Ethical Theory and Moral Practice
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-022-10348-y

Harmony and Solitude: A Comparative Study of Confucianism and Metz's Relational Ethics

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Accepted: 21 November 2022

Abstract
By introducing Confucian relational ethics, this essay engages critically with Metz's deontological relational moral theory from a comparative perspective. It first points out the similarities that Confucianism and Metz's African ethics share in emphasizing relationality and harmony. Then, this essay reveals the theoretical deficiency in Metz's relational moral theory compared to Confucianism; that is, the former lacks the concern for solitary cultivation which is essential for one's cultivation and development. This essay is also less optimistic about a universal ethical system as suggested by Metzian African harmony; instead, it proposes a method for the harmonious coexistence of multi-ethical systems inspired by the Chinese Confucian-Daoist complementarity model.

Keywords Thaddeus Metz · African relational ethics · Confucianism · solitary cultivation · Confucian-Daoist complementarity

1 Introduction

Thaddeus Metz's recent work, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent* (2022) is meticulous and creative in introducing African ethics and formulating an abstract theory of right action for a global audience beyond the West-centric perspective. While I generally agree with his emphases on relationality and the capacity to commune in constructing a moral theory, I find it not as comprehensive in theory and practice as Metz's passionate advocation would lead one to believe. Thus, in the following four sections, I engage critically with Metz's relational moral theory from a comparative perspective. In the first section, I introduce Metz's relational ethics and Confucian relational ethics, respectively, and present similarities that they share in highlighting relationality and harmony. In the second section, I analyse the emphasis Confucians put on solitary cultivation to reveal a theoretical deficiency in Metz's relational moral theory. In the third section, I address

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Published online: 02 December 2022

possible queries regarding solitary cultivation in relational ethics. Last but not the least, I offer, instead of a comprehensive moral principle or ethic, a coexistent way of looking at multi-ethical theories.

2 Relational Moral Ethics

As Metz specifies in the book, instead of describing indigenous African morality with intricate details, he devotes his efforts to the philosophical construction of a moral theory drawing upon prominent aspects of the sub-Saharan tradition (2022, p. vi). After critically refusing the hypotheses of taking well-being or vital force, respectively, as the highest good to be pursued, Metz argues that one should consider harmony or communal relationship as an ultimate end meriting pursuit for its own sake in the African tradition. Metz then provides a detailed reconstruction of the typical sub-Saharan understanding of communality or harmony as the combination of sharing a way of life with others and exhibiting solidarity with others, and points out that it is similar to what English speakers label "friendliness" or "love." This accounts for his relational moral theory of "rightness as friendliness." Metz holds that his theory of "rightness as friendliness" "is most philosophically defensible compared to others suggested by the sub-Saharan tradition such as vitalism" (p. 3) and "should be taken seriously by those in a variety of global philosophical traditions" (p. vi).

As a layman regarding my knowledge of African philosophy, I do not think it is my place to judge among different understandings and interpretations of African philosophy; therefore, the purpose of this essay is not to argue for or against which theorization best represents or reveals African philosophy *de facto*, but to focus only on Metz's theorization of it. One of the primary contributions Metz puts forward in his book is his demonstration of the African relational moral theory as saliently featuring the prioritization of harmony or community as a basic premise which combines identity and solidarity. In particular, identity refers to "identifying with others" or "sharing a way of life," and solidarity means "exhibiting solidarity with others" or "caring for others' quality of life." They are two ways of interacting that are distinct in cognition, emotion, volition, and motivation. Regarding identity, one identifies with others insofar as one thinks of oneself as a common member of a relationship or group, enjoys a sense of belonging or is glad of the presence of others, coordinates with others in pursuing goals, and participates in cooperative endeavours for reasons beyond mere prudence. As for solidarity, one exhibits solidarity with another person when one is attentive to details about him, empathises with him, acts to improve his condition, and does so altruistically. The combination of identity and solidarity reflects the way that family members ought to treat each other (Metz 2022, pp. 90–101).

African philosophy in Metz's theorization resembles Confucianism in many ways; both are relational ethics regarding harmony as an end worth pursuing for its own sake (Li 2006). A comparison between the two ethics shows that they are similar to a large extent, but the latter is more comprehensive in theory and feasible in practice. One thing to note before rushing into it is that Confucianism is a broad concept and its meaning is subject primarily to its context. To avoid controversy, "Confucianism" in this essay refers specifically to the early Confucianism prevalent during the Pre-Qin period. It draws mainly on recognised

Confucian works such as the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, the *Xunzi*, and the *Wu xing* (The Five Conducts) text from the Guodian bamboo manuscripts.[1]

Metz argues punctiliously that harmony, communality, or friendliness as a combination of identity and solidarity is most important and should be pursued as an end in African philosophical tradition. Confucianism also emphasizes harmony or relationality. On the one hand, a Confucian self is always a self in relation to others. This is not new to Chinese scholars and the sinologists who focus on Confucianism. For example, early Confucianism has been representatively defined as a "role ethics" by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont (Ames 2011; Rosemont 2015; and Rosemont and Ames 2016). Differing from the Western concept of a free, autonomous, rational, and right-bearing individual, a person in Confucianism is always a relationally constituted role-bearer. One's identity is constituted by all the roles that one plays (Rosemont and Ames 2016, pp. 33–57). On the other hand, roles in different relationships also bear different moral duties and attach different virtue requirements to a person. This is best expressed in the Confucian idea of "rectifying names/the rectification of names" and represented by the famous statement made by Confucius: "Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons" (*Analects* 12.11). It is not that the lord, ministers, fathers and sons are doing role-plays, but each of them has role-specific duties that they should perform, and a relation-oriented emphasis on specific virtues that they should present in interacting with others. As far as Confucians are concerned, if all social participants would fully discharge their role-specific duties and act according to their relation-oriented virtues, order and harmony would naturally be achieved. Apart from this, self-cultivation and self-fulfilment also have to be realised through relations in Confucianism. One becomes virtuous by carrying out role-specific duties and following the requirements of relation-oriented virtues. A true lord/minister/father/son is thus also a virtuous lord/minister/father/son.[2]

With a brief description of both theories, I now turn to looking at a one-to-one correspondence between Confucianism and Metz's identity and solidarity in African harmony in "constituent propositional attitudes" in terms of "cognition, emotion, volition, and motivation" (Metz 2022, p. 94) to reveal more clearly some of the resemblances between the two kinds of relational ethics.

It is undisputed that Confucians put great effort into identifying with others. First, cognitively following the requirements of relation-oriented virtues, Confucians always think of themselves "as a common member of a relationship or group" (Metz 2022, p. 94). One key feature of Confucian relational ethics is its emphasis on the family, which is a person's initial group when he is born. It is the starting point not only for building relationships but also for cultivating morality. When one grows up, one extends one's living and connections from one's family to society, a much bigger group with more complicated relations, and with further extension, the state/country, and finally, the world. Fei Xiaotong calls this Confucian trait "the differential mode of association" (1992, p.63). Second, the Confucian self also emotionally "enjoys a sense of belonging" (Metz 2022, p. 94). The self not only belongs to the group but the group is radiated out from the self; each part of the group is interconnected

[1] Unless otherwise specified, chapter orders and quotations from the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, the *Xunzi*, and the *Wu xing* in this essay are adopted from Slingerland (2003), van Norden (2008), Hutton (2014), and Cook (2012), respectively.

[2] See also Sun 2019, pp. 64–65. This essay does not make a strict distinction between the use of "relation ethics" and "relational ethics."

with the self. Third, volitionally "coordinating one's behaviour with them [others] when pursuing goals, [and] making adjustments to either one's own goals or one's pursuit of them, so that other's goals can also be realized" (Metz 2022, p. 94) is well presented in the Confucian Golden Rule[3] and the Silver Rule[4]. A Good/benevolent person intends to help others to achieve their success, or at least he does not interfere with others' goals any more than he wants others to interfere with his. Fourth, Confucians highly praise the concept of harmony.[5] The Confucian harmony "presupposes the existence of different things and implies a certain favourable relationship among them" (Li 2006, p. 584). To achieve harmony within a group, each part of the group should coordinate and cooperate with the other parts. If one arbitrarily infringes upon another's rights or interests in pursuing one's own goal without the other's consent, tension or conflict emerges, which undermines the total harmony of the group. It thus follows that the motivation to cooperate in Confucianism arises not out of a shrewd calculation of self-interest even in the long run but out of a desire to maintain harmony and favourable relationships within the group.

Confucianism also has much to offer regarding solidarity. First, one must be aware of and attentive to details about others. In his explanation, Metz introduces the concept of empathy, "taking up the other's standpoint and thinking about what it is like to be him" and "trying to become aware of factors that another might be unaware of himself" (2021, p. 96). While it is disputable whether one can truly share and understand another's feelings and emotions as if they were one's own as Metz suggests, let alone the reasonability and authenticity of the factors that even the other person does not fully recognise, Confucianism nonetheless treats people at both ends of the relationship as important and Confucians are always thoughtful towards others. For example, the Confucian virtue of *shu* (empathetic understanding) involves "an ability to imaginatively project oneself into another's place" (Slingerland 2003, p. 34). Confucians may hold different views on the goodness/badness of human nature, but they believe in human beings' potentiality for moral development and self-perfection even though many people may not fully recognise it by themselves (*Mengzi* 2 A: 6; *Xunzi*, Chap. 23). Second, Confucians are always sympathetic towards others emotionally. To begin with, Confucians attach great importance to family. If any family member is in a bad condition, all the others feel it and sympathise with him. This feeling of sympathy is not only applicable within the family but should be extended towards all the people under heaven as the world is ultimately an extension of the family. Third, caring for others is an innate requirement of benevolence (*Analects* 12.22). Confucians act to improve other people's conditions as long as it does not go against the principle of righteousness. They not only have the willingness to improve another's condition materially or morally (*Analects* 12.16) but take it as their responsibility (*Analects* 14.42). Fourth, Confucians care for others for the sake of others. This can be seen vividly in Confucius's life. If Confucius wanted to be successful himself, he would long have given up travelling and persuading indifferent or immoral rulers to carry out benevolent government. Quite the reverse. He experienced innumerable trials and hardships and sometimes even put his life on the line, but he persisted. It was not for himself, but for all the common people under heaven.

[3] "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire" (*Analects* 12.2).

[4] "Desiring to take his stand, one who is Good helps others to take their stand; wanting to realize himself, he helps others to realize themselves" (*Analects* 6.30).

[5] It is to be noted that the Confucian concept of harmony differs from Metz's interpretation of the African concept of harmony. They are two separate concepts in this essay.

In a nutshell, Confucianism as a relational ethic has abundant theoretical resources regarding identity and solidarity; however, the purpose of a comparative study between the two relational ethics is not merely to show their similarities. I argue in the following sections that early Confucianism is more comprehensive in theory and feasible in practice than African relational ethics.

3 Confucian Solitary Cultivation

Relations are necessary and of essential importance for both ethics, however, it alone is not sufficient for Confucian moral cultivation. Compared to Metz's "rightness as friendliness," Confucianism leaves ample room for the self in the process of moral development. I illustrate Confucian solitary cultivation in this section to reveal Metz's theoretical deficiency. In particular, I introduce three cases when solitary cultivation detached from relations is respected and promoted by Confucianism, two active and one passive.

While Metzian moral theory places considerable value on interacting with others in the sense of identity and solidarity, it seems to lack due concern for one's inner world. Confucianism believes that one can and should frequently examine oneself internally. Self-examination is an indispensable way to cultivate oneself. For example, Zengzi says in the *Analects* 1.4 that he would examine himself on three counts every day: "in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach?" Zengzi did not do the self-examination at the moment when he was interacting with others but did it incessantly at the end of the day when he was alone. He looked inside and asked himself the three questions to see whether he had violated any of the moral norms that he valued in actual social behaviour. Upon reflection, he would keep his good record if all of the three had been committed properly, and correct his fault in a timely manner if there was any. With the constant accumulation of such effort, his moral level would be improved over time.[6]

Confucius also highlights reflection and self-examination. He teaches that "When you see someone who is worthy, concentrate upon becoming their equal; when you see someone who is unworthy, use this as an opportunity to look within yourself" (*Analects* 4.17). Slingerland reads that "one is to emulate the virtues and avoid the vices observed in others… The emphasis here is upon action: not just seeing the qualities of others, but also using this insight as an opportunity for self-improvement" (2003, p. 35). However, a crucial link in between is missing in this reading. "Seeing" someone worthy or unworthy could either happen through direct interaction with the person or merely out of observation. Even if it is the former case, the point is not the other person or the interaction, but the see-er. The see-er, upon seeing the other person's worthiness or unworthiness, needs to do a self-reflection before taking any action: am I as worthy/unworthy? The see-er acts accordingly to improve himself only after this inspection.[7]

[6] See also in Chap. 1 of the *Xunzi*: "The gentleman learns broadly and examines himself thrice daily, and then his knowledge is clear and his conduct is without fault."

[7] A similar but more detailed statement could be found in Chap. 2 of the *Xunzi*: "When you observe goodness in others, then inspect yourself, desirous of cultivating it. When you observe badness in others, then exam-

The difficulty with introspection should never be underestimated, especially when one is innerly deficient. Confucius once lamented that he had yet to meet anyone "who is able to perceive his own faults and then take himself to task inwardly" (*Analects* 5.27). Slingerland quotes the well-known Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, saying, "Rare are those who, when they make a mistake, are able to realize it. Rarer still are those who, aware that they made a mistake, are able to take themselves to task inwardly. If one is able to take oneself to task inwardly, then one's sense of repentance will be profound and urgent—a necessity if one is to change oneself" (2003, p. 51). Therefore, to take oneself to task inwardly is not always something that can be done readily nor is it a pleasant task that one is willing to do all the time. Only those who are determined to improve themselves can persistently do so.

If one manages to look sincerely inside oneself and finds no faults, one gains inner peace. When a gentleman inspects himself and finds himself morally sufficient inside, he is free of anxiety and fear. In other words, the gentleman focuses and is sustained by his internal good; thus, he is relaxed and at ease. By contrast, the petty man is perpetually full of worry (*Analects* 7.37) and is a servant to things (*Xunzi Chap. 2*) because he focuses not on his morality inside but on external gains which are heavily subject to external circumstances. Therefore, the petty man is constantly beset by the success or failure of his material gains and losses. Yet, he still intends to cover his inside moral weakness with a severe expression on the outside (*Analects* 12.4). Confucius makes an analogy of such behaviour: "like breaking into a home in order to commit burglary" (*Analects* 17.12). This implies that the petty man steals his fake reputation (of being moral) just like a burglar steals material goods.

In addition to self-reflection, the importance of solitary cultivation is also embodied in the Confucian idea of *shendu*. Its meaning was ambiguous until Zheng Xuan, a famous Confucian scholar and commentator of the Later Han Period, read it as "be cautious about one's behaviour when one is alone" (Kong 1980, p. 397, my translation). When one stays alone, the situation is quite different from when one is interacting with others or in public. In the latter case, one is regulated by social norms and supervised by others and thus tends to follow the norms and behave properly either out of the fear of punishment or the hate of acquiring a bad reputation; but when one is alone, all the external regulations and restrictions cease to be effective, one is more likely to act arbitrarily, and thus fall morally. Given this, Confucians stress in particular one's moral cultivation in solitude and instruct people to be cautious and guard against immoral behaviour or thoughts when they are alone. If one manages to do so in practice, one becomes a gentleman; otherwise, if one behaves properly in public but immorally in private, one is a hypocrite.

Zheng's reading of the term *shendu* was regarded as a common view at the time and widely adopted by later Confucians until the excavations of silk manuscripts and bamboo slips over the last three decades of the 20th century. The material uncovered through these new excavations throws into question our interpretation of "*du*." Based on excavated manuscripts such as the *Wu xing*, unearthed in the Guodian Chu Tomb in Hubei Province in 1993, contemporary scholars have reached a consensus that *du* refers to the heart-mind or one's thoughts, and *shendu*, accordingly, means being cautious about one's heart-mind or one's thoughts[8] rather than the traditionally held interpretation of being cautious about

ine yourself, fearful of discovering it. If you find goodness in your person, then commend yourself, desirous of holding firm to it. If you find badness in your person, then reproach yourself, regarding it as calamity."

[8] It makes no big difference to the understanding of the concept of *shendu* whether *du* is the heart-mind or the thoughts because the heart-mind was considered to be the organ of thought by ancient Chinese people.

one's behaviour in private. On top of that, it is believed that *shendu* in this sense has the same meaning as the notion of "being sincere in one's thoughts" held by early Confucians (Liang 2014).

Note that the purpose of this essay is not to demonstrate which interpretation is more in line with the original meaning of the concept of *shendu*, but to use both to show that Confucians attach great importance to solitary cultivation, which is overlooked in Metzian ethics. The contemporary interpretation of *shendu* as "being sincere in one's thoughts" implies a physical breakaway from others and relationships as well. It requires one to focus on one's heart-mind and thoughts despite external conditions. This is because Confucians believe that the heart-mind is the master of the body and has complete control over it (Cook 2012, p. 517). One must remain vigilant against what it thinks. What is more, one's thought is formed deep inside the heart-mind before it is expressed outwardly. No one else would know what it is for sure. It is thus the self's responsibility to make sure that the heart-mind reflects correctly and that all thoughts are morally approvable. In other words, the self should be constantly cautious about the heart-mind in the process of moral cultivation.

Shendu in the latter sense corresponds well to the self-reflection mentioned earlier: *shendu* requires one to constantly engage in introspection; when engaging in introspection, one examines one's heart-mind and thoughts. Both of them are active cultivation methods used in solitude in the sense that they are moral practices that people can and should actively choose to do during their moral cultivation. With all that said, I now turn to a passive case of the Confucian way of cultivating in solitude.

Confucius once wished to withdraw from political and public life when he felt frustrated. He was going to cut himself off from almost all his relationships by floating on the sea in a small raft (*Analects* 5.7). As far as is known, he did not do that, but it at least implies that there is always the option of staying away from the world to focus only on one's inner cultivation when one cannot turn the tide. Confucius makes this point explicit in the *Analects* 8.13: "If the Way is being realized in the world then show yourself; if it is not, then go into reclusion. In a state that has the Way, to be poor and of low status is a cause for shame; in a state that is without the Way, to be wealthy and honoured is equally a cause for shame." As Slingerland analyses, "when there is an opportunity for virtuous service, it would be shameful for the gentleman to remain in obscurity and poverty; when nothing but immorality and corruption prevails, however, it would be equally shameful for the gentleman not to withdraw" (2003, p. 82). Therefore, to withdraw from the public and go into reclusion is a virtuous choice and the right action for Confucians when there is no opportunity for virtuous service.

This thought was inherited by later Confucians. For example, Mengzi distinguished two cases in 7 A: 9: when a morally cultivated person achieves his intention and is successful, and when he does not achieve his intention and is impoverished. In the former case, it usually means for Confucians that the morally cultivated person meets an enlightened ruler and succeeds in putting his political ideas and ambitions into practice through that ruler, but in the latter case, it means that the ruler does not endorse and adopt his idea. It is conceivable that in the former case, Confucians would spare no effort in the performance of their duties and engage actively with others and the world, but sadly, the latter seems to have been the common case for Confucians throughout history. Yet they do not give themselves up or go adrift but turn to be attentive to themselves and their inner cultivation.

See the *Mengzi* 6 A: 15: "The function of the heart is to reflect."

Compared to self-reflection and *shendu*, which people should actively choose to do in moral cultivation, it is a passive choice for Confucians to retreat from the public and focus on inner cultivation when they do not achieve their intentions. This is not to say that Confucians do not care about public affairs anymore or that they must sever all their connections, but that their emphasis leans passively towards their inner world. Moreover, for Mengzi, virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to people externally, but they are possessed by all human beings inherently. If people could sincerely reflect upon what they inherently possess, they would discover virtues internally and be fully aware of the right thing to do (*Mengzi* 6 A:6).

To sum up, three cases in which Confucians advocate focusing on the self and the internal instead of on others, relations, and the external have been delineated: self-reflection, *shendu*, and making oneself good on one's own when one is impoverished. These cases are conducive and sometimes indispensable to self-improvement in Confucianism but are lacking in Metz's theorization, which makes it less comprehensive and ineffective in dealing with solitary cases.

4 Objections and Replies

Some may argue that Metz's relational moral theory also emphasizes the self and the internal in terms of dignity and self-regarding obligations, however, this essay argues that it is fundamentally other-oriented and may ultimately hinder self-development.

It is well noted that Metz refuses to ground his moral theory on harmony in its teleological sense. He proposes "that the right way to respond to harmony/communality/friendliness is not to treat this way of relating as a good to be theorized or a goal to be promoted" but to treat "the capacity to be party to it as a superlative non-instrumental value," which "warrants respectful treatment," grounded on which he formulates and defends a principle that is supposed to be universally approvable in determining which action is right and which is wrong: "An act is right if and only if it respects individuals in virtue of their capacity to be party to harmonious ways of relating" (2022, p. 110). He theorises, "the more a being is capable of relating communally, the greater its moral status, where only large differences of degrees count" (p. 107).

This does show Metz's concern about the individual in the sense that every human being has a dignity and thus should be respected, but such a dignity and respect are rooted in the individual's capacity to be party to communal relationships. For one thing, what makes *this* capacity to relate stand out from all the other good capacities or characters an individual could have? If it is because this particular capacity is conducive to harmonious or communal relationships and thus deserves respect, will it not make Metz's theory teleological? For another thing, the capacity to relate seems to be exclusively other-oriented which distracts the focus away from the individual. It is particularly the case when one is in solitude, voluntarily or passively. Even though according to Metz it does not alter one's moral status because what matters is the capacity, not the reality to relate, Metz fails to offer any practical moral instructions for people in solitary situations. Instead, Metz contends that "we have obligations to actualize and perfect our capacity for communality with others. Perhaps we do ourselves wrong if we do not enter into communal relationships with others" (2022, p. 121). It tends to deprive people of the right to be alone and neglects due consideration for

people who are unable to enter into communal relationships. Comparatively, Confucianism is relation-oriented and it considers both ends of the relationship important.

In addition, Metz holds that "every being that by its nature has the ability to relate communally as both a subject and an object enjoys a full moral status," "regardless of whether one has in fact related communally with them" (2022, p. 118). The moral status of an individual thus seems to be static and constant if it is irrelevant with regard to how one actually relates to others, but totally up to one's modal-relational property, that is, one's potential capacity to be party to communal relationships. Then the point of self-regarding and other-regarding obligations is only to show our respect towards the capacity of communality but has nothing to do with the improvement of moral status. This eliminates the possibility of moral growth for human beings and the necessity of self-cultivation. In Confucianism, however, human "beings" are always "human becomings" in the sense that people have to constantly improve their moral status regardless of whether they are interacting with others or in solitude (Ames 2008; Rosemont and Ames 2016).

Some may also question that if Confucianism concentrates on the self and the internal, can it still be identified as a form of "relational ethics," which further challenges the appropriateness of comparing it with Metzian relational ethics? The answer is positive.

First, when Confucians actively engage in introspection, they contemplate their way of interacting with others and the world. In Zengzi's situation, for instance, he reflects upon whether he was dutiful in dealing with others and trustworthy in interacting with his friends and associates, and whether he has put into practice what he teaches (*Analects* 1.4). All these reflections, though taking place in his heart-mind internally, are about external affairs and related to others.

Second, when someone is practising *shendu*, he either consciously abides by his role-specified moral codes in solitude as if there were others present or is careful about his heart-mind and thoughts to make sure that they do not go against his role-specific moral requirements. In either case, the content of *shendu* is role-related, implying that no matter whether there are actually others present or not, one should always think and act by one's role. In addition to that, "'What truly is within will be manifested without.' Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone" (*The Great Learning*).[9] Internal thoughts and external behaviour are closely related. Thinking directs one's actions and actions are expressions of one's thinking. Being cautious about one's internal thoughts is a way to ensure the appropriateness of one's external behaviour in interacting with others and dealing with various affairs.

Third, making oneself good on one's own when impoverished can also have a great impact on others. When morally cultivated persons could not play their roles in public affairs and politics, "their self-cultivation was evident to all in their era" (*Mengzi* 7 A: 9). For one thing, Confucians believe that one's inner cultivation can be expressed outwardly in one's appearance and behaviour. For instance, humanity's contemplation and knowledge's contemplation lead to *yuse* (the lustre of jade), and sagacity's contemplation to *yuyin* (the timbre of jade) (Cook 2012, pp. 493–495). It depicts the gradual processes from the virtue-based internal contemplation of the heart-mind to the external appearance of the morally cultivated person and his conduct of virtue. According to Cook, "The term *yuse* refers here to visual bearing, to the radiant exterior of the noble man that follows as a matter of course upon the indepth practice of a certain sort of inner cultivation" (footnote 58, 2012, p. 493),

[9] See http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/learning.html.

and *yuyin* "refers to the audible bearing of the noble man, a reflection and reinforcement of his inner virtue—though in the 'Wu xing,' it likely refers more prominently to his spoken manner" (footnote 67, p. 495). *Yuse* and *yuyin* are external expressions of one's inner virtues; moreover, they can be perceived by others. For another thing, cultivated persons can act as moral examples for common people, and their virtue has a natural influence on others. Just as the grass will bend following the wind's direction, common people will spontaneously follow a gentleman when perceiving his virtue without the gentleman doing anything deliberately (*Analects* 12.19).

Forth, when Confucians withdraw from the public and focus on inner cultivation, they preserve rather than abandon themselves to ride forth again when the time is right. The perfect ideal of self-achievement for Confucians is "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" meaning that one should strive to be a morally superior person internally and at the same time externally be an active participant in public affairs to improve others and society both morally and materially. While "inner sageliness" is by and large up to oneself and can be achieved through one's efforts, "outer kingliness" depends more on external factors. If one lives in a bad time and is suffering political repression from those in power, for instance, one could find no outlet for one's political ambition to achieve "outer kingliness." In this situation, one can either choose to persist like Confucius does even though he knows that it is impossible for him to succeed in politics, or he can hold back and turn to focus on inner cultivation, but even in the latter case, he still stands ready to return to politics anytime when there is a proper chance. To withdraw from the public does not mean to turn in on oneself. Both self-cultivation in solitary and through relations are necessary for moral achievement. They are not mutually exclusive but complementary. In other words, when one withdraws from the public, one may not play any political role, but one can still have private roles and connections.

Taken together, underlying the Confucian ideal of making sure one's conduct is correct even when one is alone is still informed by ideas of relationality. On the superficial level, one could argue that when the Confucian is alone, he is no longer within society and, therefore, no longer needs to act according to (relational) virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. One can see these virtues as operational and effective only when one is in society. Once one is removed from society, one no longer performs actions according to the norms governing behaviour that are relational in nature. On a deeper level, however, *shendu* still has a relational telos. It is still informed by the idea that ultimately the self will re-join society, and therefore one's habit of correct, social behaviour should not cease even for a moment. This tradition of self-cultivation arguably reflects the Mencian idea that we are all born with genuine knowledge (*Mengzi* 7 A: 15), that is, even prior to partaking in society, human beings have a moral muscle that spontaneously cannot bear to see suffering.[10] The purpose of introducing Confucian solitary cultivation in this essay is not to show that it highlights individualism, but to argue that, as a form of relational moral ethics, Confucianism also addresses situations in which one is not physically interacting with others, something that is missing in Metz's account of African ethics.

[10] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this hint.

5 Complementarity of Multi-moral Theories

I have specified that both cultivation in solitude and cultivation through relations are indispensable for Confucians. In this section, I will point out some of the risks of neglecting the former in Metz's theorization of the African concept of harmony and further deny his attempt to construct a principle "that promises to account comprehensively for how one morally ought to act" (2022, p. v) and end it with a brief introduction to a Chinese method for embracing and configuring different moral systems.

Solitary cultivation is not confined to Confucians but is necessary for all. As Socrates declared at his trial, "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 2002, p. 41). Self-examination is essential for a fulfilled life. From an individual perspective, lacking self-reflection in cultivation may lead to one of two oppositely polarised situations: one becomes either softheaded or headstrong. Without self-reflection, while sharing a way of life with others, one may have no judgement of one's own but may follow anyone or any opinion like a sheep, not to mention having a strong determination of what is right. It is just like the petty person whose virtue is like the grass. When the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend in the direction of the wind (*Analect*s 12.19). What the petty man follows is always external to him, because he cannot internalise the external norms and become self-disciplined if there is no contemplation. Without self-discipline, a petty man cannot be expected to persist in the process of moral cultivation.

On the flip side, however, if one is resolute but holds firmly onto the wrong or inappropriate opinion, one cannot find it out and make it right without self-reflection. It is more likely the case that one will act wilfully and will be too stubborn to consider another's advice or opinion, which runs exactly counter to the goal of self-perfection and hinders the realisation of a fulfilled life. Worse still, a headstrong person is more likely to cause harm to others and the deterioration of friendly relationships compared to a softheaded person. Take, for example, the stereotypical *pater familias* Metz mentioned. He cares for his wife and acts in what is in her best interest but gives "insufficient weight to the free and informed decision making" on her part (2022, p. 98). It is uncontested that in exhibiting solidarity with his wife, he has good intentions and considers himself right, but he is too imperious and his ways of relating to his wife go against Metz's principle of the right action. In this case, he will not be able to realise by himself that his behaviour of coercing and deceiving his wife to improve her life is wrong without deep introspection. Even when faults are pointed out by others, headstrong persons with no self-reflection are reluctant to take any criticism or advice, which work at best as palliative.

In addition, Confucians believe that one is not morally cultivated if one merely follows external norms. For instance, two kinds of conduct are distinguished in the *Wu xing*, that is, conduct and the conduct of virtue. If benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom take shape from within, they are called "conducts of virtue;" otherwise, if they do not take shape from within, they are called "conducts" (Cook 2016, pp. 485–487).[11] "Taking shape from within" implies that one has virtues internally. When he acts, he embodies what is inside and his conducts are thus conducts of virtue. On the other hand, if one does not have

[11] Besides benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, sagacity is paralleled with them in the *Wu xing* text, but it is different from the other four in the sense that no matter whether it takes shape from within or not, it is called a "conduct of virtue" (Cook 2016, p. 487). As it does not affect the argument of this essay, sagacity is not mentioned intentionally to avoid further complications with the difference.

any virtue inside, even if one's conduct does not violate any external rules or norms, it is not virtuous. Without internal virtues, one is not self-disciplined. In situations where there is no external constraint, e.g., when one is alone (*du*), one acts arbitrarily if one does not practice *shendu*. Confucians disdain moral hypocrites who act as if they have virtues inside but only act virtuously for the sake of benefits such as a good reputation, wealth, connections, and so on. The hypocrite has two faces. He poses as a person of high morals when there are others present, but is morally bankrupt and does immoral or evil things when there is no external supervision. One key difference between a hypocrite and a gentleman is that the former is morally deficient within and acts for profit, whereas the latter is morally sufficient within and acts following his inner virtues.

Another important difference that sets the gentleman apart from a hypocrite or a petty man is that when encountering hardship, the gentleman is not overwhelmed by it. When touring around the states, Confucius confronted various difficulties. One of the biggest crises occurred when he passed by the state of Chen: "all of the provisions were exhausted, and his followers were so weak from hunger that they could not even stand" (*Analects* 15.2). Zilu was so upset he asked: "Does even the gentleman encounter hardship?" Zilu had a very straightforward logic: the gentleman cultivates himself and becomes a person of morality, and resultantly, people are supposed to follow and support the gentleman; but why on earth are we gentlemen encountering so many hardships in reality? Confucius replied, "Of course the gentleman encounters hardship." Moral cultivation cannot promise one will have a bright future without difficulty. It is not that one can surely realise his ambition and enjoy a hardship-free life as long as he cultivates himself. Quite the reverse is true in fact. While a petty man is unscrupulous and tries all means to get what he wants and is thus more likely to succeed from a utilitarian perspective, a gentleman often suffers and fails because he adheres to moral principles. When a petty man encounters hardships, he gives in to immorality and falls easily, but when a gentleman does not achieve his intention and is impoverished, he can choose to turn towards self-cultivation and make himself good on his own. If we deny the necessity of solitary cultivation but emphasize cultivation through relations exclusively, it then leaves morally cultivated persons no way out when they are frustrated.

In short, without solitary cultivation, the concept of African harmony in Metz's conception and his relational moral ethics fails to address situations when things go contrary to one's wishes. This is not to argue that, all things considered, Confucian relational ethics is better than African relational ethics or that Confucianism should be regarded as the most justified moral theory. This essay agrees with Metz that African relational ethics or respect for relationality can provide plausible alternatives to Western moral theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, but it considers it a bold move to assert *an* extant principle or moral theory as *the one* that is perfectly justified and instructs comprehensively how one ought to act in respect of a global audience. Instead, it holds that a proper way of dealing with different moral systems may appeal to a novel interpretation of the Confucian-Daoist complementarity model proposed by Chenyang Li (2009).

It is believed that Confucianism and Daoism are opposed to each other because they emphasize contrasting values: "Confucianism emphasizes social order, conformity, active social life, and this-worldliness, whereas Daoism emphasizes spontaneity, nonconformity, tranquillity, individual life, and transcendental inspiration" (Li 2009, p. 204). Therefore, "Confucian-Daoist complementarity" is conventionally understood as complementing Confucianism with value(s) from Daoism and vice versa, which implies that these two moral

systems possess distinct sets of values. However, Li points out that "it would be wrong if we think that the moral values of these two systems are entirely exclusive of each other," but that Confucianism and Daoism are actually "two overlapping systems with different prioritizations of values" (p. 206). In other words, Confucianism and Daoism share the same values and what sets the two systems apart is how they configure the values by importance in their system, respectively. Accordingly, a more accurate interpretation of "Confucian-Daoist complementarity" should be that Confucianism and Daoism complete each other as alternative moral systems or ways of life in a society that people can choose. One can either choose Confucianism and live a Confucian way of life, or the other way around. On this basis, regarding the relationships among incommensurable and incompatible moral systems in general, Li asserts "that different value systems can share common values while prioritizing them in different ways, that each of these value systems has its own strengths as well as weaknesses, and that different value systems not only compete with, conflict with, but also can complement one another" (p. 204).

To put it in the current context, African relational theory, Confucian relational theory, and Western moral theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism and so on, are not exclusive to each other but may coexist harmoniously in society. Specifically speaking, there is a basic consensus among different ethical systems on which capacities or characters are good and which are not. Each of them appreciates the good and rejects the bad. The difference among these systems is how they prioritise the good ones. For example, the capacity to relate communally is regarded as most important in Metz's theory, but it means neither that Metz excludes values proposed by other systems (e.g., vital force, well-being, etc.) nor that other systems (e.g., Confucianism, Kantianism, etc.) deem the capacity for communality bad. Rather, it means only that Metz gives the most weight to the capacity to relate communally and gradually less to other values in his theory as compared to other ethical systems. Each configuration of values, however, has its advantages that sustain its existence and prevalence, and also disadvantages that could expose it to criticisms and challenges and prevent it from being universal. Criticisms and challenges are not always negative factors. They can stimulate a particular system to evolve and improve within itself. In the meantime, multiple moral systems could and should coexist, in the long run at least, following the "Confucian-Daoist complementarity" model as alternatives for people to choose from.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, through a comparative study, this essay on the one hand argues that Metz's African relational moral theory and Confucianism share similarities in emphasizing the concept of harmony as a combination of identity and solidarity; while on the other hand, it also points out that Metz's theory overlooks the essential role that solitary cultivation plays. Nonetheless, that is not to say that Metz's relational theory should hence be rejected outright and replaced with Confucianism; rather, different configurations of ethical systems can coexist with each other in a healthily competing, conflicting, and complementary way, and Metz's efforts at interpreting African culture and promoting it to the world, and his attempt at constructing an overall appealing moral theory of "friendliness as rightness," should be greatly appreciated.

Acknowledgements Many thanks to Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Cornelius Ewuoso, Jun Wang, Joyline Gwara, and Pan Liu for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this essay. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. This study was funded by the 2021 Guizhou Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project [Grant number 21GZGX31] and the 2021 Hunan Province Philosophy and Social Science Base Project [Grant number 21JD008].

Declarations

Statements and Declarations The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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