Avoiding Misanthropic Sacrifice in African Environmental Ethics: Is Vitalist Teleology the Solution?
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Abstract
Holist nonanthropocentric approaches in ethics face the challenge of avoiding the misanthropic sacrifice objection. Those who raise the objection do so on the basis that holist, nonanthropocentric ethics imply that it might be permissible to sacrifice individual humans, groups of humans, or even humanity as a whole, for the sake of preserving broader ecological wholes. The misanthropic sacrifice objection is thus relevant to African environmental ethics, where nonanthropocentrism is often developed through frameworks that are holist—or at least relationalist—because of how they develop communitarian and vitalist resources (typically but not always in combination). In his recent work on moral status, Munamato Chemhuru emphasizes teleology alongside vitalism. I argue this focus on teleology, in combination with vitalism, (a) has some unrecognized promise as a way of avoiding misanthropic sacrifices within a nonanthropocentric African environmental ethics, but (b) nonetheless faces three key challenges that will need to be met before that promise is fully realized. These challenges concern the ability of hierarchical vitalism to afford both nonanthropocentric protections for nonhuman entities and protections for humans (and their communities), as well as an ambiguity at the heart of vitalist teleology.
Keywords: African environmental ethics; environmental ethics; nonanthropocentrism; misanthropy; vitalism; teleology

Introduction
I use the expression "African environmental ethics" primarily to refer to scholarly work in the subdiscipline of African philosophy that engages with the ethics of the environment. This is a (relatively) recently emerging subdiscipline marked notably by the publication of edited collections such as [African Environmental Ethics] (CHEMHURU 2019), and [African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation] (CHIMAKONAM 2018). While African environmental ethicists are thus unified in some sense by topic (at least at a very general level) they are certainly not unified by position, methodology, metaphilosophy, or relationship with traditional African philosophical thought.[1] One can also use the term "African environmental ethics"

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[1] There are ways of using terms like 'African environmental ethics' and 'an environmental ethics' that would build in certain restrictions on position. According to those uses, for example, one would neither be engaged in environmental ethics nor defending an environmental ethics, were one to defend an entirely human-centered ethical theory. Although I do not build any such restriction into my use of the term, nothing in the following discussion de-

more broadly to include (a) work done before the emergence of this subdiscipline by African philosophers and ethicists that either explicitly or implicitly bears on the ethics of the environment and/or (b) traditional or indigenous African ethical thought. But it is the subdiscipline that I am mainly focused on. I will also sometimes use the term "an environmental ethics" (as well as "an African environmental ethics" and so on) to refer to normative ethical theories that bear on the environment, including (but not exclusively) those produced by those working in the subdiscipline of African environmental ethics.

One topic at the heart of much recent work in African environmental ethics is the relative merits of anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism. This issue arises in various ways. The issue arises in investigations into the extent to which anthropocentrism or nonanthropocentrism is either dominant or present in traditional African ethical thinking or ethical theorising within African ethics (CHEMHURU 2019a; HORSTHEMKE 2019). The issue arises in relation to challenges to assumptions about the anthropocentric nature of indigenous African thought (KELBESSA 2005, 2015). The issue also arises in the exploration of specific concepts in specific traditions of African philosophy (CHIDOZIE 2023; CHIMAKONAM and OGBONNAYA 2021). The issue also arises in relation to attempts to construct new ethical frameworks that effectively negotiate the challenges posed by both anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism (MASAKA 2019).

Efforts to develop nonanthropocentric ethical systems face a distinctive challenge. They must articulate an ethical system that meets two key desiderata: (a) being genuinely nonanthropocentric, while (b) delivering plausible judgements about duties, permissions, and moral reasons. This paper explores one particularly interesting recent attempt to meet that challenge that we can find in Chemhuru (2019b).[2] Chemhuru's ethical framework is multi-faceted, and I will not engage with all aspects of his treatment of the relevant issues (e.g., the pluralistic aspect). Rather, I identify at the heart of Chemhuru's account an argument that an ethical system centred on teleology, in combination with vitalism, can successfully navigate the challenge.[3] This is a promising proposal, and it avoids several pitfalls encountered by other approaches (below I will consider Tangwa, Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya, and Behrens). Nonetheless, I will identify some key challenges for the future development of the view.

The paper proceeds as follows: The second section explains the challenge of articulating a nonanthropocentric ethics within African environmental ethics without raising concerns about misanthropic sacrifices. The third section begins to motivate the solution found in Chemhuru's work by demonstrating how the environmental ethics proposed in three other prominent works struggle to meet the challenge. The fourth section then presents that solution, drawing on a recent chapter by Chemhuru and demonstrates how it can avoid the relevant struggles. The fifth section presents three remaining challenges for Chemhuru's approach that

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pends on it.

[2] A development of a view articulated previously in Chemhuru (2016). And see also Chemhuru (2022, chp.1).

[3] Chemhuru offers a different response to concerns about a similar problem—the place of human rights in Afro- communitarianism—elsewhere (CHEMHURU 2018).

future work in the area will need to address. The sixth section concludes by emphasizing that the approach found in Chemhuru remains promising, even though whether that promise can be realized depends on whether those challenges can be met, as well as suggesting one possible way forward.

The challenge to be met
I have suggested that the development of nonanthropocentric ethical systems faces a particular challenge: to articulate an ethical framework that satisfies two desiderata, namely (a) being genuinely nonanthropocentric, and (b) delivering plausible judgements about duties, permissions, and moral reasons. The aim of this section is to explain that challenge and provide basic motivation to engage with it.

Why might one be invested in the first desideratum? Why might one want an ethical framework that is genuinely nonanthropocentric? There are various motivations. One stems from diagnoses of current environmental crises, which implicate a human tendency to treat the nonhuman world as possessing, at most, instrumental value (for a relevant critical survey, see DICKSON 2017). However, for the purposes of this paper, I will not further motivate this desideratum and will not question the assumption that the project of developing or articulating a genuinely nonanthropocentric ethical system is of interest within African environmental ethics.[4] Of course, satisfying the first desideratum alone seemingly presents little difficulty. One needs only grant moral status to some nonhuman entity or entities. That could be done by stipulation. What is important is that plausible grounds can be articulated for extending moral status to some nonhuman entity or entities. Scholars working in African environmental ethics have identified various plausible grounds for doing so (for recent surveys, see CHEMHURU 2022; VAN JAARSVELD 2023). So, there is no great challenge meeting the first desideratum alone. The challenge lies in extending moral status to nonhuman entities while also meeting the second desideratum: articulating an ethical system that generates plausible verdicts about duties, permissions, and moral reasons.

Why might one worry that a nonanthropocentric ethical system could fail to generate plausible verdicts about duties, permissions, and moral reasons? The key worries are typically understood as a particular problem for holism rather than individualism. The distinction between holism and individualism is a familiar one within Western environmental ethics, tracking a distinction between two ways of extending moral considerability beyond humanity (MCSHANE 2009). Individualists, such as those advocating for the rights of nonhuman animals or moral considerability for individual organisms (e.g., SINGER, 2004), focus on the individual. Holists, by contrast, center moral value and protection on larger systems or entities—such as species, ecosystems, or the biosphere— independently of the individuals within them (e.g., CALLICOTT, 1980). An individualist vitalist might, for example, hold that all and only individual vital organisms have non-instrumental moral value. A holist vitalist might, for example, hold that only whole vital web of life has non-instrumental moral value. The precise way in which it is helpful to

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[4] That is not to deny that there might not be further important questions about this project, e.g., whether it is even possible to have such an ethics, or whether it is overly utopian. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

draw the distinction depends on the precise debates in hand.[5] In the present context, the distinction that matters is between theories that grant moral status to—or emphasize the non-instrumental value of—entities like ecosystems, species, biospheres, or an interconnected web of life.

A key challenge for holism is that, once ethical protections are focused on holistic entities, it becomes unclear whether the resulting ethical system can provide the kinds of protections for individuals and groups that many regard as essential to any plausible moral theory. I will treat the second desideratum—that an ethical system delivers plausible judgements about duties, permissions, and moral reasons—as ruling out any system that would condone sacrificing individual humans, human groups, or humanity for the sake of larger ecological wholes. I believe this approach will be widely accepted but, for present purposes, I am content to treat it as a stipulation. Many philosophers working in environmental ethics take the same position (see discussion in HASSAN 2021). Any account in African environmental ethics that grants moral status to—or emphasises the non-instrumental value of—entities like ecosystems, species, biospheres, or an interconnected web of life must address these concerns.

I will refer to the objection described above as the *misanthropic sacrifice objection*. I use this terminology to capture the concern that holist, nonanthropocentric ethics has skewed priorities, being overly prepared to permit sacrificing humans. To avoid confusion, this terminology is not chosen because such ethics recommend cultivating an active dislike for, or hatred of humanity or that proponents of such ethics have such attitudes. Rather, the terminology is chosen as a better alternative to "ecofascism" which has been used by others to capture this worry that holistic nonanthropocentric ethical views will be willing to sacrifice individual humans, groups of humans, or even humanity as a whole, for the sake of preserving broader ecological wholes (see discussion in HASSAN 2021; LAN 2025; MCSHANE 2009, who attribute the term's origin to REGAN 2004).

I avoid the terminology of "ecofascism" for three reasons: (1) "ecofascism" suggests the objection is to something political (e.g., a totalitarian regime or the aim to institute one). But, the *misanthropic sacrifice objection* is an objection to the direct implications of the normative ethics, i.e., permitting such sacrifices.[6] (2) "ecofascism" suggests a targeting of specific groups, e.g., racial groups. But, the *misanthropic sacrifice objection* concerns any tendency to permit sacrificing humans for the sake of the nonhuman world (including but not limited to those whose preparedness to sacrifice humans is extended only to particular groups).[7] (3) In contemporary usage, "ecofascism" relates to a trend of far-right political actors

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[5] As we will see below, some think that African environmental ethics, particularly that which focuses on harmonious relations within a community of life, is properly categorised neither as individualist nor holist.

[6] Although the two concerns are obviously not unrelated. One worry about such ethics might be that they could licence the actions of a fascist regime.

[7] Again, the objection is not unrelated to such targeting. The term "eco-fascism" does have roots in a critique of white supremacist culture in environmentalism in which prominent environmentalists argued, for example, against giving aid in the midst of the Ethiopian famine and for welcoming the AIDs pandemic on the basis that the people should be allowed to die in order to let nature take its balance.

or movements incorporating ecological concerns into their priorities including those that appeal to anthropocentric individualist ethics (e.g., preserving the natural world solely for individuals of a particular ethic group). But, the *misanthropic sacrifice objection* is specific to nonanthropocentric and particularly holist ethics.

The threat of misanthropic sacrifice is salient within African environmental ethics because some of the most natural ways of developing nonanthropocentric frameworks within that tradition draw on conceptual resources that lean toward holism.[8] For example, appealing to communitarian ethics can readily yield a holist nonanthropocentric view if the relevant community is conceived not merely as a community of humans but as a broader, interconnected web of life—including livestock, wild animals, natural landscapes, and the ecological systems in which they are embedded (CHEMHURU 2019a). Any ethic developed in this way—if oriented toward the good of that broader community— clearly falls within the holist camp or at least raises similar concerns.[9] It thus becomes important to ask whether African environmental ethics—especially given an emphasis on themes conducive to holism—can offer resources not only for developing or articulating a nonanthropocentric ethics, but also for avoiding misanthropic sacrifice.

Three ways of failing to meet the challenge

In this section, I briefly outline three attempts to articulate an African environmental ethics that fail to meet the challenge outlined above. These illustrate the challenging dynamic that Chemhuru's approach promises to negotiate. They are not meant to constitute a comprehensive overview of African environmental ethics, nor any particular strand within it.

Each of the three attempts fails to meet the challenge in a different way. In arguing that they fall short, I do not claim that the views in question lack merit or that they should be rejected on balance. My claim is simply this: if one seeks a view that meets the two desiderata outlined above, the three approaches considered in this section will not satisfy you.

Tangwa: 'Bioethics: An African perspective'

This early and widely cited paper by Tangwa offers a clear example of an attempt to develop an African environmental ethics—attributed to the Nso people—which extends a communitarian model to a broader community (TANGWA 1996). I raise this articulation of the Nso view not to criticise it, but to clarify what we are ultimately looking for in an African environmental ethics that satisfies the desiderata introduced above.

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[8] See, e.g., Ojomo (2011), who recognises but does not explicitly address the challenge.
[9] There are thus close analogues between this issue and the question of the place of individual human rights within African communitarianism whether in the form defended by Menkiti (1984, 2004) or Gyekye (1997,2010). Many of the dynamics traced in this paper can be found in discussions of this broader problem (e.g., CHIMAKONAM and KWEKE 2018). Although it is not the approach I take here, it also means that a promising strategy for responding to the challenge of misanthropy in African environmental ethics could borrow from strategies developed to incorporate protections for individual humans into a communitarian or relational ethics, e.g., see Metz's development of solutions to the one problem (e.g., 2011, 2014) into solutions to the other (see, e.g., 2019, 2021).

The Nso view begins with a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life and accordingly conceives of community as "extending beyond anthropological communality, even goes beyond biocommunitarianism … and may be more appropriately described as eco-bio-communitarianism" (1996, 192). So far, the account is holist in character and appears, at first glance, to offer a promising model for an African environmental ethics that might satisfy our two desiderata. The fact that eco-bio-communitarianism is presented as going beyond even biocommunitarianism—that of Callicott whose view has invited criticism on grounds of misanthropy and ecofascism—might suggest the Nso view will struggle with the second desideratum. But, in fact, the problem is with the second.

As Tangwa presents it, the Nso view does not meet the first desideratum; it remains fundamentally anthropocentric, albeit in a way that recognises and values deep interrelations between humans and the rest of reality. As Tangwa puts it, the view ultimately considers "human well-being as the aim, end and purpose of morality," such that "Nso' morality is ultimately and fundamentally human-centred insofar as its teleological end and limits are defined by human well-being." If we seek a genuinely nonanthropocentric ethical system, we will not find it in one that holds that the entire web of life is directed toward and serves the purposes of human flourishing.

Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya: 'Environmental thinking in African philosophy: A defence of biocentrism using the notion of nma'

One can, of course, articulate a genuinely nonanthropocentric account within African environmental ethics. The biocentric approach defended by Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya (2021) could hardly be accused of anthropocentrism. Indeed, their explicit aim is to demonstrate the possibility of a non-human-centred framework. A key feature of the view is the claim that "Human life is not a superior lifeform higher in terms of relevance than other lifeforms in the world. Human life is ontologically equal to other lifeforms in the biosphere. All realities, whether humans or nonhumans, exhibit and possess life and their lives are equal in importance to other lifeforms" (2021, 204). This framework bestows on the biosphere not the role of sustaining human life or wellbeing in particular, but the role of sustaining life in general. The view thus easily satisfies our first desideratum: it is nonanthropocentric.

The difficulty lies in whether a view of this sort can support meaningful protection for human individuals and groups against being sacrificed for the sake of the wider biosphere. To do that, it is useful to consider why such a biocentric account might struggle to offer such protection. This requires us to examine the relationship between the individual and the whole in the ethical framework they propose. Consider the following key passage (2021, 204–5):

> If it is accepted that every reality impacts others, then it does this through influencing and affirming the other's ndu (life) and vice versa. This ndu is what they share in common and seek to protect and perpetuate in the biosphere. So, no ndu is less or more important. Every ndu is as important as the other. . .. For ndu to be or exist, it must belong. . . to the community of other ndu. . .. [T]o have life is to belong to the com-

munity of living things. Nothing has life outside of this community of lives or living thing, just as nothing exists outside of the community of beings—uwa. Consequently, the mishap that could befall any being is for the life of such a being to be neglected or denied the right to exist in the biosphere. This is also a way of doing the biosphere a great disservice. Since life is found in uwa, the biosphere is itself life-sustaining, and any being that does not belong to the ecosystem cannot sustain its existence. Thus, to have life is to contribute meaningfully to the fulfilment of the goal of uwa (the biosphere), which is life and the giver of life to those that . . . belong to the realm of reality in uwa. With this, the biosphere finds its meaning, fully realized when all that is. . . is given its rightful place and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the sustenance of life in the biosphere and through a holistic biosphere. This is the beauty or essence of life. . . Life is beautiful and meaningful when life sustains life in the biosphere.

There are three ways to unpack this philosophical position. Working through them is an interesting and helpful exercise for our purposes (I set aside the question of which is intended, or a plausible interpretation of the authors or the underlying concepts of nda and nma).

A first way to unpack the view: there are no human individuals inside the community who fail to contribute meaningfully to community (because "to have life is to contribute meaningfully") and also no human individuals outside the community who fail to contribute meaningfully (because "nothing has life outside of this community"). This view is implausible given what we know about the human influence on the biosphere (assuming that a meaningful contribution is not a destructive one).

A second way to unpack the view: while there are no human individuals inside the community who fail to contribute meaningfully to the community, there are some outside the community, but they lack life (because "nothing has life outside of this community"). This view fails to meet the second desideratum because the protective rights extend only to those with life (because it is "the life of a being" that has a "right to exist in the biosphere") and as such fail to protect humans deemed to fail to contribute meaningfully to the biospheric community.

The third way to unpack the view: while all human individuals are part of the community, have life, and that life has a right to exist in the community, that right is a qualified right that protects only the right to have life that contributes meaningfully to the community. The features of this view will be dependent on the precise nature of the right and the precise package of correlative duties that define it. Importantly, does it generate a duty in others merely not to interfere in your attempts to contribute meaningfully, to actively help you in your attempts, or to ensure your success? Regardless of the answer, the important thing to note is that the relevant right is in competition with the right of every other living thing. In the envisaged trade-offs between humans and the natural world—those which attract the misanthropic sacrifice objection—the protection afforded to you by my duty is relatively scant given the fact that I have that same duty to all the nonhuman entities beings affected by the decision too (even when my duty is to ensure you have

life that contributes meaningfully to the biospheric community).

As noted earlier, holist environmental ethical frameworks often raise concerns in this vicinity—permitting acting for the sake of the biosphere in ways that involve harming individual humans or groups of humans. It is no surprise that a biocentric African account of this sort raises similar worries. This is not to suggest a flaw in the view itself. Rather, insofar as our inquiry is governed by the aim of finding an African environmental ethics that clearly resists concerns about misanthropic sacrifice, it is unsurprising that a thoroughly biocentric account such as that articulated by Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya is unlikely to provide the resources we are looking for—whatever other merits it might have.

Behrens: 'Exploring African Holism with Respect to the Environment'
Unlike Tangwa and Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya, whose projects do not directly engage the problem of misanthropic sacrifice, Behrens makes this challenge a central focus. As he notes:

> One of the persistent challenges to holism is that if one accords ecosystems and nature final moral value, respect for humans becomes secondary to the needs of the biosphere. Could this not imply a moral imperative, for instance, to cull human beings in the interests of the survival of the earth? (BEHRENS 2010, 478)

Behrens believes that the relational character of African ethical thought can help forge a form of environmental ethics that avoids misanthropic sacrifice. I will argue to the contrary: Behrens's African Relational Environmentalism is not able to protect individuals and groups against sacrifice.

It is worth noting that the relationalist view as Behrens originally presents it (in BEHRENS 2010) appears anthropocentric. The relationships it values all involve humans. He distinguishes his view from both individualism and holism, stating:

> Where African Relational Environmentalism differs is that it does not accord some sort of final moral value to the 'community' of nature itself. What is valued is harmonious relationships between us and other members of the community of nature (2010, 479)
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> Belonging to a community. . . means that one ought to . . . promote harmonious relationships within the community. And for at least some writers this applies both to relationships within the human community and to relationships between humans and their natural environment. (2010, 473)

Relationships between nonhuman entities are notably absent here. The rationale for this restriction is unclear. If harmonious relationships are valuable, why restrict this to those involving humans? Indeed, Behrens's later articulation of the view (2014) shifts away from this anthropocentrism.[10] Here we have a community-

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[10] See also Mweshi (2019).

based relational ethic which treats humans as having reasons to promote, etc., harmonious relationships across the board in a holistic community of life. In Behrens (2014), individuals and groups gain moral considerability simply by being part of the interconnected web of life, and,

> [I]t makes sense that moral agents should promote and preserve that which holds the web of life together. Harmonious, balanced relationships within the web of life should be maintained and prized (2014, 76).

So, how can it be plausible for me to claim that Behrens's view fails to protect individuals and groups against sacrifice? The core of his defense is that a concern for harmonious relationships inherently includes consideration for individual interests. From Behrens (2010):

> One cannot promote harmonious relationships and completely ignore the interests of the individuals involved. . . (479)

> An African sense of relationality respects both the interests of individuals and those of the community of nature, giving ultimate primacy to neither. . . (479)

> Where what counts morally is a harmonious relationship, both individual and group interests need to be taken into account. (497–80)

And here, in Behrens (2014, 82), he is more explicit yet:[11]

> One of the persistent challenges facing holists is that its consequences appear to be unavoidably misanthropic. If the good of the biosphere always trumps that of individual people or organisms, it is hard to see why we should not then cull people to save the Earth. . . [O]ne of the greatest strengths of this African perspective is that it does not prioritize individuals over groups or communities or vice versa. Grounding moral considerability in belonging to a web of life entails promoting harmony and balance within the web. Such a position is essentially communitarian,

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[11] Behren's position is a little more ambiguous than I have presented it in the main text. In Behrens (2014, 66), he refers back to Behrens (2010) on this issue. But the way the issue is handled there does not give such emphatic reassurance against the risks of misanthropic sacrifice. There the reassurance involves claims such as the following: "One cannot promote harmonious relationships and *completely* ignore the interests of the individuals involved in the relationships," "whilst *the interests of the family' of nature may sometimes need to take precedence over the interests of some individuals*, this does not imply an unconditional primacy of the biotic community over individual interests" and "this does not imply that human interests *must always* defer to those of the biosphere" (479, my emphasis). But I take it that those concerned about misanthropic sacrifice will regard this as scant reassurance. Consider Regan (2004)'s articulation of the implications that worry him: "that the individual *may* be sacrificed for the greater biotic good, in the name of "the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (my emphasis).

and yet individuals matter, too. African relational environmentalism is neither biocentric nor ecocentric, neither individualist nor holist. It is relational, and it must therefore take into account the relationships and connectedness of everything in nature. It seeks to promote harmony, solidarity, respect, and mutual co-operation between natural things.

The underlying claim is that the value of harmony itself provides the necessary constraint: we cannot respond appropriately to the value of harmonious relationships while sacrificing individuals. But I believe this argument is flawed. Behren's version of African Relational Environmentalism begins by according "final moral value" to "harmonious relationships between us and other members of the community of nature." There are broadly two ways normative ethics might treat that which has final moral value. Both of them would result in a relational ethics that is prepared to sacrifice individuals.[12] That is particularly clear in typical cases of interest in environmental ethics in which certain individuals or groups stand in profoundly disharmonious relations to the natural world.

The first way a normative ethics might respond to entities of final value is to treat them as enjoying absolute protections (akin to an individual right). Treating the value of harmonious relations in this way produces an ethic that says disrupting a harmonious relation is wrong and standing in a disharmonious relation is wrong. Such an ethic cannot give protections against sacrifice to those who stand in only profoundly disharmonious relations. The second way a normative ethics might respond to that of final value is to treat them as something to be promoted (akin to aggregate wellbeing). Such an ethic cannot give the relevant protections as overall harmony (or amount of harmonious relations) stands to be promoted eliminating these disharmonious relations and if the most effective or only route to achieving harmony overall is to remove the human agents responsible for disharmony, then the ethic appears to allow—perhaps even require—that we do so.[13] This result should not be surprising. A relational ethic that values harmony across

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[12] What I say here is not intended to apply to Metz's modal relationalist view of moral status, and the ethic he builds on the basis of it (see METZ, 2021, for book-length articulation and defence of the view). While acknowledging that both Behrens and Metz clearly take relationalism to represent an alternative to either holism or individualism, hopefully the reader will understand what I say when I say that Metz's is a more individualist relationalism than Behrens's (for some critical discussion which brings out this alignment of Metz's relationalism with individualism rather than holism, see MOELLENDORF, 2023). I do not discuss Metz's relationalism in any detail in this paper because my interest in this paper is to explore the extent to which an African environmental ethics can be developed which builds upon the more holistic tendencies in African ethics while avoiding concerns about misanthropic sacrifices.

[13] To fix this shortcoming of the account against our desiderata, one could instead afford protection to any relation between humans and nonhumans no matter how disharmonious. But that would be a rather different ethic. It would absolutely protect all individuals against sacrifice. The trouble is that it also protects all relationships against change, including against interventions to replace them with more harmonious relationships. In other words, it would protect humans against having to make any changes where their relationship with nature is highly destructive. This does not seem a plausible way forward for African relational ethics within environmental ethics.

the broader community of life is likely to support sacrificing those elements—human or nonhuman—that obstruct harmony. This becomes even more apparent when the ethic is extended to include nonhuman relationships, as in Behrens (2014). Would such an ethic categorically oppose culling humans if this were necessary to restore ecological harmony? That seems doubtful. Such a view would plausibly support the culling of deer or invasive species to restore balance, and there is no principled reason it could not similarly endorse sacrificing human agents. Indeed, in Behrens (2010), Behrens can only offer that we should not rush into such decisions—that alternatives must be explored first. But this is not robust reassurance against worries about misanthropic sacrifice. Readers remaining sympathetic to relationalism should take a moment to note just how scant this reassurance is for anyone worried that misanthropic environmentalists might be prepared to cull humans; they were likely not envisaging a misanthropic environmentalist who had simply not considered other, less drastic, alternatives. And this worry is not limited to holistic or biocentric versions of the view. Even a relational ethic that focuses exclusively on relationships involving humans remains vulnerable. Valuing harmonious relations between humans-nature does not preclude culling humans to achieve that harmony. Simply valuing harmonious relationships does not entail that we must protect the beings that potentially stand in them. It just is not true that securing direct considerability for relations secures any kind of direct considerability (let alone protection or rights against being eliminated) for the relata.[14]

In the end, then, a focus on harmonious relationships does not, on its own, secure protection against misanthropic sacrifice. Whatever other merits Behrens's relational environmental ethics may have, it fails to meet one of our desiderata. That is, of course, fine for relationalism if our desiderata are rejected, but it does mean we need to look elsewhere if we want an account that can meet the desiderata.

The promise of Chemhuru's solution
In 'The Moral Status of Nature: An African Understanding', Chemhuru (2019b) offers an account from which we can distil what appears to be a promising way to negotiate the two desiderata outlined above.

To get to, what I call, "Chemhuru's solution" some 'distillation' is necessary. Chemhuru's discussion is rich and ambitious and meant to address a wide range of theoretical concerns that go well beyond the problem tackled in the current paper. As a result, it includes many features that are not directly relevant to the question of whether one can construct a view that satisfies the two desiderata. My goal is this section not to reconstruct the full richness of his account, but to isolate and highlight those features that offer a promising path forward for a community-based, holistic, and nonanthropocentric ethics that also protects individuals and communities from misanthropic sacrifice.

The key feature that makes Chemhuru's solution promising is the teleo-

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[14] See, for some relevant discussion, the exchange between Metz (2017) and Horsthemke (2015, 89).

logical nature of his account which, coupled with vitalism to make a vitalist teleology, promises a way to meet both desiderata. Chemhuru's vitalist teleology has important similarities and differences to the views encountered so far. The promise of Chemhuru's approach—showing how both desiderata can be met—lies in both those similarities and differences. So, to make the promise clear, I introduce Chemhuru's approach through first highlighting those key differences and similarities.

Why could Tangwa's picture not satisfy both desiderata? Tangwa's (1996) picture made the holistic web of life oriented not towards life in general but towards human life. That potentially afforded certain protection against anthropic sacrifice, but it did so at the expense of any meaningful nonanthropocentrism. Chemhuru's vitalism will avoid that problem by maintaining a nonanthropocentric construal of the orientation of the community of life.

Why did Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya's picture struggle to satisfy both desiderata? They struggled to adequately protect individuals and communities from sacrifice. Why did Behrens struggle? The same reason. That is because, in their frameworks, individuals derive moral standing from their place in the broader web of life, or from the relations they stand in. When individuals fail to meaningfully contribute to the sustenance of the biosphere, it becomes unclear why their sacrifice would be illicit.[15] Chemhuru's use of teleology means he will not inherit that problem despite his nonanthropocentric vitalist communitarianism. Chemhuru's account secures direct moral standing for both human and nonhuman individuals—not because they contribute to, or are embedded in, a broader community of life, but because they have a telos.

As I have argued, the key theoretical move Chemhuru makes is an integration of vitalism with teleology to produce a vitalist teleology.[16] In Chemhuru's discussion, humans, nonhumans, and non-living elements of the world are understood as constituted by their relations within a broader web of existence or community of life. So far, this is in keeping with the other views surveyed. However, Chemhuru departs from Behrens and others by grounding direct moral considerability in individual telos. As he puts it, "non-human animals, plants, the air, soil, rocks and water bodies. . . have their teleological ends which can either be enhanced or negatively affected" (CHEMHURU 2019b, 33). This telos, or "purpose of being", is what grounds the moral standing of individuals. Each element of the web of life has a purpose, and this purpose is tied to a vital force that orients it toward well-being, survival, and flourishing. This allows vitalist teleology to offer

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[15] Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya's framework in particular leaves it difficult to categorically reject such sacrifices. The protection Behrens offers stem from the fact that individuals stand in harmonious relationships, not from the intrinsic value of those individuals. As he puts it, individuals do not gain moral considerability because they have a life or telos of their own (BEHRENS 2014, 76). But if the primary moral imperative is to foster, promote, or restore harmonious relationships, then even individuals who are directly considerable— by virtue of being part of the relational web—may be sacrificed if their presence disrupts that harmony.

[16] Again, remember my aim is not to capture Chemhuru's commitments but to distil a response to the specific question motivating this paper (for discussion of his view in fuller detail, see MATISONN AND MUADE 2023).

principled protection for individual humans and communities, not simply as contributors to the ecological whole, but as bearers of intrinsic value grounded in their own teleological purpose. As Chemhuru puts it:

> for the individual human beings and the environment to achieve their respective individual goals and purposes for existence in life. . ., human beings ought to have obligations to do so in a manner that takes into consideration the purposes and goals of other human communities, non-human communities and the natural environment as well. (CHEMHURU 2019b, 32)

Something else that promises a solution that can avoid misanthropic sacrifice is that Chemhuru's framework allows him to establish a hierarchy of existence in which human individuals and communities receive greater protection than nonhuman entities. Importantly, this hierarchy is not arbitrary or the result of a speciesist anthropocentrism.[17] Rather, it emerges from the same commitments that secure the moral standing of nonhuman entities. When Chemhuru's view treats the culling of deer differently from that of humans, it is on the basis of the same principled vitalist and teleological framework—not simply privileging human interests by fiat.[18] Different elements of nature possess different degrees of purpose, different levels of vital force, and hence occupy different positions within the hierarchy of existence. Human beings, by virtue of possessing a greater degree of purpose or vitality, receive stronger protection—but this protection arises from the same principles that ground the considerability of nonhuman entities. The view is thus nonanthropocentric in that it grants genuine moral standing to the nonhuman world, while also grounding moral asymmetries that explain why individual humans may not be sacrificed while deer or trees might.

In sum: The above account does not have the shortcomings of Tangwa's rendering of the Nso view. It does not view the natural world as valuable only insofar as it serves human flourishing. It does not have the shortcomings of Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya's vitalist holism as it provides a well-grounded mechanism for affording protection to individuals and communities. It does not have the shortcomings of Behren's rendering of a relational construal of the ethics that governs our behaviour by virtue of being embedded in a community of life. Most importantly, it secures direct considerability for individual humans and communities and not just for the harmonious relations in which they may or may not stand to others (which as we have seen does not protect individuals in the right way); it thus looks able to resist the slide into licensing misanthropic sacrifice that seems irresistible for a relationalist faced with human individuals and communities

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[17] This aspect distinguishes Chemhuru's view from the form of relationalism found in, e.g., Metz, where the hierarchy is based on the capacity to enter communal relationships with humans. While Chemhuru's hierarchy is not immune to concerns about anthropocentrism, it is arguably better motivated than Metz's on this score.

[18] That is not to say that such an account is not potentially subject to complaints about anthropocentrism. For example, one might regard it as suspicious that humans happen to regard themselves as more vital.

whose elimination, for example, might promote harmonious relationships.[19]

Challenges for Chemhuru's solution

As mentioned in the introduction, I do not mean to suggest that the account developed through Chemhuru's discussion is without problems. In this section, I argue that the account faces difficulties even with respect to satisfying the two desiderata that structure this paper. My aim is not to offer decisive objections but rather to identify challenges that must be addressed if this approach is to provide a compelling way of negotiating the two desiderata. In particular, I will argue that the account currently faces a dilemma that demands resolution.

To recall, the desiderata are as follows: the challenge is to articulate an ethical system that (a) is genuinely non-anthropocentric and (b) delivers plausible moral judgments—about duties, permissions, and reasons. This is especially pressing for attempts within African environmental ethics to draw on communitarian-vitalist themes to construct a non-anthropocentric ethic, emphasising our embeddedness within a broader community or web of life extending beyond human communities. I will consider three interrelated challenges for the solution abstracted from Chemhuru's discussion.[20] First, a hierarchy of existence/status alone does not suffice to protect beings higher in the hierarchy (e.g., humans) from sacrifice for the sake of those lower in it (e.g., rats). Second, grounding a hierarchy of existence/status in vitalist teleology might actually exacerbate concerns about misanthropic sacrifice rather than alleviate them. The third is that the solution trades on an equivocation, and this generates a dilemma that threatens the coherence of the solution.

Missing protections

One of the key ways Chemhuru's discussion promises to provide protection against misanthropic sacrifice is by invoking a hierarchy of existence. Humans, so goes the view, are protected from being sacrificed for nonhuman nature because they are more vital, more purposive, and thus occupy a higher position in the hierarchy.

However, a hierarchy alone does not offer this kind of protection. A hierarchy of interests might suggest merely a weighting, not a lexical priority. Unless human vitality is infinitely greater than that of nonhuman entities, the difference in status does not obviously ground a moral system that reliably protects humans from being sacrificed in cases where the vitality of many nonhuman beings might be enhanced by doing so. A mere hierarchy of vitality might justify the weighting of interests but not the strict prioritisation of rights.[21]

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[19] And it does so without an ad hoc anthropocentric prioritisation of harmony only within human-human or human-non- human relationships (as in BEHRENS 2010).

[20] I do not consider challenges to the foundational elements of the account, such as vitalism or teleological views as such. Naturally, any proponent would need to defend those commitments. For example, one might ask how plausible it is to view the universe as oriented towards life rather than towards entropy or decay. The plausibility of the vitalist picture cannot be taken for granted.

[21] For related concern about an ethics shaped by an ontological hierarchy of existence, explicitly focused on Metz's relationalism, see Moellendorf (2023). Note also that, theoretical-

Thus, for vitalist teleology to ground robust protection and defuse worries about misanthropic sacrifice, it must explain why the hierarchy it generates is not a mere hierarchy of weighting. Without this, the account still risks permitting the sacrifice of human lives for the sake of the wider natural world.

Misanthropic protections
The very hierarchy meant to protect humans introduces a second, deeper concern. Even if we grant that this is a hierarchy of interests and not of rights, the structure of the view invites misanthropic conclusions, particularly if entities higher in the hierarchy include environmental wholes such as species, ecosystems, or the biosphere.

Remember, Chemhuru notes that traditional African ontologies often do not place humans at the top of the ontological hierarchy. Rather, these frameworks tend to "rank beings from God, ancestors, human beings, down to non-human animate and inanimate entities" (2019b, 39). If any nonhuman entity is more vital than humans, then an ethic grounded in this hierarchy may well justify sacrificing humans for their sake.

Many readers may feel untroubled by a hierarchy in which God or ancestors rank higher than humans. That might be because they are not concerned about the relevant sacrifices (they are not, after all, ones that involve sacrifices of humans for the sake of the wider environment). Or they might dismiss the possibility of clashes between the vitality of those higher entities and humans (perhaps that is a defensible picture of the relations between God and ancestors and current humans). Or, finally, they might simply reject the presence of such entities in the hierarchy. However, I suspect that many will be concerned by the question of where entities such as species, ecosystems, the web of life, and the biosphere as whole appear in the hierarchy. Intuitively, in terms of vitality, such entities will rank higher certainly than human individuals. Thus, there is a worry that—in an ethic founded on a vitalist teleology which produces a hierarchy of being—we are again faced with a model that seems willing to sacrifice humans for the sake of the natural world.

In order for this vitalist teleology to ground sufficient protection to ward off concerns about misanthropic sacrifice, it owes a fuller, plausible story about why humans can be securely placed above any more holist environmental entities, including the community as a whole. Otherwise, the account still raises the kind of worry that concerns some that we could end up condoning the sacrificing of humanity for the sake of the wider natural world.

Equivocation and a dilemma
Chemhuru's solution promises to secure direct considerability for humans, their communities, and the broader environment by appealing to a shared orientation toward life. This vitalist teleology is at the heart of the way the solution promises to be genuinely nonanthropocentric ethic grounded in a holistic, communitarian

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ly, one could regard human lives as so very much more vital than non-human lives that the differential weighting justified is so high as to render permissible sacrifices of human lives for the sake of the non-human world so unlikely as to be practically irrelevant. But, in any case, only at the cost of losing any plausible credentials as a nonanthropocentric account.

ontology, while affording individuals direct moral consideration and thus potentially protection against misanthropic sacrifices. But the apparent coherence of this position, I will argue, depends on an equivocation.

The ambiguity lies in claims such as the claim that everything is oriented toward life or that vitality is its telos. This could mean either that each thing is oriented toward its own vitality (e.g., a forest is oriented toward the vitality of that very forest, a deer is oriented towards its own vitality), or that each is oriented toward the flourishing of life in general. Consider me: is my telos my own vitality or the general vitality of everything in the web of life? The solution seems to oscillate between these two interpretations.

On the one hand, the second interpretation—orientation toward life in general—appears necessary for the view to be genuinely nonanthropocentric. If our purpose is only to sustain our own vitality, then this purpose would seem to ground an ethic that is anthropocentric (or even egoistic).[22] On the other hand, only the first interpretation—orientation toward one's own vitality/flourishing—seems capable of grounding the kind of moral protection that would preclude misanthropic sacrifice. If an individual's telos is the flourishing of life in general, then sacrificing that individual might be done for the sake of that individual itself. You could sacrifice me while respecting my telos and orientation to life because my purpose could be fulfilled by my destruction.

One might seek to deny the distinction between these two readings by arguing, communitarian-style, there is an important sense in which individual flourishing is inseparable from communal flourishing. Made without nuance this move reintroduces precisely the worry at hand: it blurs the line between individual and collective good in a way that makes the sacrifice of individuals morally palatable.[23] That, after all, is the core concern about misanthropic sacrifice.

A vitalist, teleological, communitarian approach thus faces a dilemma. Either the relevant telos of vitality is something shared, at the community level, in which case we achieve nonanthropocentrism at the cost of individual protection; or the relevant telos is something not shared, at the individual level, in which case we gain protection but lose the genuinely nonanthropocentric character of the ethic. We have not yet seen a way to have both.

In order for this vitalist teleology to ground sufficient protection to ward off concerns about misanthropic sacrifices while maintaining a nonanthropocentric character, it owes story about how this dilemma can be avoided. And note that a similar point will apply to all attempts to meet the relevant desiderata by appealing to teleology within a communitarian outlook.

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[22] On the risk of eudaimonist views collapsing into egoism, see Toner (2015).

[23] In fact, there is more to be said here. See, e.g., Gyekye (1997), p.46, whose discussion is a little more subtle. However, importantly, his approach does not seem to help when applied to the kind of broader vitalist nonanthropocentric communitarianism considered here. I do not have space to make that point in any detail. But the thought is that his approach to this issue only helps under conditions of greater abundance than we find ourselves.

Conclusion

Attempts to develop nonanthropocentric ethical systems face a challenge: to articulate a system that (a) is genuinely nonanthropocentric, while (b) delivering plausible judgments about duties, permissions, and moral reasons. This paper has explored a recent promising attempt to meet this challenge, found in the work of Munamato Chemhuru. At the heart of the discussion in a recent chapter of Chemhuru's, is the idea that an ethical system grounded in teleology and vitality can meet this challenge. This is a compelling proposal that avoids some of the pitfalls faced by rival accounts (e.g., Behren's).

Nonetheless, the account is not without difficulties. Notably, as argued, it faces a dilemma that may be difficult to resolve. It appears to rely on an equivocation that, once exposed, forces a choice between two unattractive options. Moreover, a mere hierarchy of vitality does not help secure protections for those highest in the hierarchy nor ensure humans appear near the top. It will be interesting to see whether future work can successfully respond to this, and the other challenges identified.

To close, let me offer a few suggestions as to how Chemhuru's vitalist teleological approach might be adapted to respond to the challenges I have posed. My suggestions are based on a way to negotiate the equivocation by adapting the vitalist teleological picture which in turn allow us to reconfigure our understanding of the hierarchy. The basic fix has to be that the individual is only directed towards a subset of scenarios of general vital flourishing in the web of life: those in which that individual plays a part (allowing that there are some scenarios of general vital flourishing in which any given individual would not play a part). Such directedness could ground nonanthropocentric duties of the individual and duties in others that protected that individual against sacrifice. But a proper fix has to also, in order to avoid the troubles discussed in relation to Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya, somehow not apply across all individuals (e.g., be restricted to humans or some subset including humans). Although I do not have space to develop it here in detail, I think the best way for the vitalist teleological view to do this might be to allow the precise directedness of the individual to vitality to be moderated by self-awareness (or some other psychological property). The thought might be that the kind of self-awareness humans have means that their directedness is only towards a general flourishing *of which they are part* whereas individuals without such self-awareness can only be oriented towards a general flourishing without regard for a survival that would be their own. That would perhaps be a way to secure humans a position in any hierarchy that was afforded special protections against sacrifice for the sake of vitality in the web of life.

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