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The African Ethic of Ubuntu

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The word "ubuntu" is from some southern African languages and it literally means "humanness." To have ubuntu is to be a person who is living a genuinely human way of life, whereas to lack ubuntu is to be missing human excellence.

Black people indigenous to Africa commonly believe that one's basic aim in life should be to exhibit ubuntu, which is done by prizing communal relationships with other people.

This essay reviews this concept and how it informs both the good life and how to act morally.

1. Ubuntu as Cultivating One's Humanity

Desmond Tutu, South Africa's renowned Nobel Peace Prize winner, remarks, "When we want to give high praise to someone, we say *Yu u nobuntu*; Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*."[1] For many black African cultures, the more one displays ubuntu, that is, develops human excellence, the better one's life.

This conception of the good life distinguishes two possible ways of living, an *animal* life and a *human* one, and claims that one ought to live a genuinely human way of life and avoid living in the manner of a beast or subhuman.

Mogobe Ramose, who has developed a philosophy on ubuntu, says, "One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being."[2] If someone fails to do so, then many Africans would say of him, "He is not a person" or even "He is an animal."[3] They would be claiming that, although we are biologically human beings, someone who does not live well has failed to develop the valuable aspects of their human nature.[4]

A self-realization ethic of this sort differs from other conceptions of the good life, particularly those popular among contemporary Western psychologists and philosophers. Most strikingly, this ethic does *not* focus on hedonic considerations, such as an individual's pleasure or satisfaction, features that humans share with animals.

2. Ubuntu and Communal Relationship

Many black African societies sum up one's proper basic aim in life with phrases such as "A person is a person through other persons" or "I am because we are."[5] These maxims include prescriptive or normative meanings: they instruct one to become a real person or to realize one's true self, and to do so by relating to other people in certain ways.

More specifically, sub-Saharan conceptions of the good life characteristically understand self-realization in terms of communal or harmonious relationships. Augustine Shutte, one of the first moral philosophers to seriously engage with ubuntu, says:

> Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded.[6]

So an ubuntu ethic focuses on self-realization, but is also communitarian in nature. This community (or harmony) is an ideal form of interaction between people, a type of relating that people ought to strive to create and to maintain.

Community, or communal relationship, is usefully analyzed as the combination of two interactions: *identifying* with others and *exhibiting solidarity* with them.[7]

To *identify* with others is for people to treat themselves as members of the same group: to conceive of themselves as a "we," to take pride or feel shame in others' activities, and to engage in joint projects, coordinating to achieve shared or at least compatible ends.

Solidarity, in part, involves engaging in helpful behavior, acting in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit others. Solidarity involves attitudes, emotions and motives being positively oriented toward others' good, say, by sympathizing and helping them for their sake.

To see some of the appeal of grounding self-realization on prizing such a communal conception of

interaction with others, consider that the union of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them is basically what English speakers mean by a broad sense of "friendship" (or even "love"). Speaking of an African perspective on ethics, Tutu remarks, "Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods."[8]

There are similarities between a conception of the good life grounded on ideals of ubuntu and Western notions of eudaimonia and virtue. For Aristotle, there is a significant self-regarding element to self-realization, such as theoretical contemplation or self-control, that does not essentially involve other persons (although it often might in practice). In contrast, according to many salient sub-Saharan worldviews, one is to realize oneself solely through others. Realizing oneself is exhausted by exhibiting other-regard, an approach that is attractive at least insofar as we are considering the moral virtues.[9]

3. Ubuntu and Action

Concretely, what is involved in realizing oneself through communal or harmonious relationships with others?

The sub-Saharan tradition characteristically answers this question by appealing to a variety of virtues.[10] One exhibits excellence insofar as one displays character traits such as politeness, kindness, sympathy, compassion, benevolence, altruism, compassion, sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, and tolerance.

It might be thought that realizing oneself by prizing friendliness in these ways demands pacifism, but that is probably not true. By acting in unfriendly or conflicting ways when necessary (and likely) to prevent crime, which involves disrespect and harm, one arguably prizes friendliness and community.

This conception of the good life is meant to guide individuals in the choices they make, and it has also influenced societal decision-making in African societies. Contemporary African intellectuals and policy makers often appeal to ubuntu when thinking about how to organize public and other large-scale institutions.[11] These organizations ought to improve people's lives, and so they should be structured in ways that foster ubuntu, a plausible view of how best to live.[12]

4. Conclusion

Ubuntu as an ethical perspective and way of life has been in existence for several hundred years among sub-Saharan peoples, even if written scholarship on the topic is new. Ideals associated with ubuntu are one major source of such inspiration, and not merely to those living below the Sahara desert, since its values should be of interest to global readers.

Is the quality of human life enhanced merely by people feeling good, as per a typical contemporary Western approach, or is it better promoted by people exhibiting virtues that are ways of being a friendly person?[13]

Notes

[1] Tutu, 1999, 31

[2] Ramose, 1999, 52.

[3] Bhengu, 1996, 27.

[4] Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005, 224–226, 236.

[5] E.g., Mandela, 2013, 227; Mkhize, 2008, 40; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005, 218; Tutu, 1999, 35.

[6] Shutte, 2001, 30; see also Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005, 221–228; Tutu, 1999, 35.

[7] These definitional remarks borrow from Metz, 2011, 537–540. Communal or harmonious relationship with others that confer ubuntu on a person is understood as the combination of identity and solidarity. As one South African intellectual, Nkondo, 2007, 91, remarks, "If you asked ubuntu advocates: *What principles inform and organise your life?....*the answers would express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as part of their community."

[8] Tutu, 1999, 35.

[9] See Metz & Gaie, 2010, 275; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005, 222–228.

[10] See, e.g., Gyekye, 2010; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Paris, 1995, 129–156.

[11] See, e.g., Eze, 2010; Murove, 2009; Nkondo, 2007.

[12] Consider two examples from a South African context. First, an ubuntu ethic was largely responsible for the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that famously dealt with apartheid-era crimes in a non-retributive manner (Tutu, 1999). Second, South Africa's Constitutional Court appealed to the value of ubuntu in order to judge the death penalty to be inconsistent with the right to life and value of human dignity represented

in its Bill of Rights (Cornell & Muvangua, 2011, 65–94).

[13] This essay has been adapted and reprinted with permission from Springer Nature: Metz T. (2014) Ubuntu: The Good Life. In: Michalos A.C. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer, Dordrecht. The Editors thank Professor Metz for making this edited and abridged version of his essay available for readers of *1000-Word Philosophy*.

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For Further Reading

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