider the debate on the nature of moral properties, whether they are physical or spiritual. In other words, we will be inquiring about the content of the ethical terms 'right' and 'wrong'. Second, we will turn to normative theorization, which involves the specification of the basic value or grounding norm that we invoke to distinguish permissible from impermissible actions (Rachel and Rachels (2015)). The third question involves specifying the criterion for membership in the moral community. Often the literature in moral philosophy deploys the concept of *moral status* as the basis for membership in the moral community (Warren (1997)).

We select these three categories because we believe that they will give the reader a (somewhat) comprehensive picture of religious moral philosophy in an African context. That is, the three selected categories will give the reader a general picture of a vitality-based moral philosophy. Typically, moral philosophy focuses on three broad areas of inquiry, namely: meta-ethics, normative, and applied ethics (Sober (2001); Pojman (2002)). To construct a general picture of African religious moral philosophy we consider a question from each of these broad areas of inquiry constitutive of ethics. In relation to meta-ethics, we will consider the question of the nature of moral properties, where we will attempt to construct a religious or spiritual account of moral properties. In relation to normative ethics, we will specify the spiritual norm of vitality as the basis for the principle of right action. In relation to applied ethics, we will appeal to the spiritual property of vitality as the basis for moral status and/or human dignity, an account of moral status that will help us to reflect on select practical problems in environmental ethics and bioethics.

This article is motivated by two crucial considerations. The first revolves around the dominance of a secular interpretation of African ethics in the literature in African philosophy. Influential philosophers (Wiredu (1996); Gyekye (2010); Okeja (2013)) repudiate the view that African Traditional Religion can embody an ethical system of its own. On their view, though they recognize the centrality of God in ATR, they still insist that he does not play a defining or foundational role in morality. To sustain such a view, they often cite the fact that African religion is not revealed or institutional in nature (Wiredu (1992); Gbadegesin (2005)). These scholars argue that for a system of morality to be religious it must necessarily have the property of being revealed in the fashion of Abrahamic religions like Christianity (Molefe (2013)). The revelation, as in the scriptures, is crucial as it preserves and communicates the divine will, which embodies the moral law or principles to order our lives. This article is a response to the prevailing secular interpretation of African ethics. It will demonstrate that ATR does embody its own distinctive ethical system, which pivots on the property of vitality.

The second reason emerges in light of the extant attempts to articulate and defend a religious moral philosophy in the literature in African philosophy, religion and studies (Kasenene (1998); Bujo (2001); Murove (2002); Ejizu (2011)). This literature is an important contribution to African religious ethics, but it has several concerning limitations. One that stands out is that it tends to be anthropologically oriented rather than philosophical when dealing with the subject of morality. That is, often the reader is treated to extensive descriptions of rituals and practices thought to be associated with 'morals' in African thought (Bujo (1998), (2001); Murove (2016)). One recent example of this kind of anthropological ethics is *African Moral Consciousness* by Felix Munyaradzi Murove (2016). The book is replete with narratives of rituals and practices believed to embody and exemplify deep moral principles. It does not, however, develop what might count as a proper moral

system, which will provide a theoretical basis to reflect or answer meta-ethical, normative, and applied ethics issues, at least directly so. If one espouses a religiously oriented conception of moral philosophy, as does Murove, one would reasonably expect that he clarifies and explains the details of this ethical system. Alternatively, one would expect an explanation of how these rituals and practices might inform a principle of right action or give guidance on practical moral problems. Such important theoretical analysis associated with any robust ethical system remain under-developed and unjustified; hence, there is need for a philosophically oriented project. A philosophically oriented project is even more urgent in the context where ATR is also beginning to receive attention from scholars of African philosophy (Metz and Molefe (2021)).

It is the aim of this article, therefore, to demonstrate that ATR does have under-explored and under-theorized resources to construct a robust moral philosophy, or religious ethics. It will give an account that explains how God could play a foundational and crucial role in defining the essence of morality. The centrality of God in morality is the function of the fact that the crucial divine feature of vitality is at the heart of our attempt to construct an African moral philosophy. We will show how the spiritual property of vitality (1) explains the nature of moral properties, (2) serves as a norm to distinguish permissible from impermissible actions, and (3) provides a criterion for membership in the moral community.

It is critical that we clarify that our project is not to defend the plausibility of the metaphysical vision associated with ATR, at least not on this project. There is an overall structure of reality associated with ATR, such as the pivotal concept of vitalism. The strategy is to presume the truth of the metaphysical concepts or assumptions associated with ATR after carefully explaining them, and the aim involves unfolding the axiology associated with it (ATR). This strategy should not come as a surprise largely because it is in the nature of religious ethics that it operates on the basis of certain cosmological and spiritual metaphysical suppositions, and these suppositions inform the ensuing ethical system (Schweiker and Clairmont (2019)). In other words, the focus of this article is to elucidate an axiological system associated with the metaphysics inherent in ATR. We leave aside, at least in this article, the project of defending the metaphysics informing the ethical system propounded here. Crucially, we also leave aside the project of justifying the ethical system articulated here. The aim, at least for the purposes of this article, is to extract an ethical system from ATR.

To unfold the axiological system – a vitality-based moral philosophy – associated with ATR, we structure the article as follows. The first section discusses the concept of vitality, which will be crucial in our account of an African religious moral philosophy. The second section constructs a vitality-based account of the moral properties of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; that is, it offers an exposition of how vitality serves as the spiritual content for these moral terms. The third section turns to a vitality-based normative theory, which will outline an account of right action. We discuss two promising normative theories associated with vitality: the perfectionist and deontological principles of right action. The final section considers the concept of moral status (or human dignity) and its implications for applied ethics; we will consider environmental ethics and bioethical themes of abortion and euthanasia.

In what follows, we begin our conversation by considering the concept of vitality as a centrally defining feature of God.

### **ATR, God and vitality**

At the heart of an African metaphysical system, or even ATR, is the property of vitality. The concept of vitality is crucial in African conceptions of reality because everything that

exists comprises it (Shutte (1993)). To be, the very notion of existence, intrinsically implicates the thing under consideration with the possession of vitality (Imafidon (2013)). Vitality is crucial in ATR, or in African theology, because some African cultures believe that it defines the very essence of God or divinity. ‘Vitality’, which is sometimes described as *life-force* or *life*, is the spiritual energy that emanates, maximally inheres, and defines God (Tempels (1959); Magesa (1997); Kasenene (1998); Bujo (2001); Bikopo and van Bogaert (2009)). In a recent exposition of ATR, Metz and Molefe (2021, 397) make this observation about the nature of God in African thought:

Traditional African Religion differs from salient versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A second major difference concerns the way to conceive of God’s most fundamental or unifying property. It is common in the Abrahamic faiths to think of God ultimately in terms of *logos*. In contrast to rationality, what stands out about the African tradition is the conception of God in terms of *bios*, that is, what African philosophers tend to call ‘life-force’ but what may also be called ‘vitality’.

ATR imagines a God that is definable in terms of *bios*, life or ‘liveliness’, as Metz (2012, 2021), one of the leading scholars of African philosophy, tends to capture it. Vitality or liveliness, I use these terms interchangeably, is God’s outstanding and distinctive feature. The greatness or perfection of God is a function of the belief that he possesses the highest quantity and quality of vitality possible, whereas systems of religion that define God in terms of *logos* tend to think of him as an intelligent designer. On such systems, intelligence is the fundamental property that defines the nature of God. On the contrary, according to ATR, what stands out about God is the property of vitality. The notion of vitality is usually associated with ‘creativity and growth’ (Dzobo (1992), 78). To associate God with vitality or liveliness places a premium on such things as productivity, health, vivacity, creativity, growth, life, continuity, fertility, abundance, and so on (Magesa (1997); Bujo (2009); Metz (2012)).<sup>1</sup>

To help the reader to appreciate the importance of vitality (the defining feature of God) in African metaphysics or ATR, we turn to the hierarchy of beings used to explain it (ATR). There is a consensus in the literature that the best model to understand ATR is the idea of a hierarchy of beings (Menkiti (1984); Gyekye (1995)). Laurenti Magesa (1997, 39) comments in this fashion regarding the hierarchy of beings; ‘In the conception of African religion, the universe is a composite of divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate elements, hierarchically perceived, but directly related, and always interacting with one another.’

Nhlanhla Mkhize (2008, 37) also notes the following: ‘God does not exist in complete isolation from the rest of creation. Rather, a hierarchy of beings is postulated, with God at the apex, and then at different levels, the living dead (ancestors) . . . then human beings and then the rest of creation.’

Scholars capture the relationships of the things that exist in the cosmos in terms of the model of a hierarchy of beings. The notion of hierarchy gives us a sense of cosmic order in this metaphysical system. In African thought, the cosmic order is organized in terms of the supernatural and natural communities (Shutte (2001)). God and ancestors belong in the supernatural community. Human beings, animals, and other physical things belong to the natural community. The reader should not wrongly construe this division to imply metaphysical dualism; rather it simply identifies that there are two kinds of things, some of them are invisible and others visible in the single realm of reality. On the one hand, we have supernatural things. These escape human perception – they are beyond the reach of any technological device to track or identify empirical stuff. On the other hand, you have physical things that are accessible to human perception or technological

devices. Though both the supernatural and natural things exist together in the single realm of reality, they do not occupy the same rank or station in it. Some beings occupy higher positions than others do in the hierarchy, which captures cosmic order in African thought.

Typically, things in the spiritual community occupy a higher position than those of things in the natural one in the hierarchical scheme of reality. God occupies the highest position in the hierarchy. Following God are other members of the spiritual community, ancestors or the living dead. That is, those human beings that have since experienced physical death but have now transitioned into the spiritual community, where they now serve as guardians of their remaining families on earth (Mbiti (1975); Ramose (2013)). In the natural community, human beings occupy the highest position, followed by animals; below animals are other animate and inanimate things.

The notion of a hierarchy of beings is important in African thought, because it captures one important insight. It captures the centrality of the idea of a community. It imagines the cosmos as a kind of community composed of spiritual and visible communities. Scholars of African thought capture the notion of a single community composed of different things that interact by appealing to the metaphysical concept of holism. 'Metaphysical holism' refers to a conception of reality where 'Everything – God, ancestors, humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects – is connected, interdependent and interrelated' (Verhoef and Michel (1997), 395). This concept represents reality in terms of how things organically stand in interdependent relationships. In other words, the notion of holism captures the relationalism usually associated with African thought, where it denotes the state of things caught up in perpetual relationships with others. The notion of a hierarchy gives a picture of a community, or interconnectedness, where all elements, in one way or another, are connected. For example, Godfrey Siteloane (1979) explains this interconnection in terms of the analogy of a magnetic field, where all elements hold and pull together in harmony. Each element or community in its rank plays a crucial role in fostering and maintaining harmony.

In light of the hierarchy of beings explained above, we might now want to ask two crucial questions. How do we explain the connectedness of things in the world? Furthermore, how do we explain their various positions in the hierarchy? The property of vitality explains the position of different beings in the hierarchy. In a sense, vitality serves as the glue that connects things. All that exists possess vitality and anything that has it can and does connect with any other in the system (Imafidon (2013)). Vitality is like the magnetic force through which all things are drawn into the community of life and can share in the communion of life. In relation to the question why some things occupy higher positions than others in the hierarchy, the answer lies in the quantity of vitality a thing possesses. The reader should remember that God is the originator and distributor of vitality, although he distributes it in varying degrees relative to the different ranks. It is a common belief in African thought, for example, that human beings have greater vitality than animals, and this is the order God imposed in the cosmos relative to the rank occupied by human beings in the hierarchy that has higher vitality than the rank of animals.

We now have a rough picture of ATR particularly in relation to vitality. We can conclude that ATR is a monotheistic religion that posits a single God occupying the highest position in the hierarchy. We also noted that God's nature is essentially definable by liveliness or vitality. The divine offshoot (of vitality) features in all that exists that will form the basis for our construction of an African religious moral philosophy.

In the next section, we articulate an African moral philosophy. We begin with meta-ethics.

## Vitality and meta-ethics

This section explores a specific meta-ethical question – the question about the nature of moral properties. One important meta-ethical debate in African thought has pivoted on whether moral properties are religious or secular (Wiredu (1992); Gyekye (2010); Molefe (2015a)). To identify moral properties as ‘religious’ means that one understands them in terms of some spiritual property like a soul, or the image of God. To identify moral properties as ‘secular’ means one associates them with physical things like human needs or pleasurable experiences. The literature in African thought has tended to insist on a secular interpretation of the nature of moral properties, where moral properties are accounted for in terms of some physical item. Often, some aspect of human nature serves as the natural property that captures the essence of morality. Influential meta-ethical theories in African thought cite human needs (Wiredu (1996)); human welfare (Gyekye (2010)); human capacity for community (Metz (2021)) as the relevant physical property. That is, African scholars tend to defend a version of ethical humanism of one form or another. Elsewhere, Molefe (2015b) has developed arguments which criticize this kind of ethical humanism in African ethics. The aim in this section is to articulate a vitality-based meta-ethical system.

How do we explain the spiritual nature of moral properties in the light of vitality? Until now, we have been talking about the nature of *moral properties*. By ‘moral properties’, in this instance, we have in mind the concepts of right and wrong. It is one thing to identify some action as right or wrong, where one is evaluating the action against some norm like pleasure. It is quite another thing, however, to ask the question about the nature or content of right or wrong. Typically, one can answer this question by appealing to a variety of objects such as the Subject (ethical subjectivism), Culture (cultural relativism), Convention (moral conventionalism), God (ethical supernaturalism), and so on (Sober (2001)). For our part, we are positing God, or some spiritual property, specifically vitality, as the defining feature of right and wrong. In other words, when we use the moral terms right and wrong, we are telling a story about vitality.

To explain how vitality captures rightness and wrongness, we begin by noting that the good in African thought revolves around our relation to vitality or liveliness. We might have a positive and/or a negative relation to vitality. Rightness is a function of a positive relation to vitality and wrongness of a negative one. What do we mean by positive and negative relation to vitality? In African thought, positive relation to vitality refers to situations characterized by creativity and growth, or simply put, those that lead to more life. Tempels (1959, 30–32) captures this ethical orientation in this fashion:

their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force . . . Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force.

Tempels talks about the purpose or the only kind of blessing in this ethical system revolves around growing one’s vitality. In other words, positive relation to vitality refers to a situation where the agent acquires more of it, and the more of it she acquires, the better. The situation where one grows or acquires more vitality is a blessing, and we can deduce that a curse is a function of loss of vitality.

The negative relation to vitality refers to the state or process of losing vitality, which is usually associated with death. We can distinguish between natural death, which is merely a biological fact associated with the fact that we are naturally mortal. The death associated with the diminution of vitality, the worst evil, is a moral kind and not the merely

biological one – though these two tend to converge. In other words, as one loses one's vitality this has immediate biological consequences associated with the loss of health, energy, and power; diseases might start to set in, which might lead to natural death. Talk of moral death is tantamount to talk of a progressive loss of vital force due to the agent's conduct. If the progressive loss of vitality continues without a halt, then one can recede to absolute death, where one physically dies and does not become an ancestor (Bujo (2009), 283). The worst evil or curse – the progressive loss of vitality – that might lead to death must be avoided by all means possible.

Rightness revolves around the positive relation to vitality, which leads to more life.<sup>2</sup> Wrongness is associated with a negative relation to life, which leads to death. According to the Divine Command Theory, a leading western account of moral philosophy, morality revolves around the divine law. What God commands serves as the content for morality. Right is a function of what God commands (or prescribers) and wrong is a function of what he forbids (Adams (1981); Berg (1991); Joyce (2012)). The difference between two ethical systems is overt. One posits vitality and another God's command as the content of the moral terms right and wrong. In the African meta-ethical system, the term right indicates a positive relation to vitality – does the action preserve or enhance vitality. Whereas in DCT the term right is about God's command, obeying the divine will. One notable advantage associated with defining right in terms of liveliness is that it appears to eschew the Euthyphro problem, which is a pertinent and persistent objection against DCT (Molefe (2017)).

The Euthyphro problem, in moral philosophy, raises two objections against defining morality in terms of God's command. One side of the objection points out that if the good is a function entirely of God's commands, then it seems that morality is arbitrary. The arbitrary charge is strong because it suggests that it cannot be a mere fact that God commands something that renders it right. The perfect example of this objection is the story of God commanding Abraham to kill his son. For most of us, the divine command to kill an innocent teenager is overtly wrong. Another objection points out that if God commands it because it is good then it seems morality is independent of God – the act of commanding does not add anything to the content of morality. The Euthyphro problem arises in relation to DCT because it tethers morality to God's command, whereas ATR tethers morality to God's property of liveliness.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does grounding morality on vitality eschew the Euthyphro problem, it also renders the objection that religious ethics requires divine revelation otiose. The essence of ATR is that God does not need to reveal himself through prophets, founders, and scriptures. The pervasive presence and reach of God through vitality offers an under-explored way to imagine religious ethics. In African thought, divine will is a function of relating positively to the vitality that inheres in us and surrounds us. Cultivating positive relations of harmony to enhance vitality constitutes the essence of morality and a meaningful life (Mkhize (2009)). This does not mean that God does not reveal himself in African thought. He can and does reveal himself via spiritual diviners and ancestors (Ramosé (2013)). However, the essence of God's revelation is how we relate to the divine property of vitality among each other and the broader natural environment.

In the next section, we turn to the discussion of a vitality-based normative theory.

### Vitality and normative ethics

Human beings tend to operate with a common-sense view of what actions count as morally permissible or impermissible. We can group those actions that we consider permissible into one basket (charity, truth telling, care, and so on). We consider acts like killing of innocent persons, cheating, robbery, and corruption as impermissible.

Normative theorization is an attempt to provide a basic norm or value through which we can distinguish between these two baskets of actions, the permissible from the impermissible ones (Rachel and Rachels (2015)). For example, classical utilitarianism postulates pleasure as the basic norm for distinguishing permissible from impermissible actions (Kymlicka (1990)). Actions promoting pleasure are permissible and those promoting suffering impermissible. ATR, on the other hand, postulates vitality as the basic value or norm for distinguishing permissible from impermissible actions. In our view, there are two prominent normative theories in African thought associated with vitality – the *perfectionist* and *dignity-based* renditions.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows below, I give the reader a rough sense of these two normative theories. The aim, at this stage, is to outline these two theories of right action rather than going further to evaluate which of them is the most plausible. Remember, the aim of this article revolves around unfolding the moral system associated with ATR as a counter to the view that for a moral system to be religious it must be revealed. We begin our discussion with the perfectionist principle.

### *The perfectionist normative theory*

The concept of personhood captures one of the prominent ways to capture African ethics (Tempels (1959); Menkiti (1984); Dzobo (1992); Ikuenobe (2006); Oyowe (2014); Molefe (2019)). The notion of a person that is important in African thought is the normative one (Menkiti (2004)). In the normative sense, the concept of a person is an honorific one, where it signals socio-moral approval or commendation of the agent for having led a virtuous life (Wiredu (2009)). In this light, it is one thing to be a human being, a metaphysical or descriptive fact, and quite another thing to be a person. The former is an ontological given, either one is a human being or not. Being human is necessary for personhood but not sufficient for it – the agent's quality of conduct secures her personhood. In this light, personhood is something the agent pursues, and, if successful, then she attains it; if not, she fails to achieve it.

Scholars of African thought tend to associate the approach to morality associated with the achievement of personhood with moral perfectionism (Menkiti (1984); Metz (2007); Behrens (2013); Molefe (2019)). They tend to do so because at the heart of this approach to ethics is the expectation that the human agent has to develop her distinctive (spiritual) features to be characterized by virtue. Bujo (2001, 88, emphasis mine) captures the perfectionist rendition of ethics in this fashion: 'Acting in solidarity for the construction of the community allows himself to be brought to *completion* by this same community, so that *he can become a person truly*' (Bujo 2001, 88, emphasis ours). Shutte (2001, 30) construes the essence of morality to pivot around 'process of personal growth'. He understands this process to be a moral one, where the agent, if successful, 'become(s) more fully human' (*ibid.*). The moral logic expressed by these thinkers is that one has to attain a certain ideal state, that is, one must attain a state of moral perfection.

In African thought, the state of moral perfection is associated with the acquisition of virtue (Menkiti (2001); Shutte (2001)). Menkiti captures moral perfection in terms of the idea of *excellence*, as the reader will see below. Shutte uses the language of *virtues*, which is not surprising given the Thomism characterizing his interpretation of African thought. The moral agent is born with a deposit of vitality, which Tempels, as cited above, described in terms of the agent being *endowed by God with a certain force*. The chief ethical task is the development or growth of this divine endowment. The essential part of developing vitality finds expression through the manifestation of the virtues of character or excellence. Note this comment by Menkiti (1984, 172, emphasis original):



This is perhaps the burden of the distinction which Placide Tempels' native informants saw fit to emphasize to him the distinction between a *muntu mutupu* (a man of middling importance) and *muntu muku/umpe* (a powerful man, a man with a great deal of force). Because the word 'muntu' includes an idea of excellence, of plenitude of force at maturation . . .

There is a distinction between merely being human and being a person. The latter, if we follow the above quotation, refers to an agent that has developed her vitality. The development of vitality amounts to the agent having a great deal of it, where we can now describe her as powerful. Notice that the attainment of greater proportions of vitality, the achievement of the status of personhood, is associated with excellence that is directly associated with the plenitude of force. The plenitude of force refers to moral maturation. The growth of vitality leads to moral maturation, where the agent's disposition abounds with excellence. Scholars of African thought tend to construe the excellence or perfection associated with the maturation of vitality, on the part of the agent, with relational virtues, such as generosity, kindness, respect, solidarity, and so on (Menkiti (1984); Gyekye (1992); Tutu (1999)).

In light of the above, we can come to the following principle of right action:

An act is right insofar as it perfects the agent's spiritual nature; and, it is wrong if it fails to do so.

The agent's spiritual nature refers to the fact that the most distinctive aspect of our humanity is the divine endowment of vitality. The perfection of this spiritual nature refers to the agent's primary duty to nurture her vitality. The nurturing of her spiritual nature leads to her being powerful or abounding with excellences of character. The quotation by Bujo above indicated the means through which the agent must grow her vitality, which essentially involves positively relating with others in the community. It is through these positive exchanges of vitality that one becomes a person truly insofar as one's virtues will emerge. The goal is personal development, the self-regarding aspect of ethics that captures the final good, and the means are through robust relationships with others, the other-regarding aspect of ethics.

How does the perfectionist normative theory explain the wrongness of rape? Rape is wrong, first since it fails to perfect the perpetrator. The agent by raping lets himself down as a spiritual being. Remember, the perfection anticipated here is one that reveals itself through the display of relational virtues like kindness, tolerance, generosity, and so on. Moreover, and importantly, it is wrong also because it fails to relate positively with the victim. The act of rape fails to appreciate the spiritual nature of the victim, and, as such, harms and degrades her, as it relates to her as other than a spiritual being possessing vitality. The self-regarding aspect relates to the failing to nurture her own spiritual nature, and the other-regarding aspect refers to her failing to recognize and nurture another spiritual being by positively relating with her.

We turn now to the deontological moral principle.

### *The dignity-based normative theory*

There is another promising vitality-based normative theory – the dignity-based rendition of it. Underlying the dignity-based principle is the deontological orientation. The idea of human dignity signals the intrinsic worth associated with a human being and in virtue of possessing this worth, we owe her utmost respect (Donnelly (2015)). The notion of vitality captures the intrinsic value that captures human dignity (Bikopo and van Bogaert (2009)).

There are at least two ways to relate to a value. Consequentialists accounts tend to *promote* a value, which involves ensuring that there is much of it as possible. Promoting the value of truth, for example, would require that we make sure that there is much of it as possible even if the achievement of this goal requires refrains of it (Pettit (1989)). Deontological accounts, on the other hand, tend to require agents to *honour* a value. Honouring a value means recognizing and respecting an instance of that value, even if doing so might lead to there being less of it in the world (MacNaughton and Rawling (1992)). That is, one must tell the truth even if being truthful might lead to one's partner being unfaithful. On the dignity-based account, which is deontologically oriented, the agent is merely required to recognize and respect instance(s) of the value of vitality.

In our view, Pantaleon Iroegbu (2005, 448) expresses the dignity-based view when he avers: 'This brings to focus the positive value of life. Because it is divine in resemblance, it must be taken loftily and with highest respect. It must be seen for what it is: of high value.' Godfrey Onah (2020) also captures the dignity-based view in this fashion: 'At the centre of traditional African morality is human life. Africans have a sacred reverence for life . . . To protect and nurture their lives, all human beings are inserted within a given community . . .' The point that emerges here is that human life is intrinsically valuable, a bearer of dignity, and, because it bears such a high value, we must respond to it with the highest respect or sacred reverence. The language of *highest respect* and *sacred reverence* in relation to the value of vitality implies that we should honour it.

In other words, moral agents have a duty to honour those who possess vitality. Part of what is involved in honouring some value, particularly human dignity, involves the stringent negative duties of non-harm and the strong positive duties of empowerment (Beyleveld and Brownsword (2001)). In light of this brief analysis of the intrinsic and high value placed on (human) life or vitality, we come to the following normative theory:

An act is right insofar as it respects a person's spiritual nature; and the act is wrong insofar as it degrades this valuable human nature.

The moral principle requires agents to recognize the human person's spiritual nature, her human dignity, which is a function of her possessing the property of vitality. The mere fact that she possesses vitality means we have duties to respect human persons. Right actions are those that respect a person's spiritual nature, and this involves actions that avoid degrading her as a spiritual being and those that enhance her spirituality.

In this light, rape is wrong because it degrades the person's spiritual nature, her dignity. Sex is an important part of participating in creativity and growth. The reader should remember that vitality is an intrinsic feature of our nature, which also makes it possible for us to connect with others. It is in the positive connection with others that our spiritual nature participates and grows its liveliness. Rape, on this view, is wrong precisely because it undermines our vitality and our ability to connect with others positively. On this view, consent is a means through which agents participate and grow their liveliness.

In sum, we demonstrated above that the vitality-based ethical system embodies two promising normative theories: the perfectionist and dignity-based accounts of right action. One cannot deny the prominent place occupied by the perfectionist strand in African thought. There is also no denying the importance of the idea of human dignity in African thought. It is worth noting that the vitalist interpretation captures both strands of thought. In future work, it will be important to ascertain which of the two normative theories is most plausible, particularly if we are committed to ethical monism.

The next section turns to the question of the moral community.

## Vitality and moral community

We can distinguish between the natural and moral communities. Anything that exists in the world is a part of the natural community. The natural world is composed of things such as cars, human beings, mountains, grass, clouds, and so on. We can also talk of things in the natural world towards which we have moral duties. Those things in the world to which we owe moral duties belong in the moral community. Typically, things that are members of the moral community tend to be ones that we can harm. The technical term used in the literature to capture the idea of citizenship in the moral community is that of *moral status* (DeGrazia (2008)). To have 'moral status' denotes that the entity under consideration is an object of ethical concern, that is, we have moral obligations towards it. These entities are objects of moral concern in their own right; that is, we have direct duties towards such objects of ethical concern. We have obligations towards those with moral status for reasons that revolve around certain facts about them, such as the fact that we can harm them (Metz (2012)).

The concept of moral status is an abstract one about the duties we have towards certain things in the world. Theories of moral status posit a property, an ontological one, in virtue of which we can identify things to which we owe such duties of respect (Metz (2012)). Different moral theories posit different ontological bases to account for moral status (Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019)). Utilitarianism, for example, grounds moral status on the ability to enjoy or suffer – sentience. On this view of moral status, all sentient beings have moral status (Singer (2009)). Some theories account for it by appeal to cognitive abilities (Rosen (2012)). On such views, any being that possesses the requisite threshold of cognitive abilities has moral status. In the religious front, particularly in Christian thought, moral status is the function of possessing a soul or the divine image (Schulman (2009)). By merely possessing these divine features the entity in question has moral status. In light of ATR, moral citizenship, or moral status, is the function of merely possessing vitality (Bikopo and van Borgaert (2009)). Any object that possesses vitality has moral status. It should follow, therefore, that since everything in African thought possesses some degree of vitality, there is no object that has no moral status, although others have higher moral status than others do relative to the rank they occupy in the hierarchy (Chemhuru (2016)).

One might wonder how this account of moral status might contribute to applied ethics. For the sake focus and giving the reader the rough sense of how a vitality-based view of moral status might resolve some moral conundrums, we focus on environmental ethics and the bioethical questions of abortion and euthanasia. In relation to the environment, the central question is – do we have ethical duties towards the environment or some components of it such as animals? We can begin our inquiry by considering if animals, in light of vitality, do have moral status. Why would it be wrong to torture Max, a neighbour's dog, for fun? We take it for granted that an attractive moral theory at least must be able to explain our duty not to torture Max and our duties towards animals in general. On this account, interestingly, all entities – animals, vegetables, and inanimate objects – have moral status since they possess vitality, which implies that we owe them some moral regard. Human beings, obviously, given that they occupy the highest rank in the hierarchy of beings in the natural sphere, have higher moral status than other lower forms of life, and so deserve greater moral respect (Metz (2012)).

The gradations in moral status relative to where some entity stands in the hierarchy are crucial in understanding this religious ethical view (Metz (2012); Molefe (2022)). In the natural sphere, human beings have the highest vitality, and therefore, have dignity, whereas other entities merely have moral status (Bikopo and van Bogaert (2009); Molefe (2022)). The highest degree of moral status, usually explained in terms of full

moral status, is tantamount to human dignity (Toscano (2011); Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019)). In this light, though both human beings and animals have moral status, we owe greater duties to the former because they have dignity. Though we have duties towards both, should we face a trade-off situation, we should prioritize the interests/goals/needs/rights of human beings. The same logic characterizes the operation of the hierarchy of beings, so that animals have greater moral status than things lower than them in the hierarchy, and so on. In this light, we note that a vitality-based moral system embodies a promising and under-explored non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, which seems able to accommodate some of our intuitions about the difference in terms of moral status among various species.

Furthermore, on this view, things like mountains and stones also have moral status since they also possess some vitality. We are not yet sure about how to give things like stones and mountains some moral regard, but this theory entails that we owe them some. In a more detailed research project, one would endeavour answering such complicated questions about how to respect mountains and rivers. It should suffice for our purposes here merely to point out that this notion of vitality explains the high regard usually shown towards nature, generally, by African peoples (Murove (2004)).

To explore further the robustness of a vitality-based account, we consider the bio-ethical questions of abortion and euthanasia. In relation to abortion, we might frame the question around whether the young have moral status. We use the phrase 'the young' to cover all stages of pregnancy, infants and children before the age of reason. In relation to the medical termination of pregnancy, a vitality-based approach forbids it. The underlying logic is that at any given stage of pregnancy 'the object' under consideration, be it an embryo or a foetus, does possess vitality. Any instance of vitality, which can potentially or actually participate and benefit in growth and creativity as prescribed by African thought, ought to be protected and nurtured. The upshot of this view is that, in all stages of pregnancy, all things being equal, abortion is impermissible given that it disrupts the participation in the growth and creativity inherent among the unborn – such an act is oriented towards death (Ramose (1999), Bujo (2001)).<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, African thought permits euthanasia, particularly under circumstances where the agent's biological condition has deteriorated to a point where she can no longer participate in or benefit from creativity or growth. A life in which the agent's medical condition severs her from the only blessing, which is participating and growing in liveliness, is a life of shame, or even a curse. Hence, Godfrey Tangwa (1996, 195) opines: '[if] an elder who has accomplished his or her mission in life falls sick, s/he would pray that, if her time has come, God take him/her speedily'. The shame associated with irreversible medical deterioration that represents death ought to be avoided as much as is possible, hence euthanasia would be a welcome friend. The underlying guiding axiological principle is whether the 'objects' under consideration, be it the unborn or the extremely sick, still have the potential or ability to participate in and benefit from liveliness. The unborn or the young have the potential to participate in and benefit from liveliness, and hence we have a duty to protect and nurture them (Bujo (2001)). By contrast, the extremely sick and frail with no prospect of recovery can no longer meaningfully participate in and benefit from liveliness, which leaves them in a state of indignity associated with irreversible disease and excruciating suffering. In such a context, a vitality-based account would permit euthanasia (Molefe (2020)).<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

This article proffered a philosophical exposition of ATR with the aim to demonstrate that it does embody an under-explored and promising religious moral philosophy. To

construct an African religious moral philosophy, we invoked the centrally defining divine feature of vitality. We demonstrated that a vitality-based account embodies its own meta-ethical, normative theories and that it can contribute to applied ethics. In terms of meta-ethics, we explained that rightness is a function of positive relation to vitality and wrongness a function of a negative one. We considered two normative theories associated with the vitality-based account – the perfectionist and dignity-based accounts. In relation to applied ethics, we considered that vitality grounds its own conception of moral status or human dignity. Anything that possesses vitality has moral status, and human beings have dignity because they possess the highest degree of vitality in the natural community. We explored how a vitality-based conception of moral status might contribute to environmental ethics and bioethics.

We are the first ones to admit that this article focused on philosophically unfolding the axiology associated with ATR. We are aware and leave it for a future project to evaluate the plausibility of the ethical system associated with ATR. This kind of exposition is important as we hope it will ignite intra- and intercultural conversations about African religious moral philosophy, which largely remains marginal and ignored in ethical discourses in African philosophy and even in the literature in religious ethics. For our purposes, we are satisfied to have demonstrated that ATR does embody its own conception of ethical theory, which we hope to develop in our future work.

## Notes

1. One of the reviewers expresses concern that God in African thought is also associated with omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. The concern seems to emerge because we define God essentially in terms of vitality, and the reviewer rightly wonders about these other properties usually invoked as defining features of God. To clarify our view, we will make use of an analogy that captures our approach and view. In western religious systems, God, as we note in the article, is essentially definable in terms of intelligence or rationality (*logos*), but the fact that God essentially is definable in terms of *logos* does not preclude the fact that he still does possess the properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. The major difference in African thought is that these properties would be accounted for in the context of theoretical constraints and possibilities inherent in the concept of vitality. For example, one interesting constraint is that in some versions of Christianity the omnipotence of God is in part accounted for in terms of him creating the world from nothing, whereas in African thought the omnipotence of God is imagined in the context that he fashions the world from pre-existing material. These theoretical constraints and possibilities associated with vitality will not detain us in this project since they are not the focus. Our focus is on deploying vitality as the basis for theorizing morality in an African context.
2. One of the reviewers wonders if there cannot be an instance where an immoral act leads to more vitality or liveliness. As an example, the reviewer imagines a situation where an individual steals a car and subsequent to that becomes livelier. Two things are worth noting about the reviewer's framing of this concern. S/he uses the idea of 'livelier' to refer to the improvement in the quality of life (well-being), where the thief may come to enjoy logistical efficiency and productivity associated with having a car. Second, the framing of the concern is consequentialist in that it prizes certain consequences as the basis for moral thinking. Two things are worth noting as a response. First, the act of stealing is wrong because it deviates from the means usually invoked in African thought to achieve liveliness, which tend to be those that are characterized by interdependence and harmony. Moreover, the notion of liveliness in African ethical thought might have considerations of welfare as part of what is involved in being moral, but the salient feature of it is the manifestation of other-regarding or relational virtues such as kindness, and so on. The act of stealing surely, in the short run, might lead to what seems like an improved quality of life, but in fact it depreciates the quality of the agent's vitality and humanity as it vitiates her vitality.
3. One of the reviewers is not convinced that a vitality-based account does avoid the Euthyphro problem. Space will not permit an extensive defence of this view. It suffices that one of us has published an article where they offer a full defence of this view. On this view, morality is religious God because vitality is a property that defines God. Morality is not merely arbitrary because it evidences itself through more life or vitality.
4. One of the reviewers wonders if vitality is open to a hedonistic or a welfare-based interpretation. We believe that vitality is open to the welfare-based interpretation as a normative theory (Metz (2013)). In this article, Metz contrasts two versions of a personhood-based ethics – the community and the welfare views of ethics. We are not

yet convinced that it is open to a hedonistic interpretation. It is our view, however, that a welfarist interpretation is not prominent at least in religious interpretations of African ethics. There is a strong welfarist ethical strand in a secular interpretation of ethics (Metz (2021)).

5. One of the reviewers wonders how we might handle a situation of a trade-off between the mother and the foetus where only one can survive, and another will die. This complicated question would require details regarding the nature of the cause of the trade-off which will help us to offer a satisfactory resolution to this problem. In terms of principle, the vitality-based view of moral status regards the interests of the mother and those of the foetus as worthy of equal consideration. This is the case because 'the unborn' is as much part of the moral community as any other human being. In virtue of merely belonging to this community given the holistic moral thinking characteristic of African thought, they also have full moral status. In this light, the full moral status of a foetus serves as a very strong constraint against fetuses being killed merely because they will be a financial inconvenience, for example.

6. Bikopo and van Bogaert (2009) offer an argument similar to ours where they demonstrate that a king would be euthanized when his vitality has reached concerning levels given that the position and function of a king requires an agent that possess higher levels of vitality so that he may properly lead and bless his subjects.

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