
Ethics in Africa and in Aristotle: some points of contrast

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ABSTRACT

In this article I compare and, especially, contrast Aristotle's conception of virtue with one typical of sub-Saharan philosophers. I point out that the latter is strictly other-regarding, and specifically communitarian, and contend that the former, while including such elements, also includes some self-regarding or individualist virtues, such as temperance and knowledge. I also argue that Aristotle's conception of human excellence is more attractive than the sub-Saharan view as a complete account of how to live, but that the African conception is a strong contender for a limited group of the most important virtues related to morality qua rightness.

1. THE TRADITIONALLY SUB-SAHARAN AND THE CLASSICALLY GREEK

It is only in the past 50 years or so that traditional sub-Saharan approaches to ethics have been interpreted in writing by those who are informed and sympathetic.¹ However, there is now enough literature available to make any ignorance of African values on the part of scholars self-imposed. Research on the topic has developed to the point where two projects are worth undertaking, namely, comparing a philosophical interpretation of indigenous African perspectives on ethics with philosophies from other traditions, and evaluating the extent to

¹ Consider that the first real anthology of sub-Saharan ethics appeared only in the last three years (Murove 2009).

which the former has global contributions to make.² I engage in both projects here, seeking to ascertain precisely how views about the good life widely held by traditional black peoples below the Sahara, upon philosophical expression, differ most starkly from Aristotle's system, and then offering some suggestions about which to favour.

On the face of it, there are many commonalities between the two ethics.³ As I make clear below, both are standardly understood to be based on self-realisation or *eudaemonia*, to cash out *eudaemonia* in terms of the exhibition of virtues, and to maintain that virtues cannot be well understood apart from people's nature as social beings. In fact, a plain reading of Aristotle on topics such as justice, friendship and the *polis* suggests that he would readily agree with the following summary of sub-Saharan ethics from the influential central African theologian Bénédet Bujó: "(I)t is exactly the community which enables the self-realisation of the individual. According to the African representation of values, it is not possible to achieve the ethical ideal individually or as a strictly personal achievement" (1997: 28).

My aim, however, is to highlight the more glaring respects in which Aristotle's views differ from some characteristic African ones. I clarify the respects in which the latter are exclusively "communitarian" and how such a perspective is inconsistent with some core "individualist" elements of Aristotle's ethics. I also argue that Afro-communitarianism is, relative to Aristotle's view, implausible as an account of ethics, in the sense of a complete reckoning of what makes for a good human life, although it remains extraordinarily promising as an account of morality, in a more limited, modern sense *qua* rightness.

I begin by providing a brief account of a major swathe of sub-Saharan thought about ethics that is communitarian (sec. 2). I show that a maxim recurrently taken to encapsulate sub-Saharan ethics, namely, "A person is a person through other persons", is well construed as a prescription to realise oneself through communal relationships alone. Then, I focus on aspects of Aristotle's ethics, expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* ('*NE*') and the *Eudemian Ethics* ('*EE*'), that appear not to be communitarian and instead to focus on self-realisation apart from relationships with other people. Specifically, I discuss the apparently individualist goods of

² For other examples of this work, see Metz and Gaie (2010); Bell and Metz (2011).

³ As Paris (1995: 182-183) notes.

temperance, continence, toughness and knowledge (sec. 3). In the following section, I consider objections to my reading, to the effect that there is no qualitative difference between African and Aristotle's ethics (sec. 4). Some might contend that the African tradition recognises what I am calling "individualist" forms of excellence, while others could suggest that a correct reading of Aristotle indicates that for him all virtues are communitarian at bottom, ie necessarily exhibited in a certain social context. After responding to both sorts of criticism, I conclude by arguing that my reading of Aristotle provides a more attractive account of a good human life than does the Afro-communitarian view, which is too narrow. However, I also point to what I take to be the potential kernel of truth in Afro-communitarianism, namely, that it promises to serve as an attractive, modern account of right action and of attitudes positively oriented toward it, which could be plausibly taken to be the virtues that are most important and should be prioritised (sec. 5).

2. AFRO-COMMUNITARIANISM

It is well known that indigenous sub-Saharan thought about ethics is commonly captured with the maxims "A person is a person through other persons" and "I am because we are". One will encounter such phrases in the works of a wide array of African theorists, ranging from the Kenyan John Mbiti (1969: 108-109) to the Nigerian Ifeanyi Menkiti (1979: 171) to the Ghanaian NK. Dzobo (1992: 229) to the South African Desmond Tutu (1999: 35). Although these phrases are sometimes used to express a metaphysical claim, to the effect that one could not have become who one is without living in a society, they also are routinely meant to express an evaluative claim. In particular, they are implicit prescriptions to become a *real* person, to bring out one's *true* self, or to live a *genuinely* human way of life. As Mogobe Ramose in a revealing book sums up the view, "One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being" (1999: 34); an agent is required to exhibit humanness or "*ubuntu*", as it is famously known in the Nguni languages of Southern Africa.

Such an approach to ethics, in the broad sense of enquiry into how one ought to live, is a *eudaemonist* or self-realisation perspective. The ultimate answer to the question of why one

should do one thing or be one way rather than another is the fact that it would make *oneself a better person*. Such an approach differs from more impartial theories, say, a form of perfectionism according to which one's basic reason for action is solely to make *better people in general* (Hurka 1993), or the familiar utilitarian theory that one's basic reason for action is solely to make *people in general better off*.

Eudaemonists are quick to point out that from the fact that self-realisation is invariably one's basic reason for action, it does not follow that it ought to be one's motive; in fact, one might best realise oneself by being motivated to help others for their sake, and not in anticipation of becoming more of a *mensch*. In addition, *eudaemonists* note how their understanding of proper self-regard differs in an important way from egoism, ie, a prudential or instrumental view about practical reason. The latter views are that, often enough, helpful and participatory relationships with other people are expected to have the long-term *effect* of improving's one's own life or satisfying one's own desires. Whereas the Hobbesian argues that positive relationships with others *cause* one to do well or to be satisfied in the long run, the *eudaemonist* in contrast maintains that such relationships are *constitutive* of one's own good. As Augustine Shutte, one of the first academic philosophers in the English-speaking world to seriously engage with African ethics, says: "Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded" (2001: 30).

These ideas will be familiar to the scholar of ancient Greek ethics, and particularly of Aristotle. What might be unfamiliar, however, is that characteristic sub-Saharan ethical thought, at least as philosophically interpreted, maintains that self-realisation is *exhausted* "through other persons", that is, through community alone. It is typical for African theorists to maintain, or at least to suggest, that the *only* comprehensive respect in which one can live a genuinely human way of life is by communing, or sometimes "being in harmony", with other people.

I deem the following claims to be representative of the strong view salient among African thinkers that relating communally *is one and the same thing* as self-realisation or a

genuinely human way of life. Consider, first, Desmond Tutu's comments on the way sub-Saharanans tend to understand ethics:

We say, 'a person is a person through other people'. It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather: 'I am human because I belong.' I participate, I share....Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the summum bonum - the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague (1999: 35).

Similarly, South African public intellectual Muxe Nkondo remarks that if you asked adherents to an *ubuntu* philosophy,

What do you live for? What motive force or basic attitude gives your life meaning? What gives direction and coherence to 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 (2007: 91).

Again, the Nigerian theologian Pantaleon Iroegbu sums up African ethics with the claim that "the purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness" (2005: 442). Finally, commenting from a moral-anthropological standpoint on the practices of the G/wi people of Botswana and related small-scale societies, George Silberbauer says: "(T)here was another value being pursued, namely the establishing and maintaining of harmonious relationships. Again and again in discussion and in general conversation this stood out as a desired and enjoyed end in itself, often as the ultimate rationale for action" (1991: 20).

These and other characterisations by sub-Saharan ethicists of one's proper final aim often focus on two logically distinct elements of community (harmony), namely, participating, being bound up with and belonging, on the one hand, and sharing, promoting the good and serving, on the other. Elsewhere I have analysed these conceptually different facets of community under the headings of "identity", or "sharing a way of life", for the former, and "solidarity", or "improving others' quality of life", for the latter, and I have also argued that the

combination of the two relationships not only is a fair specification of what many African theorists have in mind, but also a rational reconstruction of the ground of a plausible moral theory (Metz 2007, 2012; Metz & Gaie 2010). I point out that the combination of sharing a way of life and improving others' quality of life is what most people mean by "friendship" or a broad sense of "love". In short, then, the maxim that "a person is a person through other persons" is well understood, at least in philosophical form, to be the claim that one should develop into a real person, or live a genuinely human way of life, something that one does just insofar as one prizes friendly relationships, ones in which one shares a way of life with others and cares for their quality of life.

This purely relational, and specifically communitarian, interpretation of self-realisation makes good sense of the virtues that are salient in the African tradition. For instance, Kwame Gyekye, the influential Ghanaian moral and political theorist, remarks that for his Akan people, "ideal and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others" (1992: 109)⁴; in a book devoted to virtue in the African tradition, Peter Paris remarks: "No virtue is more highly praised among Africans and African Americans than that of beneficence because it exemplifies the goal of community" (1995: 136), and he also grounds several other prized virtues, such as forbearance, practical wisdom, improvisation, forgiveness and justice, on the basic value of community (1995: 141-156); Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, two South African theologians, associate the following traits with *ubuntu*: "Because it is manifested in living in community, it is best realised in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice" (2005: 74); and, finally, Dismas Masolo, the magisterial historian of African philosophy, in a recent book on sub-Saharan conceptions of self and personhood says: "*Charity* and other virtues of altruism such as *politeness* and *benevolence* to others are perhaps the most celebrated aspects of African communitarian practices and ideals" (2010: 251).

⁴ Note, however, that Gyekye (1992: 109, 2010) believes that these virtues are unified not by the basic value of community, but instead that of welfare.

What all these conceptions of virtue have in common is an essential reference to people distinct from the agent. Summing up one major African conception of virtue,⁵ then, a person exhibits human excellence just insofar as she has character traits that express a prizing of communal or friendly relationships, ones of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life. In the following, I draw out respects in which Aristotle's conception of human excellence differs; unlike this African view, Aristotle's is not purely relational or other-regarding.

3. INDIVIDUALISM IN ARISTOTLE

Perhaps the most famous quotation from Aristotle is his assertion that "man is a being meant for political association" (*Politics* 1253a9; see also *NE* 1169b18). There is no doubt that Aristotle believes that human nature, and a particularly valuable facet of it, includes a disposition to relate positively to other human beings. In particular, the African conception of community above is close to Aristotle's conception of friendship, and it would be of interest, in other work, to pinpoint what, if any, differences there might be between the two concepts. Another salient other-regarding facet of virtue in Aristotle is justice, which also would be worth comparing to African ideals of reciprocity and mutual aid.

While acknowledging that there are substantial other-regarding dimensions in Aristotle and that they merit attention in comparison to African ones, in the rest of this article I instead focus on substantial differences between African ethics (as sketched above) and Aristotle's. Specifically, I discuss four forms of human excellence for Aristotle that appear not to include any essential reference to other human beings and are in this sense "individualist" or "self-regarding".

I begin with three practical virtues that are naturally understood to be self-regarding, namely, temperance, continence and toughness. Aristotle provides intricate discussions of how these differ from one another and from other properties, and of the respects in which they are

⁵ There are other strands of moral reflection below the Sahara desert beside what I am calling "Afro-communitarianism". For instance, some take utility to be the fundamental good (see note 4), while others maintain that vitality is (for example, Bujo 1997; Magesa 1997; cf Metz 2012). These views invariably take community, of the sort discussed here, to be an essential means by which to produce such goods or to know how to do so.

virtues and their opposites are vices⁶; however, rough characterisations of them will suffice for me to establish their individualist nature.

Intemperance is the bad of being overly drawn toward bodily pleasures, judging them to be more worthy of pursuit than they in fact are, and consequently indulging in them too much. Temperance is the good of having moderate desires toward taste and touch, judging moderate desires to be apt, and satisfying them.

Incontinence is the bad of being overly drawn toward bodily pleasures, judging them not to be so worthy of pursuit, but indulging in them too much despite one's better judgment. Continence is the good of being overly drawn toward bodily delights, but judging them not to be so worthy of pursuit, and consequently "overcoming", or not giving in to, the base desires related to food, drink and other physical pleasures.

Softness is the bad of being overly sensitive to bodily pains, judging them not to be so worthy of avoidance, but being unable to withstand them and hence sacrificing too much to avoid them despite one's better judgment. Toughness is the good of being overly sensitive to bodily pains, judging them not to be so worthy of avoidance, and consequently "resisting" or "holding out against" them.

Now, having desires for bodily pleasure of the right strength (temperance), overcoming desires for pleasure (continence) and resisting pains (toughness) all appear to be states utterly internal to an individual. They concern the respect in which one's rational nature is related to one's non-rational nature, more specifically, the extent to which one's judgment about one's own pleasure is correct (temperance) or the degree to which one's correct judgment about one's own pleasure or pain determines one's conduct in the face of recalcitrant desires (continence and toughness). There appears to be nothing about these practical virtues that necessarily concerns relationships with others, making them self-regarding or individualist, as I use these terms.

⁶ Aristotle scholars will note that he concludes that continence is not strictly speaking a virtue and incontinence is not a genuine vice (since it is not a kind of voluntary decision). However, he does say that incontinence is a vice "in a way" and that it is at least "similar to vice in its actions" (*NE* 1151a6-8). At the very least, for Aristotle, a human life is better for being continent and worse for the opposite.

Similar remarks go for the intellectual virtue of knowledge. Again, Aristotle's discussion of knowledge is complex, demarcating different respects in which one can apprehend the truth. For my purposes, though, it is enough to point out that the type of intellectual reflection that Aristotle most prizes, is philosophical wisdom, ie, knowledge of the most valuable objects in the world, which includes knowledge of the heavens (*NE* 1141a21-1141b8) and of God (*EE* 1249b20). Again, to be in a state of knowing some facet of world is not essentially to be in a relationship with other human beings.

In short, it appears that an adult castaway on a deserted island could in principle exhibit Aristotle's practical virtues of temperance, continence and toughness, as well as his intellectual virtue of philosophical wisdom. And there are places in his work where Aristotle prizes the latter virtue precisely because it is "self-sufficient", not dependent on other people for its exhibition (*NE* 1177a27-1177b1). I submit that this is the most stark respect in which Aristotle's ethic contrasts with an Afro-communitarian one, in which virtues are all a function of relationships of participating with others and helping them.

4. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Before evaluating whether Aristotle or the adherent to the African ethic I have articulated has the better account of human excellence, I first want to establish that I have interpreted them correctly. There are *prima facie* reasons, which I address here, for thinking that the African tradition is not communitarian, and that Aristotle is not individualist, in the ways I have contended they are.

First off, some might point to proverbs indicating that some sub-Saharan societies have counselled against gluttony and related behaviours that Aristotle would deem to be forms of vice.⁷ Such maxims suggest that Africans do not utterly neglect individualist considerations in their account of human excellence.

Now, it would take some hermeneutical investigation to clarify the meanings of the relevant proverbs, here. It might be that the prescription against gluttony is ultimately

⁷ Josephat Obi Oguejiofor raised this point in discussion.

underwritten by communal considerations, for example, to the effect that a glutton threatens to become a burden on his spouse, or would be unable to fulfil his role as a parent (for example, Paris 1995: 141-148; Ntibagiriwa 2001). Or it could be that gluttony is deemed *imprudent*, as opposed to *base*, where the latter alone is the relevant disvalue in comparison with Aristotle.

However, the sub-Saharan region is immense, with thousands of languages and societies, and so it is to be expected that one will find *some* expressions of individualism in them. It would be foolish to expect an utterly uniform belief system to cover such a wide array of space and diverse number of peoples.⁸ My ultimate reply, then, is that I am focusing on *some dominant* ideas from the African tradition about how to live, *particularly* as they have been given philosophical expression by literate sub-Saharan thinkers. As the several quotations above indicate, major themes among sub-Saharan ethical theorists have been self-realisation through communal relationships and virtue that is other-regarding.⁹ Those relational ideas neatly fit together to create a tight and interesting philosophical package, one aptly labelled “Afro-communitarianism”, and one that is worth comparing with Aristotle’s comprehensive account of how to live.

Another way to question my claim that Aristotle’s ethic differs markedly from a characteristically African one, is to suggest a different reading of the former. Although I think a plain reading of the text indicates that Aristotle holds both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues, some might be tempted to point to certain passages in Aristotle that emphasise the social dimension of human excellence.

To begin, notice that in the previous section I did not include bravery among Aristotle’s purportedly individualist virtues, for the reason that he at one point suggests that behaviour properly counts as “brave” only in the context of facing death in the course of doing what is fine (*NE* 1115a25-35). Here, Aristotle discusses risking one’s life during wartime, which would presumably be undertaken for a just cause such as the protection of one’s society. One might

⁸ See note 5 above.

⁹ Upon a survey of dozens of African texts on the value of knowledge, I cannot find a single one extolling knowledge for its own sake in the way that Aristotle and the Greek and more generally Western traditions tend to do; the overwhelmingly dominant theme among sub-Saharan thinkers is that knowledge, and higher education in particular, should be “relevant” and “responsive to context”, viz., involve a positive relationship with others (on which see Metz 2009a, 2009b).

therefore fairly read Aristotle as maintaining that bravery has an inherently other-regarding dimension.

If so, then one might also reasonably suspect that Aristotle believes that other, apparently individualist virtues, in fact have an irreducibly other-regarding dimension. Specifically, it could be that the practical virtues of temperance, continence and toughness are valuable only insofar as they would enable one to be a good friend or to carry out just intentions. Indeed, in one place Aristotle appears to say as much: “(T)he just person needs other people as partners and recipients of his just actions; the same is true of the temperate person and the brave person and each of the others” (NE 1177a30-32). Furthermore, it might be that the intellectual virtue of philosophical wisdom is a genuine human excellence, for Aristotle, just to the extent that one develops and shares the knowledge with others.

There are additional grounds for such a reading of Aristotle. On some occasions, he distinguishes between complete and incomplete virtue, and defines the former in terms of behaviour that serves others. For instance, when discussing justice he says that it is

...the complete exercise of complete virtue. And it is the complete exercise because the person who has justice is able to exercise virtue in relation to another, not only in what concerns himself....(T)he best person is not the one who exercises virtue (only) toward himself, but the one who (also) exercises it in relation to another, since this is a difficult task (NE 1129b32, 1130a8).

The passage suggests that the practical virtues generally are complete only when they include an other-regarding dimension. In addition, when Aristotle discusses self-love, he is explicit that it is not enough on its own but ought always to be paired up with concern for others: “(W)hen everyone competes to achieve what is fine and strains to do the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good” (NE 1169a10). And, finally, when Aristotle discusses the value of friendship, he is clear that living together is “the dearest wish of everybody, and especially of the person who is happiest and best”, and, further, that knowledge is something to be pursued not in isolation, but rather with others: “If one should

live well, and one's friend likewise, and if living together involves working together, their sharing will be above all in the things that make up the end of life. Hence we should study together...." (*EE* 1245b3; cf *NE* 1177b1).

In reply, I note that Aristotle's ethical works are by and large focused on the *ideal*; for instance, he begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by adumbrating three conceptions of "the best life", with his aim being to determine which is most justified and should be promoted by political institutions (*NE* 1095b13). I admit that Aristotle believes that the *most* choice-worthy life, the one *most* worthy of pride, is one in which virtues such as temperance, continence, toughness and knowledge are exercised in the context of community. However, it does not follow that Aristotle holds the stronger view that all four of these states are utterly absent of virtue when outside the context of positive relationships with other people. Notice that Aristotle's language in the quotations above is usually about what is "best" and "finest". To maintain that study with others, for instance, is part of the *most* desirable life is not to deny that study alone can be part of a *somewhat* desirable life (and perhaps because of its "self-sufficiency"). After all, incomplete virtue is still virtue, as is clear when Aristotle remarks that "many are able to exercise virtue in their own concerns but unable in what relates to another" (*NE* 1129b33).

The above rationale for reading Aristotle as a strict communitarian, while ultimately unpersuasive, is stronger than other arguments a critic might make. So, for example, it is a non-starter to suggest that, for Aristotle, community of some kind is a necessary instrument by which to acquire virtue, ie, that one can become virtuous only by being socialised in a certain way. My enquiry is about what in Aristotle's view constitutes virtue as an end, not about the means that must be employed in order for it to come into existence. For another unpromising consideration, one might point out that Aristotle often defines virtue and vices in terms of what is the norm for society; softness, for instance, is a matter of being unable to withstand pain that the average person can withstand (*NE* 1150b1). But this respect in which toughness and other virtues implicitly refer to others is not in the relevant sense, for the point is that, for Aristotle, toughness is a virtue that can be *exhibited without relating* to others.

In sum, Aristotle's philosophy and a typically African one are similar in maintaining that the *best* life is a communal one, at least in a broad sense. The *most* genuinely human way of

life, for both accounts, is one in which a person (at a minimum) acts for the sake of others and shares a life with them; on either view, if one were a castaway on a deserted island, one would be incapable of exhibiting the highest human excellence. However, the two views differ with respect to whether other-regard is necessary to have a life that is good to some degree. *Ubuntu* is characteristically interpreted to be a purely relational view, according to which virtue *as such* involves an agent and another, whereas Aristotle appears to hold that some virtue—at some times deemed the “incomplete” sort (*NE* Book 5) and at others the “self-sufficient” kind (*NE* Book 10)—can be self-regarding and not involve a relationship with anyone else. Now, who has the better account of virtue?

5. **UBUNTU FOR MORALITY, ARISTOTLE FOR ETHICS**

In this section I appeal to a modern distinction in order to clarify the respects in which an African ethic and Aristotle’s ethic are each plausible. The two traditions generally do not draw a firm distinction between the moral and the non-moral, instead taking our basic goal to be self-realisation or virtue *simpliciter*. However, in the following I maintain that while *ubuntu* promises to capture our moral ends, understood narrowly in terms of right action and the dispositions toward it, Aristotle’s account is more plausible as an overall ethic, a general guide for what to pursue for its own sake in life.

In the previous sections I argued that, in contrast to an especially salient African tradition, Aristotle believes that a good life, even if not the best life, can be one that exhibits certain states that do not essentially include a relationship with other people. Although toughness and contemplation, say, would be better if exhibited in the context of participating with others and acting for their sake, Aristotle ultimately appears to maintain, *contra* a natural interpretation of *ubuntu*, that they would have some (*pro tanto*) virtue even outside a social setting. The question at hand is whether he is correct. I maintain that he is.

To defend my view I begin by considering strong points on behalf of the opposing one. The adherent to *ubuntu* might plausibly suggest that the point of acquiring knowledge is to share it with others, that it would surely be a vice to hoard it to oneself. In addition, if one

lacked the practical virtues of temperance, continence and toughness, then one would tend to cause problems for other people's lives; consider the expected effects of gluttony mentioned above. Finally, one could reasonably suggest that even where intemperance, incontinence and softness do not in fact lead one to fail to relate positively to others, they are undesirable because they are evidence that one will have trouble so relating, for example, exhibiting weakness of will bodes ill for a tendency to live well with others.

I believe I can accept all these fair points as *partial* respects in which ignorance, intemperance, etcetera are vices, denying that these other-regarding rationales *exhaust* the respect in which they are undesirable. Return to the thought experiment of me being alone on an otherwise deserted island. It would be a vice if I recognised that my desire for mangoes were too strong but ended up eating them anyway to the point of getting unhealthily large, and my life would in contrast be a better one if I were rather able to exhibit strength of will by overcoming this desire. Similarly, it would be a vice if I were so lazy as not to build myself shelter because of the hassle, and it would instead be a virtue if I recognised that my inclination to avoid short-term pain were irrational and did not act on it. Likewise, I would be a more excellent human being, *ceteris paribus*, if I charted the stars and planets and were, after some time, able to provide a reasonable theory about their orbits.¹⁰ What this thought experiment suggests is that, even where other-regarding considerations do not apply, one still appears capable of exhibiting virtue and vice. That is a point that Aristotle can accommodate, and that the friend of *ubuntu* cannot.

In reply, one might point out that, according to metaphysical views widely held among Africans, this thought experiment is impossible.¹¹ Traditional sub-Saharanans tend to believe that we human beings are always in touch with God and ancestors, and so never lacking in the opportunity to commune with them.

¹⁰ By the same token, I submit that bravery is possible in the absence of society; I would count as "brave" to face off against savage warthogs on the island, if needed to acquire a cave essential for adequate shelter for myself.

¹¹ As Pascah Mungwini has done in discussion with me.

I have two major responses to this reply.¹² First, even if it were true that we are never lacking in the ability to commune with other persons (and not necessarily human beings), one could still conduct a fair thought experiment in which we did lack it. *Imagine* that a normal adult were utterly isolated; would virtue of some kind be possible? It appears coherent to pose this question, and also plausible to answer it by contending that an isolated individual who spent his time cultivating the extent to which his rational nature determines his non-rational one would be excellent in a way that someone who merely sun-bathed and ate mangoes would not.

My second, and more deep, response is to grant the critic that the deserted island thought experiment is for some reason inappropriate. Rather than engage in meta-ethical debate about when thought experiments are useful, suppose now, for the sake of argument, that “no man is an island”, that the isolation test is artificial since we never do live apart from others. My claim is: even if we must think of human beings as invariably set in a social context, it follows neither that all their behaviour is other-regarding, nor that other-regard is inherent to the best explanation of why a certain trait is a virtue.

To see the point, consider that the actual lives of many artists, composers and scientists, who intuitively exhibit human excellence, do in fact lack the kinds of connections with others that the friend of *ubuntu* (or even Aristotle) would prescribe as most desirable.¹³ Of course, typically these individuals end up sharing their works with others, but my key claim is that they exhibit some virtue prior to that and not merely because of that. Think about the scientist who has made an amazing discovery about the origin of the universe just before publishing or otherwise circulating his research. Surely, he has already exhibited some intellectual virtue, something in which to take great pride, and, furthermore, his excellence is not exhausted by the fact that he is now in a position to share. There is instead something about the exercise of his rational faculties and about the object of his knowledge that substantially constitutes the virtue.

¹² Elsewhere I also argue that one should not try to ground normative prescriptions on highly controversial claims about the existence of supernatural beings (Metz 2008).

¹³ See the biographies in Storr (1988).

At this stage of the debate, I think the strongest reply to make on behalf of the friend of *ubuntu* is to grant that self-regarding human excellence is possible, but to deny that it is the most important sort, and perhaps even to maintain that it should never in the real world be sought out at the expense of the other-regarding kind. What follows is one way to execute that general strategy.

Suppose, with much of the contemporary field, that there is a domain of normativity, the “moral”, that is distinct from other goods and shoulds, the non-moral. The former is principally concerned with right and wrong action and the dispositions that are about rightness, where a wrong action is one for which it would be appropriate to feel some guilt. Non-moral values and reasons, in contrast, are not about permissible and impermissible behaviour and do not merit guilt for contravention, but, rather, potentially other emotions such as shame or regret. Call “ethics” the broad enquiry into how to live a good or desirable life, which presumably includes both moral and non-moral goods.

Many in the field deem moral considerations to be overriding, or at least the most important ones to be so, such that one ought never to engage in torture, murder, rape, theft and the like for the sake of advancing non-moral goods such as art, knowledge, sport or pleasure. Suppose, now, that moral considerations are plausibly captured by a prescription to prize communal or friendly relationships. Elsewhere I have argued that an extremely promising understanding of the nature of immorality is in terms of the present African understanding of unfriendliness (Metz 2007, 2011). What torture, murder, rape, theft, etcetera arguably have in common is that they, roughly, are actions that tend: to divide people, rather than to foster a sense of togetherness; to subordinate others, rather than to coordinate behaviour; to harm others, rather than to foster mutual aid; and to express self-aggrandising or cruel attitudes, rather than to be consequent to sympathetic altruism.

In sum, if moral reasons are overriding, and if morality is identical to what *ubuntu* (as a moral philosophy) prescribes, then what *ubuntu* prescribes is overriding. Such a view is worth taking seriously, and it seems to “divide the spoils” in a judicious way with the Aristotelian. With Aristotle, one can say that a human being can be excellent to some degree insofar as he/she exhibits states that do not essentially involve a relationship with others. However, with the

friend of *ubuntu*, one can say that a person ought nonetheless to avoid cultivating self-regarding excellences when they come at the cost of other-regarding ones.

Such a view makes good sense of the deserted island case. When one *cannot* act for the sake of others (supposing that is indeed possible), then it is proper, and even virtuous to some degree, to act for the sake of oneself alone. This, I submit, the friend of *ubuntu* should admit. But what he/she can claim is that when we are not on the island, which virtually none of us ever is, then we invariably have stronger reason to act in ways that honour communal relationships. If developing excellences such as continence and knowledge contributes to that, then all well and good; but if an agent proposed to pursue knowledge at the expense of sharing a way of life with others and improving their quality of life, then he/she would be acting not only immorally, but also contrary to what that person has most reason to do.

Such a view is far from obviously correct, but it does merit further exploration. It connects up in interesting ways with current debate about the point of a public university, for example whether it can be right for academics to pursue knowledge for its own sake, and it also brings to mind the cases of Gaugin as discussed by Bernard Williams (1976) and of a moral saint à la Susan Wolf (1982). These issues, about the strength of moral vis-à-vis non-moral reasons, are large and warrant separate treatment. In this article, I have merely sought to clarify the respects in which Aristotle's conception of virtue differs from a conception particularly salient in the African tradition, and to contend that the former is more attractive as a complete account of human excellence, or perhaps an ethic about how to live, while indicating the potential kernel of truth in the latter as an account of morality and the most important form of virtue.¹⁴

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