

The Motivation for “Toward an African Moral Theory”

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Abstract

Here I introduce the symposium issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* that is devoted to critically analysing my article “Toward an African Moral Theory.” In that article, I use the techniques of analytic moral philosophy to articulate and defend a moral theory that both is grounded on the values of peoples living in sub-Saharan Africa and differs from what is influential in contemporary Western ethics. Here, I not only present a précis of the article, but also provide a sketch of why I have undertaken the sort of project begun there, what I hope it will help to achieve, and how the contributors to the symposium principally question it.

I am deeply grateful to the editors of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* for suggesting the idea of a symposium devoted to “Toward an African Moral Theory” (2007) and for making it happen. To start things off, I present not only a précis of this article, as is customary, but also a sketch of why I have undertaken the sort of project begun, what I hope it will help to achieve, and how the contributors to this symposium principally question it.

Upon marrying a South African woman and then having my first son with her, I decided to permanently relocate from the United States, where I had grown up, to South Africa, where my wife could find employment and be near her family, and where I could continue lecturing in ethics at Wits University. When I first moved to Johannesburg, people often asked me what I thought of “ubuntu,” the Zulu term for humanness or morality. My initial answer was, unfortunately, “I don’t know.” Although my education was terrific by Western standards, those standards are characteristically parochial, such that a large majority of what I had learned about African worldviews (which was not much) was a product of my own enquiry and had not been assigned in the classes I took.¹ Newly residing in Africa and wanting to be able to engage with people here, and furthermore feeling obligated to instruct material of relevance to my students, I undertook to learn about ubuntu and general African ethics.

What I found in the English-speaking literature on African ethics was not very useful with regard to the particular material that I wanted for myself and my students: it did not primarily aim to articulate and evaluate a basic principle in a systematically analytic way, a principle that one could also use to resolve concrete moral dilemmas. What I had hoped to find was something similar in structure and defence to the Western principles of respect and utility, for the purposes of comparison and contrast. However, relatively little of the literature on African ethics that I encountered offered something like this. By and large, the literature has other aims, e.g. the (critical) dis-

¹ Apart from a meta-ethics course that I took with Richard W. Miller.

cussion of the beliefs of a certain people, or the articulation of a full-blown philosophical worldview. These are aims that are entirely worth undertaking, particularly in light of colonialism having run roughshod over African self-understanding. I do not mean to suggest that the only goal worth pursuing in the field of African ethics is the one I am seeking; I am merely seeking to clarify my goal (2007: 321 n 1).

African readers will be familiar with the common summarising characterisations of ubuntu and African ethics, and my hope is that they will see the use of striving to establish a theory that is more specific and potentially action-guiding. Most famously, ubuntu is affiliated with the maxim that “a person is a person through other persons.” From what I have come to learn, that maxim expresses several different deep claims about the conditions of human existence, personal identity, moral status and moral content. However, even when the maxim is interpreted to provide the content of virtue or rightness, it is too indeterminate to be prescriptive in a way that would be of use to a professional ethicist, let alone a layperson (either on its own or combined with additional, mid-level judgments). For instance, suppose that I am a judge and must decide whether and how to punish someone who has clearly broken a just law. Being told that I would be a morally good person for interacting with other people in a positive way would not help me to make this decision.

The phrase “I am because we are,” another maxim that is often presented as capturing ubuntu, is equally unhelpful. Nor would it be of much use to be told that the word “ubuntu” means humanness or morality, for I want to know exactly how to be human or moral in this instance. Nor would it be particularly helpful to be told that ubuntu is communitarian as opposed to individualistic, for there are many different respects in which I could act for the sake of community, some of which involve suspending a sentence and some of which involve imposing a harsh penalty. Finally, it also would not sufficiently assist me to be given a list of the particular values often associated with ubuntu, e.g., generosity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, respect, dignity, equality, brotherhood, humanism, equal consideration, a spirit of oneness, unity. These values, as they stand, are vague and, furthermore, can appear contradictory. For instance, am I to be compassionate with regard to the victim or the offender? To what degree am I to be compassionate in the light of the additional prescriptions to be respectful, to treat people as equals and to promote a sense of community?

I wanted something more unified and determinate than the above characterizations of ubuntu. I do not mean to suggest that I found nothing of use in the literature, for I did. Mogobe Ramose, in his contribution to this symposium, thinks that there is more to be found than my article suggests. Regardless of whether this is true or not, it is clear that the field could use expansion. So, in “Toward an African Moral Theory”, I set about the task of ascertaining whether and to what degree one could develop a normative ethical theory of right action that has an African pedigree and offers something different from what is dominant in Western moral philosophy. By “normative ethical theory”, I mean in the ideal case, a single, comprehensive and fundamental (secular) norm that accounts for what makes right actions right. What is meant by an “African” normative ethical theory? I mean, roughly, one that is grounded in the moral beliefs of many of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, there is no a priori reason to think that a moral theory informed and justified by the values of many largely black and Bantu-speaking communities will differ from the moral theories developed in the West. I therefore stipulate in advance that this is the sort of theory I am particularly keen to develop, for if such a project were successful, it (though not only it) would be

of global importance to moral and political philosophers. Mine is a constructive project, not a descriptive one, and so it is fair to expressly seek out a theory that is different, so long as the theory is not misconstrued as something intended to be representative of sub-Saharan African societies in general.

As with a large majority of professional ethicists in the West, I take a controversial normative theory to be more justified, not only the more it entails² a wide array of particular duties that uncontroversially (or less controversially) exist, but also the better it explains why these duties obtain. In short, I primarily use the method of “reflective equilibrium” to achieve probabilistic and explanatory coherence between general principle, on the one hand, and particular duties on the other. I do not defend this analytic methodology in the article, and Ramose, in his contribution, deems it unattractive and unable to underwrite something rightly labelled “African.”

Unlike most of my colleagues in analytic philosophy, I do not appeal to my own or even purportedly widely shared intuitions in the article to appraise a principle. As part of the search for a theory with an African pedigree, one that would be of particular interest were it to provide something different from what is most influential in Western ethics, I seek to ground a theory on particular moral judgments that are widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, but not in the West. In the article, I am at pains to avoid the sins of “essentialism” and “homogenisation” by indicating that these so-called “African intuitions” are tendencies rather than essences. I do not mean to suggest that all African cultures in all places at all times have held the moral beliefs that I take as firm (but provisional) starting points for evaluating a moral theory.

However, granting the fluidity of culture, on the basis of the evidence I have gathered,³ I believe that there are several recurrent themes that may be fairly invoked to qualify a theory as “African” as opposed to Western. So far as I can tell, it is a fact that there are several judgments and practices that are spatio-temporally extensive in Africa, but not in the West. There are values that one finds among many different countries and peoples below the Saharan desert⁴ and that one does not find nearly as widespread among contemporary Western societies, and furthermore, these values have been held over a long time, viz., one finds them not only in the oral traditions of indigenous African societies, but also in the writings of present-day African literati. In mere catchwords, some of these values, discussed in “Toward an African Moral Theory,” are consensus in political decision-making, reconciliation in criminal justice, cooperation in production, need satisfaction in distribution, tradition in civil society, and procreation in the home. I could also add respect for elders, the importance of greetings, and the use of terms such as “father” and “sister” to refer to people whom Westerners would deem to be mere “extended family” or “close friends.” While I suggest in the article that these are, for many Africans, *pro tanto* right-makers, Douglas Farland's contribution to this symposium questions not only whether this is an accurate charac-

2 Perhaps in combination with further judgment; cf. Allen Wood's discussion of the role of a moral theory at the end of his contribution to this symposium.

3 Obtained as a result of reading several dozen anthropological and philosophical works about the moral beliefs of Africans, participating in conferences and colloquia with those who live on the African continent, receiving written input from academic colleagues familiar with African ethics, engaging with students in my ethics classes in South Africa, and, finally, speaking to my colleagues on the recently inaugurated Ubuntu Advisory Panel of the South African National Heritage Council.

4 From the Zulu in South Africa to the Shona in Zimbabwe, the G/wi in Botswana, the Behema in the Congo, the Nso' in Cameroon, the Yoruba and the Tiv in Nigeria, and the Ashanti and Akan in Ghana.

terisation, but also whether my attempt to capture them in a single principle is successful.

I have already been accused of reifying African culture,⁵ but I do not believe that I am doing so when I simply claim this: there are recurrent normative themes that are more common in this part of the world than in the West, and I elect to focus on those, given my aim of constructing a normative ethical theory with an African source, which is different from those in the West. Since my project is not anthropological or historical, I should not be blamed for not providing a detailed and intricate study of any of the worldviews of various peoples who have lived in sub-Saharan Africa. Others have said of the theory I advocate that “*that's not ubuntu*,” since it is not (and is not intended to be) an accurate reflection of a way of life that is notoriously complex and hard to define. But then, am I really to call the moral theory I have articulated and defended by appealing to intuitions that are more common in Africa than in the West “Metz's view”?

While I am not engaged in a descriptive enterprise, I also am not engaged in a normative one, or at least not yet. By using African intuitions to evaluate a moral theory, I am not committed to thinking that these intuitions are sound (although I do find many of them compelling, even when they conflict with my Kantian inclinations). My project is not a matter of putting forth what I take to be the correct moral theory or even the most justified one relative to all existing competitors. Instead, mine is the more narrow, epistemological task of ascertaining which principle best accounts for, among others, intuitions that are more common in Africa than in the West, leaving open the question of whether these intuitions are themselves justified or not.

In the article, I distinguish six theoretical expressions of African ethics that I have encountered in the literature, and I argue that one of them does a much better job of accounting for intuitions than the others. The one that I ultimately favour is inspired by the works of Desmond Tutu (1999), John Mbiti (1989) and Reuel Khoza (2005), who at times suggest that the most fundamental intrinsic moral good is a certain kind of harmonious relationship. I point out that the idea of a relationship between individuals having moral status differs from the idea that moral status is located in a single individual's well-being, life, agency, rights, or self-development, which the main rival interpretations of ubuntu focus on and which are much more familiar in Western ethics. Furthermore, I work to provide a detailed analysis of the nature of the relevant sort of harmonious relationship, which I cash out, basically, as a matter of the combination of people identifying with each other and helping one another without long-term prudential gain in mind. This sort of relationship is what English speakers by and large mean by “friendship” or a broad sense of “love,” which is an intuitively attractive and underdeveloped foundation for morality. I argue in the article that conceiving of right action in terms of the promotion of harmony so construed does the most successful job of accounting for the African intuitions, among others. That is, of any existing theoretical account of ubuntu, a basic injunction to promote friendly relationships best entails and explains the recurrent values of consensus, reconciliation, cooperative production, need-based distribution, tradition and procreation. Jason van Niekerk's contribution to the symposium defends the view that a self-development or virtue-based ethic would do no worse at accounting for African intuitions than the relational one I propose.

There are several respects in which the principle that one is fundamentally obligated to produce relationships in which people share a common sense of self and act for one another's sake remains in need of specification and enrichment. In particular, as I point

5 By Mogobe Ramose in this symposium and Raymond Suttner in correspondence.

out in the article, this principle is purely teleological or consequentialist and hence fails to adequately capture African ethical thinking and, in any event, is implausible. The principle needs to be refined to account for the deontological aspects of morality, or of African beliefs about morality, something that Allen Wood discusses in a revealing way. Furthermore, there is still a lack of clarity about which harmonious relationships matter most, e.g., whether the agent must be part of the relationship being promoted or prized, and how to balance a clear priority given to “local” relationships in African thinking with the intuitive impartiality that most believe has a central role in a moral theory.

Despite the remaining incompleteness and unclarity, the idea that morality is at bottom a function of producing a certain kind of harmonious relationship is more complete, clear and comprehensively justified than other interpretations of ubuntu from the literature, or so I maintain in the article. Let us return to the case of a judge needing to decide how to respond to an offender, for instance. A Kantian would be inclined to have the judge ascertain what the offender warrants simply in light of his past misdeed, while a utilitarian would counsel the judge to determine what would be likely to deter the offender or others in society in the future. In contrast, ubuntu, in the way I have interpreted it *qua* moral theory, would recommend a sentence that would be likely to promote relationships in which people think of themselves as joint members of a group and act for one another's sake, which, in turn, probably recommends a response that would foster reconciliation between the offender and his victims. There is more to be said here, no doubt, but we already have more than simply “a person is a person through other persons” and something that, upon further refinement, has the potential to resolve a wide array of practical problems in law, business, medicine and so on, in a way that differs from standard Western approaches.

My horizons as an ethical theorist have been broadened in substantial ways upon having moved to South Africa. I have encountered moral perspectives, and have had to take them seriously, in ways that would have been unlikely, had I remained in the States. This is one reason that I am happy to be living here and to be a part of the South African philosophical community. I hope that my fellow residents in Africa find a decidedly analytic approach to ubuntu to be a worthy addition to the field of ethics.

References

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