



CHAPTER 9

An African Theory of the Point of Higher Education: Communion as an Alternative to Autonomy, Truth, and Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

Much philosophy of higher education in the English-speaking literature has addressed the appropriate *final ends* of a higher education institution such as a university with a significant public dimension (whether substantial state funding or influence on civil society), that is, it has considered what such an institution ought to aim to achieve for its own sake and not merely as a means. In addition to being of intrinsic philosophical interest, a comprehensive conception of the final ends of higher education would have major implications for a variety of more specific educational issues, such as what kind of independence a university or lecturer should have, which research to discover and disseminate, what to teach, how to teach it, and whom to include among academic staff and the student body.

In this chapter I seek to advance enquiry into the point of a public higher education institution (from now on merely “university”) by drawing on ideals salient in the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition. There are relational, and specifically communal, values prominently held by African thinkers that I use to ground a promising rival to the dominant

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contemporary Western, and especially Anglo-American, accounts of what a university ultimately ought to strive to achieve, which focus mainly on autonomy, truth, and citizenship. My aims are not merely comparative, contrasting an Afro-communal approach with other ones that have been more globally influential, but also substantive. Although the theory of a university's point that I articulate and defend has an African pedigree, I work to show that it should be taken seriously by a global audience, for plausibly capturing a variety of intuitions and claims that are widely shared.

To show that the Afro-communal account of higher education's final ends merits consideration is of course not to demonstrate that it is the best or even that it is better than the characteristically Western philosophies with which I contrast it in this chapter. My aims are the limited ones of arguing that the African view is strong, even by "non-African" lights, in some areas where major competitors appear to be weak, and that it also does not suffer from some weaknesses that one might have initially thought.

Another limit of this project is that I do not bring out the African credentials of the philosophy as much as some readers would find useful. I do indicate how it naturally follows from some statements of important sub-Saharan thinkers, but do not do the work of showing that their statements, in turn, are indeed a function of worldviews and ways of life indigenous to the African continent, especially south of the Sahara desert.¹

In the following section I spell out an ethic informed by African thought, according to which just policies are those that treat people's capacity to commune with respect (2). Then, I apply this ethic to the final ends of higher education, identifying five major ones and noting some of their implications for policy and practice (3). I next contrast these communal final ends with those of autonomy, truth, and citizenship, arguing that the latter have gaps that the former help to fill (4). I conclude by briefly summarizing and reflecting on the argumentative strategy of appealing to characteristically African values when addressing a largely Western audience (5).

AN AFRO-COMMUNAL ETHIC

When writing on Africa, one is expected to note the variety of long-standing languages and cultures, which historians and sociologists would sensibly address in their particularity. From a philosophical perspective, however, it can be reasonable to work at a more general level, noting recurrent African values, that is, ones that have been common over a long span of time and a wide array of space on the continent and that are not as

prominent in many other philosophical traditions such as the Western, Chinese, Islamic, Hindu, and so on. At least when contemporary African philosophers have written about moral matters, they have tended to focus on a small handful of distinctive values taken to be fundamental in the sub-Saharan context.

Specifically, some philosophical articulations of sub-Saharan values take life-force, roughly, an invisible energy that has come from God, as basic to African ethical thought.² Frequent, too, is the idea that a moral person is at bottom one who interacts in certain positive ways with human beings and imperceptible finite agents such as the not-yet-born and ancestors, those who have died but are thought to continue to live on earth and to guide the clan they had founded.³ Other thinkers have deemed the common good, practices that would leave no one's well-being unaddressed, to be foundational.⁴

I merely note these strands of ethical thought here, lacking the space to argue that they are not the best interpretation of the African tradition. I must rest content with providing a *prima facie* plausible alternative interpretation of it, one that I believe would be of particular interest to a global audience of philosophers of higher education, educational theorists, and policy-makers. According to my favoured reading of sub-Saharan morality, it is secular and relational. Roughly, from this perspective, communal relationships with human persons (and certain animals) are what merit pursuit for their own sake, whereas discordant ones are to be avoided (unless necessary to prevent a greater discord). In this section, I expound this ethic, applying it only in the following sections.⁵

Communion

To begin to get a sense of what communal, or harmonious, relationship involves for sub-Saharan thinkers, consider the following statements:

Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all.⁶

Harmony is (to be) achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group.⁷

(T)he purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness.⁸

If you asked ubuntu (the southern African Nguni word for personhood or virtue—ed.) advocates and philosophers: What principles inform and orga-

nise 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 bound up in that of their community.⁹

(The African value of cohesion includes—ed.) living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth... (and) feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict.¹⁰

These quotations, by philosophers, theologians, intellectual historians, and other kinds of thinkers from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, are of interest for two reasons. One is that they suggest that a certain kind of relationship is to be pursued as an end, not merely as a means. Another is that they specify the nature of this relationship, in terms of two logically distinct facets. On the one hand, there is what I call “identifying with” others or “sharing a way of life” with them, that is, as per the quotations above, considering oneself part of the whole, being close, belonging, being bound up with others, and feeling integrated. On the other, there is “exhibiting solidarity” with others or “caring for their quality of life,” namely, achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, servicing, being committed to others’ good, and being concerned for others’ welfare.

More carefully, it is revealing to understand identifying with another (or being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of “we-ness” and cooperative behaviour. The attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as a member of a group with the other and to refer to oneself as a “we” (and not merely as an “I”), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what another member does, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of the other’s nature and value. The cooperative behaviours include being transparent about the terms of interaction, allowing others to make voluntary choices, acting on the basis of trust, adopting common goals, and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that “this is who we are.”

Exhibiting solidarity with another (or acting for others’ good, exhibiting concern for their welfare, etc.) is also usefully construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behaviour. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented towards the other’s well-being and include a belief that the other merits aid for her own sake, an empathetic awareness of the other’s condition, and a sympathetic emotional reaction to the empathy. And the actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is, to meet the other’s needs, but also, in the ideal

case, are ones done for that reason and for the sake of making the other a (morally) better person or for the sake of communal relationship itself.

I call the combination of identity and solidarity so defined “communion” or sometimes “harmony.” I tend to abjure the word “community,” in part because it is used in a variety of ways and in part because it might suggest the (Western) communitarian view that appropriate norms are determined by a group’s attitudes or culture. In contrast, the African ethic is meant to be an objective standard by which to determine whether a group’s norms are appropriate, that is, whether it has some moral reason to change its attitudes or culture so that people are treated as special in virtue of their capacities both to be communed with and to commune.

Respect for the Capacity to Be Party to Communion

Supposing the capacity to commune confers a dignity on us, sometimes honouring it will include actions that seek to promote actualization of the capacity, that is, that are expected to foster communion. However, the ethic I advance does not say to promote communal relationships as much as possible wherever one can in the long run, as per agent-neutral consequentialism; it rather says to treat people with respect in virtue of their natural capacity to relate communally, both as subjects and objects. This principle is deontological or agentrelative, in at least three major ways.

First, honouring communion, or people insofar as they can be party to it, means first and foremost exhibiting it in oneself. One is more to relate communally than to enable or prompt others to do so.

Second, actual communal relationships of which one is a part have some priority relative to merely possible relationships one could have (and the actual relationships of others). To honour communion means in the first instance sustaining one’s own ties, even if cutting off extant ones is foreseen to result in marginally more communion for oneself (or elsewhere in the world). Such is a philosophical reconstruction of the special obligations often accorded to kin in traditional African societies¹¹ and intuitively accepted by many in the West (and especially the Confucian East). Note that giving priority, when it comes to positive obligations to aid, to those related to oneself does not mean that strangers count for nothing¹²; instead, by the present ethic, everyone with the ability to exhibit communion has a dignity that must be respected, but those who have been in communion are entitled to more of one’s help.

Third, to honour the capacity for communion entails that it is normally wrong to seek to realize it, including among one's own relations, by using a discordant means against innocents, where discord consists of relationships that are the opposites of communal, that is, acting on an "us versus them" attitude, subordinating, harming, and doing so consequent to hatred, cruelty, or the like. It is wrong to seek to advance identity and solidarity in the long term by being divisive or exhibiting ill-will in the short term (when unnecessary to rebut an initial discord¹³).

To see some of the *prima facie* appeal of this ethic, consider its implications for the nature of wrongdoing, on the one hand, and of what justice requires from public institutions, on the other. The relationship of identifying with other people in combination with that of exhibiting solidarity with them is basically what English speakers mean by "friendliness" or even a broad sense of "love." Hence, this African moral theory implies that wrong actions are, very roughly, those that are not friendly. Wrongdoing, in respect of innocents, is a matter of either failure to commune with them, and so being indifferent to others, or, worse, discordance. What makes acts such as killing, coercing, deceiving, exploiting, cheating, breaking promises, and the like typically impermissible is that they are (extremely) unfriendly, indeed, ways of prizing the discordant relations of division and ill-will. As one scholar of African ethical thought has summed up, "immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship"¹⁴; wrongness is more or less behaviour that treats innocent parties as separate and inferior, subordinates them, is expected to harm them, and is done consequent to indifference or cruelty. This explanation of wrongdoing differs from familiar Western appeals to failure to promote well-being in the long run, degradation of autonomy, violation of what would be agreed to in a social contract, or disobedience of God's commands, the most prominent principles in the modern era.¹⁵

With regard to the normative ground of public policy, the utilitarian believes that institutions ought to enhance subjective well-being, and the Kantian believes they should protect and enhance people's autonomy. In contrast, the adherent to communion contends (roughly) that institutions ought to commune with those they influence in the first instance and then also enable others to commune with each other. This approach entails that conditions such as these are to be prized: a state that meets the needs and promotes the virtues of its residents; a business that forgoes some profits so as to strengthen ties with stakeholders; a school in which class, gender, and racial divisions are overcome with a national identity; a populace that is cohesive in the sense of being disposed to trade and cooperate across politi-

cal, religious, and ethnic lines; and a household in which adult romantic relationships are evenhanded and stable and in which children are reared with wisdom. It is not merely the effect on well-being or the treatment of autonomy that matters, from this perspective, but centrally the quality of the relationships as friendly. This ethic, too, merits consideration when thinking about how to organize a society.

THE COMMUNAL FINAL ENDS OF A UNIVERSITY

This section applies the African ethic from the previous section to the context of public higher education. Supposing that the basic duty of a moral agent (including an institution¹⁶) is to treat individuals respectfully in virtue of their natural abilities to commune and to be communed with, which ends should a university pursue for its own sake? This section argues for five major ones.¹⁷

Foster Socio-economic Well-Being

The Afro-communal principle prescribes respecting relationships of identity and solidarity, where solidarity is roughly a matter of people helping one another for each other's sake. If a university, or the government funding it, is required to act for the sake of people in a certain territory, then a major part of doing so will be a matter of seeking to improve their socio-economic conditions. A university is in a good position to do that by imparting skills to help run a modern economy and by promoting scientific knowledge that would facilitate technological spin-offs and predictions of natural events. Fostering what many would call "development" is a justifying aim of a university—that is, it is a good reason to set one up and keep it—in the light of the nature of a university and the costs of maintaining it.

Another dimension of advancing socio-economic well-being is directing it largely towards the worst off and not so much towards those already flourishing. Public higher education ought to strive to help students from lower economic classes acquire the qualifications needed to compete for jobs and other positions and to obtain the rewards that are attached to them. Treating people as equals in virtue of their abilities to be communed with and to commune means that an agent with substantial resources, such as a university, has strong moral reason to assist those from poor backgrounds who otherwise would not have a chance to acquire the education essential to engage in interesting work that is well paid. If a state

university did not yet exist, then the government would be failing to exhibit solidarity with the poor and would alienate them from itself. And if a state university did exist but did not accommodate those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, then it would be doing the same. To avoid these moral problems, a state university must be created and maintained in order to ensure that citizens have an equal opportunity to become qualified for jobs.

In practice this would mean adopting familiar practices such as providing financial aid of various sorts and possibly remedial classes. It would also likely mean that a university may not accept only the “very best” applicants in purely meritocratic terms. Instead, it would have to make allowance for those whose preparation for tertiary education has not been ideal, at least for reasons of class and other structural matters beyond their control. So, for example, a public university might accept the best applicants from schools across a demographic range; it might draw on the top ten percent of schools in wealthy neighbourhoods and in poor ones, even if the top ten percent of the latter were not as well prepared as the top 11–20 percent of the former.

Furthermore, fostering equal opportunity in a robust way informed by a requirement to care and share would mean meeting several broader needs of students, supposing that a university’s finances and other resources permitted. For instance, if students lacked enough food to concentrate on their studies and to remain healthy, a university would have some obligation to provide it. If students were unfamiliar with the professional norms of a labour market, a university would have a duty of some weight to help them obtain internships, to teach them how to construct a c.v., and to give them advice about how to interview. For a third example, students from impoverished backgrounds and from cultures at odds with middle-class lifestyles could be entitled to counselling, support groups, and the like, in order to adjust to a university environment in the first place.¹⁸

Promote Virtue

The solidarity element of the communal ethic instructs a moral agent to act for the sake of others, and, while part of acting for another person’s sake is making her better off, say, in terms of meeting her needs, another part is making her a (morally) better person. Part of honouring communion is enabling other people to be good at communing, and, so, part of

what a state university ought to be intrinsically striving for is helping others to improve their character.

Notice that this aim is not reducible to merely teaching university students about ethical views, say, by conveying propositional knowledge of utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, or even the present, Afro-communal ethic. The primary aim would instead be to enable students to improve their moral decision-making in day-to-day life. It would mean a curriculum and pedagogy oriented towards imparting not merely an abstract apprehension of moral claims or controversies but also some moral wisdom and sound practice. The aim would not be so much *moral education*, an orthodox focus on belief formation, but more *education for morality*, an orthopraxy. On this score, a university might teach students, say, how to become more aware of their implicit biases, how to identify and deal with conflicts of interest, and how to become more attuned to other people's points of view and feelings.

Although the communal ethic in principle entails that public higher education ought to strive to enhance people's virtue, in practice its reach would probably be limited. In light of some reasonable empirical claims, a university should perhaps not adopt the final end of developing virtue insofar as that is very thick, for example, involves doing the right thing for the right sort of reason or exhibiting all the apt kind of emotions, such as being glad when others flourish. There is likely not the time and other resources available for a university to make students better people in the above senses, if it is going to realize the aim of teaching them intricate knowledge and refined skills in fields such as chemistry, medicine, economics, metaphysics, sociology, and engineering. In theory, a government could tack an additional six or 12 months onto the bachelor's degree, but most students—and governments—already find higher education expensive and something to streamline on the road to economic productivity.

Although a university probably cannot foster much virtue understood in terms of certain *attitudes*, it is in a good position to advance it when it comes to performing *actions*, including those with some expressive dimension. For instance, university pedagogy could work to incorporate what are often called "communities of practice,"¹⁹ where students would learn by collaborating with others to realize shared goals. Relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life are more likely to be realized in the context of joint, public activities than isolated assignments done or prepared for at home in which students are competing against each other for grades.²⁰

Furthermore, enabling people to excel at the right sort of job, meaning one that would contribute positively to others' good, would be a significant way to impart moral virtue. If the state must treat people as having a dignity because of (in part) their capacities to be cared for and to care for others, then it must care for each of them by enabling them to work at jobs in accordance with their particular abilities and inclinations to care for others. Indeed, the central meaning of work in traditional African cultures was to realize oneself by labouring in ways that would support one's (extended) family and the broader society.²¹

Support Culture

The previous sub-sections argued that the solidarity element of the communal ethic entails that a university must care for people's quality of life in the economy, understood not in terms of whatever the market calls for, but rather relationally, in terms of enabling students to obtain fulfilling, well-paying jobs and to engage in work that improves others' lives. Turning to the identity part of communion, it requires publicly funded higher education to assist people in sharing a way of life, which includes the protection, interpretation, and transmission of a culture. Those lacking a common culture tend neither to think of themselves as a "we" nor to coordinate their action in pursuit of shared ends. Interpreting the world in similar or at least familiar ways, something a university is in a key position to enable, would foster a strong sense of togetherness and common values. In practice, this might mean that a university should favour the culture of a large majority, but the ideal would be to foster ways of interpreting life with which nearly everyone in the state's territory could identify.

There is something wrong when a music department in an African university is focused largely on Western classical music, or when a literature department in a Japanese one addresses mainly works in English. Instead, there is intuitively some moral reason for a university to engage with the culture in which it is set—where that culture could be quite heterogeneous or admit of competing interpretations—which a demand to prize communion *qua* shared way of life well explains. As is explained below, to focus on local ways of life need involve neither an undue restriction on students' liberty to explore other cultures nor some kind of chauvinism.

One might wonder what the difference is between fostering socio-economic well-being and supporting culture, for is not the latter one way of doing the former? As construed here, and as the literature is best interpreted,

well-being (or “development”) has less to do with the “intangible” heritage of language, tradition, and aesthetic expression, and more to do with “concrete” goods such as nutrition, education, healthcare, shelter, communications, transportation, and electricity. These are distinct considerations, underwritten by largely differential facets of the value of communion.

Facilitate Cooperation

This end is another dimension of identifying with others. Sustaining a culture is only one way of treating people’s capacity to share a way of life with respect; there are additional ways to foster the coordination of behaviour and the adoption of common or at least compossible ends. There are certain policies that, when routinely enforced by the state or otherwise adhered to, would enable people to avoid interfering with one another and would foster joint projects. Key examples are certain Constitutional laws, good governance policies, principles for resolving conflict, and rules to regulate debate, all of which a university could readily impart to its students.

Note that universities could teach students about cooperative participation not merely theoretically but also practically. For example, universities might do more than they normally do to include students in decision-making bodies and disciplinary hearings. From this standpoint, a university Senate ought not to consist merely of full professors and senior managers and should include not just one or two student representatives. Instead, it ought to include many students, at the very least to watch as observers, to learn how to share opinions, to disagree constructively, and to forge consensus. In addition, when students are charged with violating university rules, such as by cheating on a test, it would be useful to have other students participate as ones who collect the evidence, ascertain guilt or innocence, and make recommendations about how to respond to the infractions, ideally by sentencing guilty parties to perform kinds of labour that would persuade other students not to cheat.

Note that cooperation is usually a precondition for the moral worth of supporting culture; there would not be a genuine *sharing* of a way of life if a culture were foisted on people without their having freely chosen it for themselves. The Afro-communal ethic gives some principled weight to a common lifestyle, but not one forced onto others à la colonialism or patriarchy.

Rectify Injustice

The rectification of injustice, say, from colonialism, is unlikely to be the sole justifying aim of public higher education, for that would oddly entail that a university should be closed down once compensation for cultural, psychological, and economic losses had been made. However, if a state's assault on a people's way of life, self-esteem, and ability to compete had been extreme, then, as an essential part of respecting people in virtue of their capacity to commune, one intrinsic aim of a university would be to effect redress and more generally do what is likely to repair the broken relationship.

Part of effecting redress could be seeking to correct for competitive disadvantage in the form of affirmative action for those whose socio-economic situations had been wrongfully worsened in a way that made it difficult for them to obtain the education needed to compete for positions. Another facet of effecting redress is likely to involve seeking to make up for epistemic injustice, that is, finding ways to do right by people insofar as they had been treated discordantly in respect of their ways of interpreting the world. In the first instance, and most easily, this would mean changing the curriculum to include neglected or denigrated works. However, a complete form of epistemic redress might call for much more. In the ideal case, a university would reflect on respects in which its current practices (perhaps unintentionally) occlude engagement with suppressed cultures. For example, it is far from clear that the way for a university to honour an oral culture that has been historically disadvantaged is merely to include written texts by those who had come from that culture but were educated elsewhere. Indeed, the best route would probably be for those from this culture, if not to give guest lectures, then at least to give their opinion to university instructors about how they could best honour it, and not for instructors to decide on their own what this might involve.

In sum, if one finds attractive the idea that right acts are those that respect (people's capacity for) relationships of identity and solidarity, then one should think that a university ultimately ought to aim to foster well-being, promote virtue, support culture, facilitate cooperation, and rectify injustice. Having specified these five distinct final ends for a university that appear justified by the Afro-communal ethic, a natural question is whether there is some ranking to be made of them to guide decision-making in cases where they conflict. Above it was suggested that the good of culture normally cannot come at the cost to cooperation, that the value of a com-

mon way of life depends on it having been chosen, but there are likely other situations when a policy would advance the realization of one final end but retard that of another. For example, sometimes a dimension of culture, perhaps concerning medical practice, would thrive in a certain respect only at the cost to well-being. Although contextual, political judgement is often what is required in these contexts, some more general moral considerations about how to balance competing values might be available.²²

CONTRASTS WITH MORE WESTERN FINAL ENDS

This section compares the communal final ends from the previous section with those of autonomy, truth, and citizenship, salient in the contemporary Anglo-American and more generally Western tradition of thought about the final ends of public higher education. Part of the purpose is simply to point out similarities and differences between the African approach and the more Euro-American-Australasian ones, but another part is to argue that the former approach merits consideration as a rival to the latter.²³

Autonomy

Broadly speaking, the contemporary Western moral and political philosophical tradition is liberal, at least to a degree that no other long-standing tradition around the world is. That means that recent works in the philosophy of higher education by those from the West have tended to prize human, that is, individual, rights and more generally civil liberties to live as a person sees fit.

More specifically, a recurrent theme has been that at least one major (if not the) point of higher education should be to protect, develop, or respect the individual's capacity for self-governance. Often the language used is that of "autonomy," with John White, for instance, having contended that a university ought to enable people to satisfy desires upon which they have reflected.²⁴ Others speak of "critical thinking" or "rational enquiry,"²⁵ the thought being that a university ought to foster students' abilities to think for themselves and guide their lives in the light of the deliverances of their intellectual faculties.

Much of what friends of autonomy value is plausibly captured by the concept of cooperation that is inherent to communion as conceived above. Cooperating by definition means not coercing, deceiving, exploiting, or

otherwise manipulating another person. In addition to including these “negative” dimensions of autonomy, it also includes its more “positive” ones, such as being able to express oneself to others, to be assertive, to negotiate, and the like.

However, there are differences between the two concepts of being autonomous and relating communally, and where there are, the Afro-communal view is competitive. For example, a characteristically African perspective would (somewhat rhetorically) ask the friend of autonomy for what this capacity should be employed. A procedural focus on the individual reflecting, selecting, and pursuing ends on the face of it lacks the theoretical resources to account for the idea that some ends are substantively more worthwhile than others (beyond the end of respecting others’ ends). Should one autonomously or upon rational reflection choose to spread ignorance as opposed to knowledge of facts fundamental to human nature, or choose to count how many blades of grass are on a quad rather than improve others’ health, or choose to engage in self-destructive behaviour such as cutting oneself instead of developing aesthetic talent to create art objects that please others? There is nothing within the mere concept of self-governance that can provide grounds to favour the latter ends relative to the former ones. It is reasonable, however, to suppose that a university ought to orient students towards the latter ones.

Those partial towards liberalism or individualism might ask whether one should truly be deemed morally obligated to use one’s autonomy for the sake of others. It is indeed typical of an African approach to contend that with freedom comes responsibility²⁶ and, specifically, responsibility to others. By the communal ethic, one roughly has a duty to come closer to others (who are innocent), not to remain distant. We are not merely to “pursue our own good in our own way” (as per John Stuart Mill) but, roughly, to pursue others’ good in our own way.

That said, it does not obviously follow that one may rightly be forced to participate with and aid others. One’s having a duty to commune is one thing, and others having a right to make one do so is another. Furthermore, it is intuitively justified for a public higher education institution to insist that its expensive resources be spent on students not merely so that they can remain isolated from and indifferent towards others’ way of life and quality of life but rather so that they can learn how to contribute to society. The communal principle captures this intuition about how students should exercise their decision-making better than an appeal to autonomy,

which is open about which choices they are to make (apart from not degrading others' choices).

Another dimension of the contrast between autonomy and communion is whether moral education is appropriate for young adults, particularly those at a university. While in the West debate rages about whether to educate with the aim of imparting virtues (at least those that do not appear essential for sustaining a liberal polity),²⁷ there is no real debate about that among those in the African tradition, with the present interpretation following suit. Treating people with respect in virtue of their capacity to commune means helping them to develop and realize this special, moral capacity. Alternately, insofar as communion includes solidarity, one is to make others not merely better off but also better people, by helping them to become more virtuous.

Truth

A second final end prominently advanced by Western philosophers of higher education is truth or knowledge for its own sake, which is shorthand for a variety of epistemic goods that might include mere justified belief, that is, belief that could be false and so not strictly speaking knowledge. Somewhat recent lengthy defences of this conception of a university's point are an essay by Edward Shils, in which he argues that the basic aim of a researcher should be to discover truths about fundamental matters,²⁸ and a book by Gordon Graham, in which he contends that intellectual reflection, particularly the understanding of certain topics, is a good that a university ought to pursue for its own sake.²⁹

Also worth mentioning are classic works such as Edmund Husserl's Vienna Lecture contending that the European intellectual tradition is uniquely and desirably characterized by a propensity to adopt what he calls "a purely 'theoretical' attitude" that is "thoroughly unpractical"³⁰ and of course John Henry Newman's claim in *The Idea of a University* that higher education ought to teach (although, interestingly, not strive to discover) certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake.³¹

Those who maintain that truth is a proper final end of public higher education need not deny that epistemic goods are often likely to have beneficial consequences for society. They instead tend to claim that epistemic goods would merit pursuit even in the absence of practical benefits, or at least that, even if practical benefits were a necessary condition for

justifiably spending resources on the pursuit of epistemic goods, the latter should be much of a university's *aim*, what it should be striving to achieve.

The communal ethic can capture much of what drives the truth seekers. On the one hand, the solidarity dimension of communion will naturally prescribe scientific and other empirical enquiry of the sort likely to improve people's quality of life, while, on the other, the identity dimension makes good sense of engagements with local culture, for example, philosophy, literature, and the arts.

It might seem as though the Afro-communal theory does better than a strict concern for truth at capturing the rightful concern of public higher education with culture. Quite often truth or knowledge is understood in terms of propositional claims, *that* something about the world is the case, but it does not appear that being familiar with, say, Shakespeare's works or having learned to play the piano is reducible to that. It is, however, open to the adherent to knowledge for its own sake to broaden her conception of what counts as knowledge. In addition to knowing that certain claims are true, she could plausibly contend, as Jonathan Adler apparently has,³² that the point of a university includes the impartation of know-how such as piano playing and knowledge by acquaintance such as learning the content of a poem.

So, an interest in knowledge for its own sake appears, upon reflection, to be able to account for the idea that a university ought to foster culture. In contrast, it appears difficult for the adherent to communion to account for the idea that a university ought to pursue certain kinds of "blue-sky" or "pure" knowledge that is not expected to facilitate either identity or solidarity. Consider, for example, cosmological questions such as whether there is a black hole at the centre of every galaxy or what the ultimate fate of the universe will be and historical questions such as what killed the dinosaurs or how fishes evolved into terrestrial creatures. Answering these questions is unlikely either to improve people's quality of life, whether understood in terms of meeting their needs or making them more virtuous, or to enhance the local culture or otherwise facilitate the sharing of a way of life. Of course, answering these questions could indirectly and unforeseeably foster communion, but, then, a university ought to devote its resources to answering other kinds of questions that are more likely to do so.

There are many in the African philosophical and more broadly intellectual tradition who would "bite the bullet" and deny that public higher education should in fact advance knowledge that is unexpected to pro-

mote the sharing of a way of life or the caring for people's quality of life (or some other facet of what is good for people).³³ There is a noticeably pragmatic strain to characteristic sub-Saharan approaches to knowledge, according to which it ought ultimately to meet people's needs, including ones as social-moral beings. Traditional African education has valued *wisdom*, roughly understood as what fosters communion between people. In contrast, Western education has been much more centred on discovering and conveying abstract truths and has done so centrally by fostering competition between enquirers.³⁴ Although the latter sort of approach has often ended up producing technologies that have improved people's quality of life, Western higher education has not sought it out mainly in the expectation of that outcome. It has instead tended to prize knowledge for its own sake, frequently produced in ways that have put distance between those seeking to learn new things.

It is hard to deny that a university should be pleased were its researchers to use its resources to succeed in discovering the fate of the universe, even if that had no concrete social benefit. This author's inclination is therefore to revise the understanding of what it means to improve someone's quality of life so as to account for the aptness of some "pure" cosmological, historical, and similar enquiries.

Suppose that one's life is worse, the less meaningful it is, and suppose, too, that one's life is less meaningful, the more one is misguided about one's environment.³⁵ There is something to be pitied about members of Heaven's Gate, who killed themselves in the belief that only suicide would take them to a spacecraft trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet that would, in turn, carry them to paradise. The reaction of pity is well explained (in part) by the idea that ignorance of the fundamental nature of reality undercuts meaning in life and hence the sort of life one has reason to lead. If part of caring about people's good is indeed a matter of enabling them to live meaningfully, and if that depends on understanding certain objective truths about the world, then the communal account can provide an account of why a university should advance knowledge of them.

In fact, the appeal to the human good of meaning might do a plausible job of explaining precisely which "pure" knowledge a university ought to pursue. After all, there are many objective truths that would be utterly impractical to seek out, for example, knowledge of completely coincidental correlations. A promising criterion to identify which knowledge should be pursued for its own sake is whether it would make people's lives more meaningful to have.

In sum, it appears that a concern for communion can capture much of what drives the interest in truth, and, furthermore, note that it can do so without being overly narrow. It has been tempting for those who believe that the job of a university is to pursue knowledge for its own sake to deny that it should perform other functions, such as promoting equal opportunity, at least when they would come at some cost to knowledge.³⁶ However, it is surely the case that a state must do what it can to enable people to become qualified for jobs, including those who might not be superlatively qualified due to historical injustice for which it is responsible, and public higher education is the natural way for it to do so. Communion makes sense of that intuition, as well as the further ideas that public higher education also ought to do things such as facilitate cooperation between people and promote their virtue as social beings.

There are a variety of final ends to be pursued and to be balanced as the circumstances require, not merely the goal of truth, and it is implausible even to think that truth should be the overriding goal that must come first before all other considerations, which may come second but only at no cost to it (“lexical priority”). One theoretical advantage of the communal view is that it captures the multiplicity of appropriate final ends for a university under a single (albeit complex) concept.

Citizenship

A third common account of what the central (even if not sole) final end of public higher education ought to be is citizenship, specifically, active membership in a democratic polity. This approach has been notably championed by Martha Nussbaum,³⁷ on which this section focuses as a powerful representative.³⁸

For Nussbaum, the central aim of a university in societies that have constitutions and widely accept the idea of human dignity should be to cultivate democratic and global citizenship. Such an end includes three major elements, for her.

First, a good citizen is critical, meaning that she is one who does not defer to authority, peer pressure, or the like. She instead is inclined to evaluate policies in the light of their rationality, to be confident enough to voice a dissenting opinion, and to use her creativity to advance justice.

Second, a good citizen is cosmopolitan, that is, one who is not merely self-regarding in her interests and who is not merely aware of her own way of life. She rather seeks to advance the public good and is knowledgeable

of a wide array of cultures, including different religions, languages, and socio-economic policies.

Third, a good citizen is respectful of, and concerned for, other people, by which is meant that she is one who is not emotionally crippled in the sense of being unable to see others as equals or to sympathize with them. In contrast, she can and does view others as having a dignity that requires her to exhibit compassion for their inner lives.

Like the appeal to communion, this conception of citizenship is complex and so on the face of it is able to make sense of a plurality of final ends for a university, including, as is well known, a key role for the humanities and liberal arts. Nussbaum aptly denies that citizenship is the sole end of education, acknowledging that education also ought to prepare people for employment.³⁹ She also accepts that education can be important for fostering meaning in people's lives, but she appears to deny that public higher education should serve that function in a democratic society that includes reasonable disagreement among citizens about conceptions of the good life.⁴⁰

The Afro-communal view entails that a state ought to protect people's human rights and ought to be (consensually) democratic, for these are ways of treating people's capacity to relate cooperatively and helpfully with respect.⁴¹ So, it entails that Nussbaum is correct to contend that one "way of assessing any educational scheme is to ask how well it prepares young people for life in a form of social and political organization,"⁴² specifically one that is a Constitutional democracy and applies to people with different backgrounds.

However, the appeal to communion entails that citizenship, as Nussbaum and other liberal democratic philosophers in the West conceive of it, should be tempered in certain ways. There is a plausible middle path in between, on the one hand, being utterly unfamiliar with, or contemptuous of, other cultures (parochialism) and, on the other, educating students about a wide variety of cultures and leaving it up to them which interpretations, values, and aesthetics they will adopt (cosmopolitanism). A third way, prescribed by the African ethic, is to give some priority to understanding and enriching local culture (insofar as it has been freely chosen), while not remaining ignorant of other cultures. The African ethic of honouring communion entails giving additional moral weight to existing communal relationships, and so it would indeed be incumbent on a university not only to inform students of their duty not to radically upset norms central to the commu-

nity's freely chosen self-conception but also to focus on transmitting, interpreting, and developing these norms.

It does not follow that education about culture should simply be a matter of ensuring students mimic a given society's past. Being concerned for the good of students entails not utterly restricting their knowledge to that of a circumscribed culture, particularly in a globalized world in which even rural communities have to engage with a wide array of foreign people, policies, and institutions. It is implausible to think every culture at a particular moment is optimal, or even adequate, for the welfare of all the people who participate in it. So, the injunction to exhibit solidarity with others, an independent facet of communion beyond identifying with them, gives a university reason to inform students about the rest of the world and not to quash student doubt about the propriety of an existing way of life.⁴³

The other major way that the friend of communion would question citizenship as the central final end of higher education is by noting that it is implausibly narrow, even when conjoined with the independent end of fostering employment. First off, many believe that a university is a place to find alternative, minority viewpoints, even ones that might lead one to question Constitutional democracy. It would not be inapt for a university to enable students to consider the desirability of living under, say, a benevolent dictatorship of the sort that Confucian political philosophers routinely support, where political rulers are chosen on merit, not by majority rule.

Secondly, note that Nussbaum and others in favour of higher education for citizenship intend this approach to apply only to societies that are already Constitutional democracies. Surely, though, there would be a major role for public higher education in other kinds of societies, and then not merely to train a labour force. Citizenship educationists might reply that the major aim of a university in such societies would be to enable people to transition to Constitutional democracy, but that is implausible. Even if there were no hope of autocracy falling away, there would intuitively be important roles for a university to play beyond qualifying people for jobs. Specifically, according to the communal ethic, there would remain these important ends: facilitating cooperative interaction in day-to-day life, sustaining culture, promoting virtue, and perhaps enabling understanding insofar as that contributes to the human good of a meaningful life.

Higher education is not something for the state to allocate primarily as a means to enable people to act as citizens in a state with a particular distribution of political power. The political is one dimension of the interpersonal, but it is reasonable to think that a comprehensive or substantially

large conception of a university's final end would focus on more than just the former and would capture much of the latter. Whereas good citizenship is a matter of the governmental roles of voter and advocate for justice, communion can also be manifested in the non-political contexts of being a romantic partner, friend, parent, neighbour, worker, colleague, mentor, therapist, manager, consumer, and member of a board. Voting takes place only once every several years; one's vote has virtually zero effect, while writing letters to the editor or lobbying a political party is only marginally more effectual; and one's odds of becoming someone with any real political power or influence are extremely low. In contrast, since communion can be displayed in a variety of everyday roles, and since a university is in a good position to foster communion, it is often in a position to make interventions that will greatly improve people's lives. And it is reasonable to think that the prospect of making a substantial difference to others' lives is something that would—perhaps alone—justify the costs of setting up and maintaining a university.

CONCLUSION: THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICA TO GLOBAL THOUGHT ABOUT EDUCATION

This chapter has drawn on ideas salient in the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition to spell out a theory of the point of public higher education. According to it, the basic aim of the state should be to respect individuals insofar as they are capable of communing and being communed with, where communion consists of relationships of identity and solidarity. Honouring people for their ability to commune, applied to a university, means that it should strive to foster well-being, promote virtue, support culture, facilitate cooperation, and rectify injustice. These final ends were contrasted with those more prominent in contemporary Euro-American-Australasian reflection on higher education, in particular, those of promoting autonomy, truth, and citizenship. Although the chapter did not argue that the Afro-communal ends are more defensible than the more Western ones, it did provide reason to take the former seriously as correctives and rivals to the latter.

Notice how the chapter sought to defend the African approach: it did not appeal to intuitions and claims that only those who had already accepted that approach would hold. Instead, the chapter aimed to defend the communal theory of what a university should be striving to achieve by making arguments that could be expected to have some *prima facie* appeal even to those who had not considered such a relational approach before.

The implicit view here is that different cultures tend to have insights into different facets of morality and that, specifically, the African philosophical tradition has highlighted the goods of relationship in ways that the Western one has not. Westerners, including Western *theorists*, routinely appreciate the values of identity and solidarity, but Western *theories* of higher education by and large neglect these values, often treating them merely as a means towards the practical end of self-governance (at either the individual or political level) and the intellectual end of understanding nature. The reflection in this chapter suggests that in order to capture in a principled manner the variety of ends that a university plausibly ought to aim for, a characteristically African conception of communal relationship has much to offer, even to philosophers working in other traditions.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. Which has been undertaken elsewhere, for example, in Thaddeus Metz, “Toward an African Moral Theory” (rev. edn), in *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*, ed. Isaac Ukpokolo (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 97–119. Note that in claiming that certain relational values have been salient among indigenous sub-Saharaners does not suggest that they are utterly unique to them. There are probably some similarities with the values of other native peoples, on which see George Silberbauer, “Ethics in Small-scale Societies,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 14–28.
2. For example, Noah Dzobo, “Values in a Changing Society: Man, Ancestors, and God,” in *Person and Community; Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Vol. I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 223–240; and Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).
3. For example, Bénézet Bujo, “Differentiations in African Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. William Schweiker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 423–437; and Munyaradzi Felix Murove, “The Shona Ethic of *Ukama* with Reference to the Immortality of Values,” *The Mankind Quarterly* 48 (2007): 235–241.
4. Most prominently Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and “African Ethics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/african-ethics/> (2010).
5. Some of the paragraphs in this section have been cribbed from Thaddeus Metz, “An African Theory of Social Justice: Relationship as the Ground of

- Rights, Resources and Recognition,” *Distributive Justice Debates in Political and Social Thought*, ed. Camilla Boisen and Matt Murray (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 171–190, “Replacing Development: An Afro-communal Approach to Global Justice,” *Philosophical Papers* 46 (2017): 111–137, and “The Ethics and Politics of the Brain Drain: A Communal Alternative to Liberal Perspectives,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 36 (2017): 101–114.
6. Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 65.
 7. Yvonne Mokgoro, “Ubuntu and the Law in South Africa,” *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 1 (1998): 15–26 at 17.
 8. Pantaleon Iroegbu, “Beginning, Purpose and End of Life,” in *Kpim of Morality Ethics*, ed. Pantaleon Iroegbu and Anthony Echekwube (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005), 440–445 at 442.
 9. Gessler Muxe Nkondo, “Ubuntu as a Public Policy in South Africa,” *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 2 (2007): 88–100 at 91.
 10. Dismas Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 240.
 11. On which see Anthony Appiah, “Ethical Systems, African,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998).
 12. A criticism made by Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke, “Philosophy of Education: Becoming Less Western, More African?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 50 (2016): 177–190 at 186.
 13. Although respecting others insofar as they are capable of communion means not aiming to foster it by being discordant with those who have themselves respected communion, it can mean directing discordance towards those who have misused their capacity to commune, if it is necessary to get them to stop or to compensate their innocent victims.
 14. Peter Kasenene, *Religious Ethics in Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers), 21.
 15. There have of course been some relational strains in the Western tradition, including the ethic of care, certain appeals to loyalty, and some kinds of communitarianism. Even here, however, there are important differences between these views and the Afro-communal moral theory. For one, communion includes not merely caring for others’ quality of life but also sharing a way of life, a distinct way of relating not often thematized by care ethicists. For another, the concept of human dignity is central to the African tradition and grounds a kind of impartiality that is rare to encounter in Western forms of relationalism, particularly those appealing to bonds of loyalty and social identity. By the communal ethic, everyone has a dignity in virtue of the capacity to be party to communal relationships, even if those with whom we have in fact communed are entitled to greater aid.

16. If the reader is uncomfortable with the idea of an institution being an agent distinct from the individual human persons who compose it at a given time, then she may read the duty as binding on all the individual members.
17. This section draws on some ideas first published in Thaddeus Metz, "The Final Ends of Higher Education in Light of an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43 (2009): 179–201, and "An African Egalitarianism: Bringing Community to Bear on Equality," in *The Equal Society*, ed. George Hull (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 185–208.
18. Many of these programmes are in fact undertaken by public universities in South Africa, even if not to an adequate degree due to limited resources.
19. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
20. For more on this point, see Thaddeus Metz, "Communitarian Ethics and Work-Based Education: Some African Perspectives," in *Learning, Work and Practice*, ed. Paul Gibbs (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 191–206 at 198–200.
21. On which see Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, trans. C. N. Nganda (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1997), 164.
22. For some suggestions, see Metz, "The Final Ends of Higher Education in Light of an African Moral Theory," 185–193.
23. It is common for theorists to maintain that behind the different global moralities are different ontologies. One frequently encounters the suggestion that Western societies hold an atomist metaphysics that grounds an individualist approach to ethics, whereas African and Asian societies adhere to a holist metaphysics that grounds a relational approach to ethics. Although there have been these historical associations, for reason to doubt that a certain ontology necessitates a particular sort of morality, see Thaddeus Metz, "Questioning African Attempts to Ground Ethics on Metaphysics," in *Ontologized Ethics*, ed. Elvis Imafidon and John Bewaji (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 189–204.
24. John White, *The Aims of Education Restated* (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Richard Norman, "‘I Did It My Way’: Some Thoughts on Autonomy," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 28 (1994): 25–34, and several contributions to Roger Marples (ed.) *The Aims of Education* (London: Routledge, 1999).
25. For just a few examples, see Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973); Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and John Mearsheimer, "The Aims of Education," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 137–155.

26. See, for example, Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics," 432–433; Robert Birt, "Of the Quest for Freedom as Community," in *The Quest for Community and Identity: Critical Essays in Africana Social Philosophy*, ed. Robert Birt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 87–104; and Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 51–87, 265–287.
27. See, for example, Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (eds) *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For clear critics of moral education beyond some contributors to that volume, see Mearsheimer, "The Aims of Education"; Jonathan Adler, "Knowledge, Truth, and Learning," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 285–304; and Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
28. Edward Shils, "The Academic Ethic," repr. in *The Calling of Education: The Academic Ethic and Other Essays on Higher Education*, ed. Edward Shils and Steven Grosby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 3–128.
29. Gordon Graham, *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea, 2nd edn* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008).
30. Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man," trans. Quentin Lauer, http://www.users.cloud9.net/~bradmcc/husserl_phil-cris.html (1935).
31. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (repr. New York: Longmans, Green, 1907).
32. "Knowledge, Truth, and Learning," 287.
33. Cited and critically discussed in Thaddeus Metz, "Higher Education, Knowledge for Its Own Sake, and an African Moral Theory," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28 (2009): 517–536.
34. For more on this contrast, see Thaddeus Metz, "Values in China as Compared to Africa," in *The Rise and Decline and Rise of China*, ed. Hester du Plessis (Johannesburg: Real African Publishers, 2015), 75–116 at 96–99, and "How the West Was One: The Western as Individualist, the African as Communitarian," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47 (2015): 1175–1184.
35. See my *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 204–205, 209–210, 213–215, 229–230.
36. For instance, Edward Shils, "Render unto Caesar ...": Government, Society, and the University in Their Reciprocal Rights and Duties," in *The Calling of Education: The Academic Ethic and Other Essays on Higher Education*, ed. Edward Shils and Steven Grosby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 177–233.

37. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
38. A similar view is advanced by Elizabeth Anderson, for whom the main point of higher education is to enable people to advance social justice conceived in terms of improving the economic lot of the worst off and taking advantage of political and civil liberties. See her “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287–337 and “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 595–622.
39. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 9.
40. *Ibid.*, 9.
41. Argued in, for instance, Thaddeus Metz, “Developing African Political Philosophy: Moral-Theoretic Strategies,” *Philosophia Africana* 14 (2012): 61–83.
42. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 9–10.
43. For this point and some additional ones about the aptness of focusing on local culture, see Thaddeus Metz and Joseph Gaie, “The African Ethic of *Ubuntu/Botho*: Implications for Research on Morality,” *Journal of Moral Education* 39 (2010): 273–290 at 279–280.
44. For written comments that have led to some substantial improvements in this essay, the author is grateful to Eli Kramer and Aaron Stoller.