

Against Relationality: A Response to Abeba Birhane

By

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For over 100 years, social critics have decried the transformation of the west into a mechanized and mathematical society — not only in terms of technology — but also because values are increasingly assessed quantitatively without much regard for human existential and spiritual fulfillment. Dr. Abeba Birhane, “Algorithmic injustice: a relational ethics approach” (2021) comments on this societal mechanization in the context of machine learning’s effects on marginalized communities. She argues that the western rationalist position creates a “veneer of objectivity” and positions itself as “value-free, neutral, and amoral,” while leading to harmful social impacts of “historical inequalities” and “asymmetrical power hierarchies,” which are mathematicised by western thought. According to Birhane, we should be critical of rationality and consider “the lived experience of marginalized communities.” If we practice a relational ethics, we can attain a better qualitative assessment of AI’s social harms. Yet while Birhane presents relational ethics as an alternative to western rational quantitative systems of power, her own methodology derives significantly from the western sources she blames.

There are three major shortcomings to Birhane’s argument. First, in imagining some more authentic relational ethics in the Global South, she elides both western concepts of relationality that have long discussed lived experience and the paternalistic, unequal structures of traditional cultures. Second, while she relies on the concept of lived experience to forward a progressive agenda, it is in fact a politically and historically volatile category that can equally

serve a conservative agenda; her argument may lead to conclusions very different than the one she intends. Third, in her caricature of western culture as a singularly colonial-minded mechanistic rationality, she also jettisons western models for normative ethics in favor of vague descriptions of non-western communal belonging which may not really exist as authentically or as free of traditional hierarchies as she suggests. Amid such conceptual confusion, Birhane's efforts to create a more progressive relational world purged of western thinking are both unlikely and misguided.

Before criticizing Birhane's argument, consider that in fact her charges against western rationality are not wrong, simply misplaced and lacking in proportion and that these arguments undermine the validity of her proposed ethical framework. Birhane's assertion of the long historical relationship between western rationality and colonialism has been proven in many fields from both western and non-western perspectives. Since Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, western thinkers endeavored to map the varieties of rationality in every culture and explore the unique ties of western rationality to colonialism. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer lay out one of the central theses of the Frankfurt School, the potential harms of excessive individuality, rationality, and technological solutionism. Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) devotes an entire section to the entwinement of western rationality and imperialism that justifies racism and genocide as well as a rapacious extraction of human labor and capital from the Global South. There are many others who also elaborate this thesis of the colonial interventions of western rationality, also among the very sources from which she draws her relational ethics framework: western structuralist theory, hermeneutics, Russian formalism, cognitive science, and clinical psychology, mixed with more contemporary ideologies like Black Feminism. Birhane defenders

argue there is no contradiction in her methodology, that Birhane calls neither for a complete refusal of western ethics nor a purely non-western rationality, and that her mere purpose to highlight the historic wrongs of the west and western technology as they apply to our algorithmic era (Bayrau & Chinganga, 2023), but if those are her arguments, it remains unclear why she offers such a strong binary between the Global North as rationalist imperialist and the Global South as relational communalist. The problem lies in her reductive understanding of western rationality as *merely* rapacious colonialism, which she opposes with the equally under-interrogated concepts of “lived experience” and non-western relationality.

If lived experience is a category which Birhane deploys to describe marginalized peoples’ lives, she might also acknowledge its complex origins in western debates about rationality and understanding. The term originates from German historian and hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. He characterizes lived experience, or *Erlebnis* (inner experience), as not merely an individual intellectual process but a form of understanding, derived from human action and interaction (Dilthey, 2002). In contrast to the Kantian ideal world of theoretical representation, Dilthey believed that lived experience was not solely phenomenal. In other words, inner experience (or lived experience) is not only derived through the senses, but also perceptible through the mind. Dilthey stressed a combination of both philosophies of human understanding. While he staunchly opposed modes of thought that disregarded inner experience and derived solely from the natural sciences, he also believed a combination of rationalist understanding and inner experience could, and should, coexist. Max Weber, Dilthey's contemporary, argued the same. Therefore, Weber sought to create a general theory of *Verstehen* (understanding) that could be derived from a wide variety of cultural sources (artwork, religious texts, history, etc) (Weber, 1981). As Weber argued, this concept may help western figures gain

an understanding of non-western cultures. However, Weber also argued that the usefulness of this *Verstehen* (understanding) is fundamentally limited as it is not tied to rationality. In other words, this understanding is a tool to explain values or comprehend specific situations — it is valuable when tied to causal meanings. Otherwise, we risk relying on non-objective metrics. When “lived experience” is our exclusive or primary method of determining societal standards or arriving at ethical decisions, the result can also be a morally ambiguous amalgam of competing, idiosyncratic experiences of groups and their interests. Hence the need to combine understanding with a mode of more strictly explaining (*Erklären*).

After Dilthey and Weber, many other western thinkers, anthropologists, existentialists, and phenomenologists — from Margaret Mead and Herbert Blumer to Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Georges Bataille, and Max Scheler — adopted “lived experience” as an analytical category to explain human interactions qualitatively, not only quantitatively. It is a concept deeply and undeniably embedded in the western philosophical tradition, not simply an invention of the Global South, as Birhane suggests. In the 1980s, relational ethics’ American inception may have had some non-western corollaries, as American feminist philosopher Sandra Harding identifies (Harding, 1987). But Birhane’s simultaneous borrowing from and rejecting western ethics undermines her own argument that the west is the monolithic perpetrator she makes it out to be. Her own work incorporates strands of western thinking, even though she rejects these.

While her claim that relational ethics is foreign to western thinking is untenable, so is her illusion that relationality or lived experience, her prized category for ethical practice, is not purely progressive. Lived experience turns out to be just as likely to appear in reactionary thought as it is in progressive ideology. As an anti-rationalist existential category, lived

experience remains politically unstable, swinging both far to the right and the left.. Looking at the history of those who have made social claims based on lived experience reveals that the results are just as likely to serve progressive ends as illiberal ones. German author and philosopher Ernst Jünger, who criticized liberal values, democracy, and the Weimar Republic, embraced the concept of lived experience. In his 1922 book *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (War as an Inner Experience), Jünger details his very personal, and at times transcendental, experiences during the First World War (Jünger, 2021). Meanwhile, another Weimar conservative, Martin Heidegger, argued that lived experience had little effect on human existence. He saw lived experience as an outmoded traditionalist approach to subject and object, which led to the very domination that Birhane opposes.

The controversy over lived experience and how to define it, draws critics of diverse political positions (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). It has even, at times, been rejected as self-serving and solipsistic without reference to the supposed communal goals its proponents claim to support (Leith, 2016). Perhaps the truth about lived experience is something in between the opposing views of Heidegger and Jünger — a category attempting to encompass real world human experience, but if we use it as the main determinant of ethics, it creates a system that is inextricably relativistic, anti-normative and therefore incompatible with an agenda of progressive emancipation. Rejecting normative categories creates a vacuum of moral authority, which is in fact something that traditional African communities decry (Ikuenobe, 2016). As Heidegger already knew, the category of lived experience can fundamentally degrade the idea of a baseline of morality — one that deems certain actions to *always* be wrong.

In Birhane's rejection of western quantitative approaches, she also presents a reductive view of empirical data collection, evaluation, or statistics as only colonial. While expanding the

arguments of D'ignazio and Klein's *Data Feminism* (2020), Birhane rightly criticizes well-documented issues of data sovereignty and surveillance, yet she also neglects their main argument that these methods, when properly designed and supervised, can also help inform governments and advocacy groups of the lived experiences she prizes. Pursuing a politics of refusal on data collection may suppress the ability of marginalized people to draw attention to the reality of their situation and their community's needs. Birhane rejects data-driven medicine and statistics, although they alone can show the well-documented health risks of Black people; she wrongly assumes that such data can only serve oppressive ends. Her insistence that "the intrinsically political tasks of categorizing and predicting things such as 'acceptable' behavior, 'ill' health, and 'normal' body type then pass as apolitical technical sorting and categorizing tasks" and therefore oppress marginalized communities. Yet for those genuinely engaged in improving health care, creating informed metrics for human health--with the rational tools of mathematics--has been a key step in the efforts to improve the lives of minority communities. Are we to ignore the work of doctors who, relying on "western medicine," have shown that Black people are more at risk for certain cancers or heart disease (CDC 2017)? Does Birhane want us to neglect the fact that Black women face the highest rate of pregnancy complications? That is a claim one could not defend without statistics. Denouncing the objective and rationalist metrics that show these true but unfortunate facts is the exact opposite of participating in the improvement of the lives of marginalized communities. If we refuse to classify things as healthy or unhealthy and concretely good or bad through rational categories, the result can only be an amplification of social harm.

If Birhane truly wants to posit an African, non-western ethics, she needs to address the many normative claims of *ubuntu* and other African frameworks, which build on habits of

excellence and education as well as a strong belief in patriarchy and natural social hierarchy (Jecker, 2022). Creating a relational form of ethics is neither necessarily African nor even particularly ethical — it is an attempt to establish intersubjective and perspectivist societal standards, built on competing self-interests of different groups. Ultimately, one can only applaud that Birhane fails to produce an authentically non-western ethics. Not only is such an ethics impossible in an increasingly globalized world, characterized by overlaps between western and non-western traditions, but it may also fail the marginalized communities she believes she benefits. Lived experience, or *Erlebnis*, is fundamental to every human being — but its usefulness is limited. If we use lived experience as the primary determiner of morality and therefore downgrade scientific rationality, we risk obfuscating the real complexities of the world — whether this includes disparities in the medical treatment of minorities or the disparate impacts of machine learning.

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