

Different Conceptions of Ubuntu in Political Theory from the Global South

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Introduction

The concept of Ubuntu can be seen as the root of African Philosophy. Even though it is such a well-known concept in African political and philosophical theory, different conceptions of Ubuntu exist. One of the most common translations into English is: “I am because you are”, or “I am because we are”, which gives the simplest view of the concept. These simple definitions are not wrong per se, but they do not paint the complete picture of all that Ubuntu entails. One can compare it to saying “doing what is best for the most people” is Utilitarianism. While it is not incorrect, it is too simplistic to actually convey something meaningful. This essay will explain the conceptions of Thaddeus Metz, Mogobe B. Ramose and Michael O. Eze, and will compare them in the hope of arriving at the foundation of Ubuntu.

Thaddeus Metz' normative theorization of Ubuntu

Metz has written multiple articles and chapters in books about Ubuntu. In "The African ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: implications for research on morality" he, together with Joseph B.R. Gaie, provides a theoretical reconstruction of sub-Saharan ethics, which they argue as being a strong competitor for western systems of morality. The moral theory that they describe in this article states that the ethicality of actions should be judged by how they promote harmonious living with others and by how they honour communal relationships. After laying down the foundations of this ethical framework, they test it by comparing it to typically western systems of morality, specifically utilitarianism and Kantianism.

In The African ethic of Ubuntu/Botho, Ubuntu is described as the phrase "A person is a person through other persons"¹, which might seem only descriptive, but in the African context it becomes more than only a way to describe our interdependence on other human beings, because while the western notion of the human is static (you are a human or you are not a human), the African notion of a human is more dynamic, Ubuntu prescribes that you can become more human, you can become more of a person in the system of Ubuntu. In another article that Metz wrote (Ubuntu: The Good Life) this is described as having or lacking Ubuntu. If you have Ubuntu you are a fully developed person, and if you lack Ubuntu, you lack human virtue and are sometimes even seen as an animal.⁴ Defined like this (with both the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of Ubuntu), Ubuntu or sub-Saharan morality is a "'self-realisation' or 'perfectionist' ethic"².

To make it better clear how the system of Ubuntu differs from western notions of morality, a couple of topics are considered in order to give concrete differences between these two modes of being. If we look at the way that property is distributed, the western practice is based on an individualistic model. You have your own property and you are not obligated to share it with other people. There is taxation which finances the state and the social programs that the state maintains, but there is still the possibility to achieve great financial inequality. Ubuntu/Botho on the other hand prescribes distributing property in a way that "expresses esteem for communal relationships"³. This directly leads to less financial inequality. If you focus on harmonious connections with your community, you share your wealth, you do not hoard it. The other side of this story is that membership of a community is enough to be entrusted with a portion of the land and other forms of wealth (cattle).

¹ Thaddeus Metz and Joseph B. R. Gaie, "The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for Research on Morality," *Journal of Moral Education* 39, no. 3 (August 4, 2010): 273–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497609>. 274.

² Metz and Gaie, "The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for Research on Morality." 275.

³ Metz and Gaie, "The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for Research on Morality." 277.

In “Ubuntu: The Good Life” Metz describes the similarities in the conception of the good life which is grounded on Ubuntu, and the western notions of eudaimonia, self-actualization and virtue⁴. One important difference that is described is that in the Ubuntu system, you can only realize yourself through others.⁴ The “African ethic ...” article also specifically mentions the impossibility of achieving Ubuntu in isolation², while western ideas and notions regarding self-actualization and virtue do not prescribe the necessity of a community.

Before these articles, Metz has also written an article that tried to develop a normative theorization of Ubuntu. This article is written in 2007, three years before his combined work with Gaie (The African ethic of ...) and compares six theoretical interpretations of Ubuntu, after which it develops the sixth further in order to try to connect it to western normative theorization. In “Toward an African Moral Theory” Metz creates sort of a benchmark on which theoretical moral interpretations of Ubuntu can be tested. This benchmark consists of twelve moral statements, from which six are supposed to be non-controversial in western and African societies alike, and six statements which are less controversial in African societies, and more controversial in western societies. A good theoretical normative interpretation of Ubuntu should be able to answer these twelve moral statements in the fashion that “most friends of Ubuntu”⁴ would answer them, which is a bit problematic because Metz does not really provide sources for these “friends”, it might be that it is just a figure of speech, but if you want to ground Ubuntu in a western theoretical framework, this benchmark will need some sources.

The book of Mogobe B. Ramose which I will cover in the next chapter is also cited in this article. When Metz criticizes normative theory four “An action is right just insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realizes oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one’s valuable nature as a social being.”⁵, Ramose is quoted as saying “to be a human be-ing is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. . . . One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being.”⁶, which connects well to this fourth normative theory. Metz’ best critique of this theory and thus on Ramose’s interpretation is that it still seems like the emphasis on the individual is placed here. “To be a human be-ing is to affirm one’s humanity ...”, it still starts with the need for affirming *your* humanity instead of focusing on the relations between you and the other. It still seems a bit of a self-cultivation theory, instead of cultivating relationships. The normative theorization that Metz regards as best after the comparison, goes as follows:

⁴ Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory*,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (May 3, 2007): 321–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00280.x>. 323.

⁵ Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory*.” 331.

“U6: An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community”⁶, after which Metz goes into more detail on what we should consider harmony to be, which he thinks is best captured in “The Combination of Shared Identity and Good-Will”, which then finally provides the following normative conception of Ubuntu: *“An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will”*.

Mogobe B. Ramose’s theory of the fragmentation of the wholeness

The award-winning book by Ramose “African Philosophy through Ubuntu”, covers multiple facets of Ubuntu. For comparative value this essay will focus on chapter six: “Law through ubuntu”, but in the remainder of the book we find seven chapters which handle specifically how Ubuntu applies to other topics of the humanities (ubuntu & philosophy, ubuntu & religion, ubuntu & medicine etc.), which shows that Ubuntu is not singular applicable. Ubuntu really connects with every aspect of reality. Law is not exactly the same as ethics but considering that ethics can be seen as the philosophical foundation of law suggests that there is comparative value.

Ramose starts the chapter of by showing the western focus on the conceptualization of legal subjects: legal subjects are abstract entities⁷. By contrast, the African legal system recognizes the legal subject as a “living and lived experience”⁵. Continuing, Ramose writes that ubuntu can be seen as the basis of African law: there is a “family atmosphere”⁵. This family atmosphere describes the feelings of affinity and kinship among different indigenous groups of Africa. This is represented as the biological similarities between people: we all have the same blood running through our veins. This is how Ubuntu also directs matters of law. The “family atmosphere” is the harmonious living with your own community and other communities as well.

The differences between the western and African systems of ethics are thus represented in language. Seeing that laws and discussions are written in language, the philosophical impact of how a language is constructed cannot be underestimated. Ramose states that the dominant function of language, especially from a western point of view, can be described as a violent incursion in the flow of reality. This incursion leads to a fragmentation of the flow of reality, which means that the wholeness of reality

⁶ Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory*.” 334.

⁷ M.B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, 1999, <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/african-philosophy-through-ubuntu>. 72.

dissolves into abstract or concrete individual entities, which are then seemingly independent. This is one example of how harmonious living with your community can dissolve into competing individuals.

After this fragmentation of the wholeness of reality has taken place, it can become fixated into our minds, and further reinforce our sense of separation from one another. The end result is that we forget that we are part of a community, and in the end only see separation and individual entities. Another aspect of the fragmentation of the incessant flow of reality is that individual entities become fixed: they are separated from their ancestors and separated from their children. If you identify yourself as your community and your ancestors and your children, you do not die as long as the community survives. This shows how harmonious living with the people around you is possible, because you are living together, you are surviving together. If you are living together as one organism, you share wealth and help each other, because you are the same as the other person, you identify yourself as the community, you and the “other” both identify as the community, so this puts your shared wellbeing in the first place. You cannot be happy when others are sad, because if the other is sad, part of the community is sad, and because you identify as the community, you experience sadness yourself.

The focus of especially western languages on nouns (persons, places, thing, ideas, animals) can be seen as the language or thought equivalent of western tendencies to individualize and separate all things. If you focus on naming every little thing, you separate it from that which has not the same name. The whole process of labelling and naming has the purpose of individuating things from another, which leads to the fragmentation of the whole. So an investigation into the fragmentation of reality can become an investigation into the activity and function of language.

If we investigate language, we discover that there is often a *doer* who is *doing something*. Something is the object. According to Ramose, this apparent structure of language also determines the sequence of thought⁸. Thought is supposed to “not only follow this pattern” but also to “reveal the separate and independent existence of the noun (doer) on the one hand and the object (something) on the other hand”. If that activity is repeated often enough in the mind, the mind will start to believe that the noun and object are indeed irreconcilably separated. Following this mode of thought, the verb (doing) then becomes the bridge between the two separate entities (doer and the object), which shows the independence of these two entities. According to Ramose, the separation of the doer and the object, removes the focus from the activity (the doing), which leads to the fragmentation of being. If we write “John writes a letter”, you can focus on John writing the letter (the letter becomes passive, becomes an object), or you can focus on the letter being written (John becomes passive, becomes the object), or you can focus on the writing that takes place. Ramose sees western language emphasizing John and

⁸ Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. 75.

the letter, and less the writing, and argues that the writing is the “be-ing as a whole-ness”⁹, where focussing on John and the letter leads to separation and individualization and thus the fragmentation of this whole-ness.

So, where Metz tries to provide a more complete picture of Ubuntu by trying to connect it to the western way of normative theorization, Ramose argues that there are different ways of thinking and being between African and western people. He observes that western people use language in the legal system in a different way than African people and proposes that the way the west uses language leads to more distinctions. These distinctions are problematic because they break the community which makes the human being. This premise that the community makes the human being is criticized by Michael Eze, who we will discuss in the next chapter.

Michael O. Eze’s critique on consensus and prioritization

In “What is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a regulative ideal” Eze argues against consensus as a method for representing or describing the politics of common good with regards to the African value system, instead he proposes a realist perspectivism. Eze views consensus as not giving an adequate amount of the praxis of common good in African communitarianism, as consensus “absorbs multiple viewpoints through a totalitarian uniformity”¹⁰. His proposed alternative, realist perspectivism does not depend on “the elusive prospect of conformity”¹¹ but strives for conversion of beliefs. He adapts Ubuntu as the discourse of African communitarianism, and thus gives an overview of how Ubuntu is located within the “ethical, socio-political and cultural ethos in the African value system”¹².

Eze quotes chapter six of Ramose’s book to substantiate his (Eze’s) view that Ubuntu is at once a philosophy and a culture. Ubuntu, analytically speaking, describes the quality or essence of a person amongst sub-Saharan tribes (Ubuntu as something that a person can have or lack, where more Ubuntu means you are more person, more human). Continuing from this, Eze arrives at his main point which is that the individual does not pre-exist the community and that the community does not pre-exist the individual. This seems a rather obvious observation regarding the nature of Ubuntu, but what Eze here means is that the place of the community and the individual is defined through an “inter-subjective

⁹ Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. 76.

¹⁰ Michael Onyebuchi Eze, “What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 386–99, <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajpem.v27i4.31526>. 386.

¹¹ Eze, “What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal.” 387.

formation between them”¹², which is a contemporaneous process. If we connect this back to his critique of consensus, we read that in consensus people lose their individualities, and these individualities are important. Not more important than the community of the individuals, but the community of the individual is also not more important than the individual individualities, so the proposition that the community makes the individuals is something that Eze cannot agree with.¹³ In Eze’s view, the identity of the individual and the community are mutually constitutive, neither one exists prior or without the other one. The idea of contemporaneity is very important in Eze’s regard of the connection between the individuals and the community, so this is why he thinks consensus is not a regulative ideal. His proposed alternative of realist perspectivism would need agreement of beliefs, which makes sure everybody stands behind the outcome of the decision-making process.

Agreement of beliefs however seems to me to be more difficult to achieve than agreement of action. In consensus (agreement of action), parties can consent on things they think are of minor importance, while if the disagreeing parties must first come to an agreement of beliefs, the process becomes far more personal and raises the stakes in a way that it becomes very difficult to achieve any decisional outcome. If however agreement of beliefs is reached, this would mean that all the parties actually think the same way and are completely on board with all the further outcomes of the decision-making process. When agreement of beliefs is reached, all further steps will become infinitely easier, as you all have fundamentally the same goals, ends and regulative ideals. This is however very difficult to achieve in my opinion.

¹² Eze, “What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal.” 389.

¹³ Eze, “What Is African Communitarianism? Against Consensus as a Regulative Ideal.” 388.

Conclusion

While Metz and Ramose argued their conceptions of Ubuntu in relation to the west, either through trying to connect it to the way the west does moral philosophy (normative theorizations (amongst other things)) or through a perceived difference in the use of language in the legal system, Eze stayed most close to the African continent by criticizing the notion that the community comes prior to the individual, proposing realist perspectivism as an alternative to the model of consensus which stifles self-realization and the subjectivity of others. Metz would however say to Eze that his whole notion of self-realization is problematic, because it places the focus on the individual again, as opposed to cultivating the relationships which should be seen as the goal for Ubuntu according to him. Both authors use the work of Ramose, who sees Ubuntu as the whole-ness of reality, which this essay concludes as the foundation of Ubuntu.

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