

Duty, Human Rights and Wrongs and the Notion of Ubuntu as Humanist Philosophy and Metaphysical Connection

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This article reviews and discusses the issue of one's duty, rights and wrongs within the Humanist African Philosophy of Ubuntu. 'Ubuntu' is an Nguni Bantu term denoting "humanity". It asserts that "I am because we are" and expresses of having a sense of "humanity towards others" which in the Zulu language is stated as "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu". The roots of African Life, culture and value systems in Southern Africa in particular are found in the philosophy of Ubuntu but they have also been partially influenced by specifically the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Ubuntu considers human rights as moral principles or norms that designate certain standards of human behaviour that are required in dealing with other human beings. One's rights and duties in society are grounded in a multifaceted philosophy because of the moral aspects which are a mixture of heritage and tradition. Ubuntu avows that society, and not any transcendent being, provides human beings with their basic humanity. An authentic individual human being is part of a complex and important relational, communal, societal, environmental and even mystical world. One's actions are correct to that extent that they are a matter of living harmoniously with others and doing one's duty while acting ethically and within the ambit of the law, and thus demonstrating reverence towards others in communal associations. It calls for apology, and forgiveness when doing something wrong and ultimately reconciliation with guilty or injured parties.

Keywords: Ubuntu; Rights; Wrongs; Duties; Metaphysics; African humanism

Introduction

It is invariably the case that all individuals are products of particular societal structures and systems and owe much of their identity to the community in which they live and to their cultural heritage. Individuals who live in the Western Christian world generally tend to base their ethical beliefs and their behaviour on the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) that were handed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Ethics for them is then a series of laws and principles that individuals should try to live by, but often fail to do. There is thus a profound connection between ethics and the Abrahamic religions' Holy Scriptures of Judaism, Islam and Christianity and also the ethics of great Western philosophers, predominantly from Classical Greece such as Aristotle, Plato and Socrates.¹ Aristotle asserted that the highest

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¹Nicolaides (2014).

good (eudaimonia) of people is a life of cogent activity of the soul in harmony with virtue and this aligns with Ubuntu. Lutz maintains that Confucian ethics shares the Ubuntu ethics perspective that the family is a dominant building block of society².

In Africa, there is an assortment of values and practices that people view as making them authentic human beings who have a role to play in a grander and important relational, communal, societal, environmental and mystical world. All societies are forged on a set of values and norms through which people are expected to live. These norms allow for the creation of principles, conventions, ethical and cultural values, and they emerge as a philosophy aimed at guiding human existence in an ethical direction. This is what Ubuntu entails³. Yawson states that Ubuntu is an auxiliary to a diverse approach of leadership which is an Afrocentric leadership style which is the principal obligatory style of leadership in Africa⁴. In African societies, the values generally championed are those which align with the values of the local community as a set of commonly understood moral principles and conventions which are grounded on realistic and rational judgments of what moral conduct entails. The values passed down through the generations become very robust determining factors of attitudinal and behavioural change and thus necessitate recognition as being significant in sustaining efficacious human rights observances. For many indigenous African communities, their values are traditionally based and generally derived from their own unique values, in this case the notion of Ubuntu⁵.

Ubuntu has long existed in oral literature and appeared in South African written sources from the mid-19th century. Ubuntu is still prized and is not simply a relic of the past in any sense⁶. The term covers ideas relating to human nature, humanness, virtue, goodness, and compassion⁷. From around the 1970s, Ubuntu began to be designated as a specific kind of African humanism. Mafunisa asserts that Ubuntu is a divinely inspired positive action and it allows Africans to function according to socio-cultural norms and values which are founded on the truth of one's inner being⁸. An ethical action in Africa, is one which is considered to be the idyllic action by society⁹. In observing human rights one is expected to treat all people as possessing dignity, as "exhibiting a superlative non-instrumental value. Alternatively, a human rights violation is a failure to honour people's special nature, often by treating them merely as a means to some ideology such as racial or religious purity or to some prudentially selfish end"¹⁰. Gyekye mentions that African ethics is that which 'refer[s] both to the moral beliefs and presuppositions of the sub-Saharan African people and the philosophical clarification and

²Lutz (2009).

³Mkabela & Luthuli (1997).

⁴Yawson (2017).

⁵Mkabela (2014).

⁶Ramose (2001).

⁷Gade (2011).

⁸Mafunisa (2000).

⁹Gyekye (2010).

¹⁰Metz (2011).

interpretation of those beliefs and presuppositions'¹¹. Ubuntu incorporates moral values such as inter alia humility, conformity, and responsiveness, which regulate how an individual is viewed within indigenous African communities. In an African milieu a sense of duty and the responsibilities of individuals are more dominant than the notion of individual human rights as in the West.

Ubuntu is a plausible African moral theory and is compatible with various ethical theories including the common good approach, the utilitarian approach, the rights ethical or deontological approach, the justice or fairness approach and the virtue approach. The greatest parallel is with the common good approach which is endorsed collectively in a range of common values and moral or ethical principles that exist in virtually all societies. Societies across the globe share in common what are considered to be either positive and negative values. Charity begins primarily with the family, and it fundamentally divulges the primary nature of God's existence within people¹².

The Issue of Rights

Human rights are intrinsically a set of norms or moral principles of shared standards of acceptable behaviour by individuals and groups. In terms of national and also international laws, these rights are universal and protected and are inalienable fundamental rights¹³. Ubuntu, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity all call for consideration to be shown towards others and their human rights for the perpetuation of actions which are steeped in moral integrity. It is only through others that a person can be considered to be a human being and one's full acceptance of this and positive participation are then imperative. All people need to be treated inclusively and have their proposals and thoughts carefully considered, and in particular, they should be treated with the utmost human dignity and afforded their human rights to the full extent of the law. Sound ethics necessitates that all individuals have virtues and a set of principles or standards of what is considered to be right or wrong and they have the capacity to make libertarian choices¹⁴.

Eze, states the fundamental issue of Ubuntu is that a person becomes a person through other people and thus one's humanity comes through recognising the 'other' as a different and unique being. Humanity is thus not entrenched in one's persona solely as an individual but is rather co-substantively conferred upon the other and oneself and this requires sustaining¹⁵. African society has for the most part developed its ethics based on customs and on what is believed to be moral or immoral by various cultures. African societies tend to afford the family the highest standing and it is families that are considered to be the core model relating to the

¹¹Mulemfo (2000).

¹²Smith (2005).

¹³Mkabela & Luthuli (1997).

¹⁴Smith (2005).

¹⁵Eze (2010).

concept of community¹⁶. It is also the case that Ubuntu imbues all persons with unique intrinsic worth as they have a capacity to relate to fellow human beings in a communal sense but this is not necessarily how they are treated in return - there is thus a possible disjunction. A person is considered to be spiritually consequential since all people and even the elements of the natural environment possess a life/vital force and all these diverse forms of life are interrelated. People thus complement everything else that exists¹⁷.

The values inherent in Ubuntu are a fundamental part of that value system which is contained in the South African Constitution and speak inter-alia notions of human dignity, equality, the advancement of human rights and freedoms¹⁸. Ubuntu also stresses that the greatest good should be created for the greatest number of people and the notion of ethics is evaluated as a duty and not as a right, and so human welfare is stressed first and foremost¹⁹. Strangers as well as all members of a community need to be treated respectfully. Kindness is not prerequisite of community development but tend to guard against instrumentalist relationships. However, it may often be the case that genuine kindness may leave one vulnerable to those who harbour ulterior motives. There is additionally a problem in that ubuntu has an association with the early pastoral societies relationships with ancestors and also has a collectivist orientation, and some suggest that it necessitates a “[...] group-think, uncompromising majoritarianism or extreme sacrifice for society, which is incompatible with the value of individual freedom that is among the most promising ideals in the liberal tradition”²⁰.

Of great metaphysical importance is the question as to whether or not a human being is self-sufficient in their daily existence and yet still depends on his or her relationship with other people. We also need to ask if a person has an ontological priority over the community in which they live or whether they are communitarian beings²¹. The African philosophy welcomes consultation and inclusivity from all role-players from all walks of life, and this can be translated into any organisation’s strategy. Consequently, the development of practices, policies, procedures and processes must all be aimed at developing people and this includes in the institutions in which they serve²². Rights are considered to be ego-centric in relation to the home-grown notion of a person as a being of moral value. The common value takes precedence and this implies that moral duties and individual rights should be assimilated. Respect is the notion that is crucial in Ubuntu and this means that all people should be treated fairly since they have common human rights. Respect is shown by one being humble, understanding and empathetic towards others. Harmony and equilibrium are vital in collective whole.

¹⁶Shutte (1993).

¹⁷Mkabela & Luthuli (1997).

¹⁸Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 108 of 1996.

¹⁹Griggs & Louw (1995).

²⁰Metz (2011).

²¹Gyekye (2000).

²²Mbigi & Maree (2005).

One's Duty

Ubuntu emphasises that it is a society and not any transcendent being which ultimately gives people their humanity. This essentially then emanates from meeting the requirements to be accepted as being part of for example, a tribe. It is deemed proper to treat one with an Ubuntu spirit and to deny a family member or one from a local community Ubuntu is considered to be an extremely immoral act²³. This is because African society generally embraces communalisation and all human life has a strong communitarian association. According to Ubuntu, one is mandated to advance one's level of humanity by honouring and sharing a sense of identity and solidarity with others who possess dignity by virtue of their characteristic capacity to participate in such relationships. So when there are human rights violations "these are serious degradations of this capacity, often taking the form of very unfriendly behaviour that is not a proportionate, counteractive response to another's unfriendliness"²⁴. Ubuntu incorporates a shared human partisanship that endorses a community's good through an unconditional acknowledgement and also a general appreciation of individual exceptionality and uniqueness²⁵. For most Africans, freedom exists in an assortment of privileges and exclusions that derive from the notion of a collective life and how one is inclined to handle their responsibilities as members of the community at large. For example, the crux of education is family, community, societal and environmental well-being which is one's duty²⁶.

Ubuntu directs and promotes much African education, and seeks to decolonise it from western educational paradigms which have been in place for a century or more²⁷. Ubuntu education utilises the family unit, community, society, environment and even spirituality as sources of knowledge but correspondingly as teaching and learning media²⁸. Ubuntu education requires that learners become critical about their social conditions and strive to enhance them. Interaction with others, participation in communal activities, recognition, respect and inclusion of others are all important aspects of a desired education. Teaching and learning activities should include groupwork and desired community supportive approaches. In fact, the very objectives, content, methodology and outcomes of education need to be fashioned by Ubuntu. Tang asserts that Ubuntu "implies that everyone has different skills and strengths; people are not isolated, and through mutual support they can help each other to complete themselves."²⁹

The nuances of African ethics and Ubuntu *per se* are important to comprehend, since it is the peculiarities that should be reflected in all African leadership decision-making processes where the notion of collective management is of supreme importance. It is one's duty to serve as an effective and virtuous leader and this must be at the core of every effective organisation. Effective leaders who

²³Ramose (2003).

²⁴Metz (2011).

²⁵Eze (2008).

²⁶Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuva (2014).

²⁷Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuva (2014).

²⁸Mugumbate & Chereni (2020).

²⁹Tang (2015).

are duty bound are inclined to be those who are inspiring role models of virtue, and sound ethical and moral leadership. Ubuntu thus views leadership as a moral service and duty and it includes a transformational element. This implies that in people should be true to themselves and endeavour to exist in truth and sincerity, while being bereft of pretence and narcissistic obsession with their egos.

In an African context, the values that should be championed by leaders include legitimacy in their particular role, the desire to develop a group and promote the growth of individuals, a community focus, joint decision making in a spirit of sharing values, the promotion of dignity and respect in the culture of an organisation and in its climate, diversity and management and the sharing of values in an environment where solidarity is evident³⁰. From a political philosophy vantage point, Ubuntu as duty encourages community equality, and the distribution of wealth. The socialisation aspect assumes that in a community, the population within which an individual shares empathy, collective prosperity is the ultimate goal.

The five pillars of Ubuntu involvement include the family, community, society, environment and spirituality³¹. This implies that Ubuntu spirited leaders also require a vision and be proactive in how they lead and value the interrelation they share with society. An Ubuntu oriented leader will invariably tend to project honesty and total consistency and should be bent on endorsing and supporting an environmental stance in which ethical practice is a given since it is one's duty to preserve the natural environment. The spirit of Ubuntu is thus contrary to the erosion of communal values by corrupt leaders. If a person displays an egoistic propensity he or she is not viewed as a person. When unethical leaders furtively acquire any assets, special privileges or advantages, those who serve under them habitually tend to become disloyal to them or the organisation in which they serve since they have abandoned their duty to serve ethically³². Where a leader is corrupt, his or her imperfections should be accepted by the community and it is up to the community to always pursue a path to redeem the that person.

It is clear that Ubuntu concentrates not only on rights but especially on one's duty when it comes to bearing in mind the well-being of others in society³³, so that rights of all stakeholders, both the individuals and also the collective, need to be dealt with in an ethical way³⁴. Ubuntu is against materialism and individualism and valued in the West and it looks at an individual person holistically, not only their financial standing. It views people as unique beings with worth irrespective of social status or wealth. This is of course the antithesis of the western paradigm in which human beings are commended to act independently and thus as separate entities which are free to act as they wish irrespective of the damage they may

³⁰Van der Colff (2003).

³¹Mugumbate & Chereni (2020).

³²Van Rensburg (2007).

³³Mbigi & Maree (1995).

³⁴Ozar., Berg, Werhane & Emanuel (2000).

cause both to themselves and also to society at large. Ubuntu serves the critically important role of sustaining the integrity of interconnected life forces³⁵.

The South African government's has a white paper which recognises that Ubuntu expresses "[...] each individual's humanity through his/her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity."³⁶ Whether Ubuntu exists in practice is debatable given that corruption is either visible or hidden in Africa as needed policies are often neglected by politicians due to their focus on making more money, inspired by an ethic of self-preservation at the expense of others³⁷.

Mboti contends that the normative definition of Ubuntu, and the formulation of moral rules that have direct implications for what human actions, institutions, and ways of life should be like, is still contentious and that Africans are in any event generally interdependent and seek harmony in all their dealings³⁸. Metz provides three chief reasons why Ubuntu sometimes receives censure. He argues that it is considered to be vague as a philosophical thought and does not possess a firm framework; In addition, he maintains that due to its collectivist orientation there is some danger of foregoing individual freedoms for the sake of society and that as a philosophy it is applicable and useful only in traditional African societies³⁹. Ubuntu fairness has elements which diverge from what exists in western societies. It values mending damaged relationships and requires compensation for damage⁴⁰. Spiritual beings and community members can caution and even punish one for misdemeanours perpetrated against a community member.

Discussion

In Africa one's destiny is inexorably linked with a personal life existing in a community within which a person is interconnected. A community is realised through individual people who collect together. In this arrangement, people are communal entities and have social interactions with others with whom they are linked culturally and share common interests, values and even objectives. In such a community, the individuals share a range of emotive attachments and are willing to stand together to defend the common interest. The collective is supportive of the notion of rights although generally speaking, the rights are borne by individuals. Nonetheless, if one takes a Kantian critical philosophy view, Ubuntu aligns to an extent with the Categorical Imperative which is a core principle of morality.

Behaviour is absolute for all agents, and the validity is not contingent on any desire or end.

According to Kant and his deontological moral system, responsive beings occupy an exceptional place in creation, and morality is an imperative, or definitive

³⁵Mkabela & Luthuli (1997).

³⁶Republic of South Africa, Government Gazette, 02/02/1996. No.16943.

³⁷Nicolaides (2016).

³⁸Mboti (2015).

³⁹Metz (2011).

⁴⁰Metz & Gaie (2010).

commandment of reason, and it is from this that all duties and obligations derive. For him then an imperative is any proposition affirming a certain action (or inaction) to be necessary in a given situation. Kant stated “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” is a logical statement and it articulates the condition of the rationality of conduct rather than that of its morality, which he expressed in another prescription: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means.”⁴¹ In the Kantian theory is the understanding that persons have an exceptional worth because they have a strong capacity for autonomy, whereas in Ubuntu they do possess worth because they have the capacity to relate to others in a communal way and sound relationships are important.

Mangena states that the moral imperative of Ubuntu ethics identifies and values the importance of the exchange of ideas in the conceptualisation and organisation of society, and that the community is at the very heart of all moral considerations based on the idea of a communal or group rationality also termed as the Common Moral Position (CMP)⁴². Dei asserts that African ethics is to a large extent grounded on religion and that there is close and specific reference to “[...] the African conception of the triadic constitution of community as including the living, the living-dead and the yet to be born”.⁴³ Etieyibo argues that there is a clearly humanistic approach to Ubuntu, through which the welfare, needs and security of the group are seen to be more important than anything and there is with a strong stress on sharing, consideration and empathy for others. Etieyibo says “your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth and your salvation is my salvation”.⁴⁴ The standing and part played by elders is also considered to be of paramount importance in the conceptualisation and organisation of African communities. This is because the elders, due to their vast experience are perceived to be the custodians of the community’s cultural conscience and it is ultimately they who forge and convey moral wisdom to the younger generation through folklores, proverbs and other knowledge tools⁴⁵. Moral wisdom is dialogical and also spiritual in essence and the key stakeholders are the Creator, ones ancestors, and then the elders of the community and the younger generation⁴⁶.

Conclusion

In drawing to a close, it should be noted that irrespective of which philosophical trend one accepts, the golden rule applies to all that one should care for one’s neighbour as one cares for oneself. Our task as human beings is to reaffirm

⁴¹Kant (1993).

⁴²Mangena (2012).

⁴³Dei (1994).

⁴⁴Etieyibo (2014).

⁴⁵Mangena (2016).

⁴⁶Mangena (2016).

human dignity and worth and care for ourselves as well as others. The role of Ubuntu ethics in African society is important and its altruistic value focus is highly beneficial to harmony in society. It considers the interests of all role players and its collective worldview 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' is powerful in forging a sense of community, esprit de corps, compassion and sharing. The Ubuntu value system reinforces the significance of African indigenous principles and morals which allow individual human rights to increase in a community in which human dignity and worth are paramount and communality is stressed. It clearly stands at odds with the narcissistic ethic of self-preservation and egocentrism which is pervading western nations. This is not to say that such elements are absent in Africa. Ubuntu's support of human rights is noteworthy⁴⁷. Any action is the right one if the objective is to live in harmony with others and positive relationships are highly valued. A person's driving ambition in life should be to become a truly human person⁴⁸. An adherent of Ubuntu will possess a life view that is based on reflection and they will tend to evaluate and question their view while respecting those of others. They are righteous ethicists and not moralists who believe their life view is superior and that they indeed possess all the answers in life. They also endeavour to work within the existing laws, standards, frameworks and guidelines in their society and contribute positively to all the participants in the collective. Indigenous values as espoused in Ubuntu are contributory in sustaining sound cultural and ethical standards.

The indigenous values provide a sense of direction or a moral compass in living a life of value. We should re-awaken a seemingly lost vision of altruism and strive to become concerned human beings given that our position in contemporary civilisation is threatened by increasing narcissistic tendencies which will ultimately lead to our self-destruction. Ubuntu is a poignant paradigm for positive and valuable human interactions in terms of which both individual and communal life can benefit. Thus, through achieving the status of true personhood integrated into society as proposed by Ubuntu, we can contribute positively towards the common good and global sustainability.

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⁴⁷Mkabela & Luthuli (1997).

⁴⁸Metz & Gaie (2010).

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