**Beyond Borders: Exploring Ubuntu as a Lived Philosophy**

Emmanuel Chiwetalu Ossai and Lloyd Strickland

Western philosophy has long faced questions about its [relevance](https://www.syzetesis.it/doc/rivista/archivio/2018/1/3%20ARTICOLO%20CELLUCCI.pdf), and even about [its self-indulgence](https://qz.com/768450/one-of-the-most-famous-living-philosophers-says-much-of-philosophy-today-is-self-indulgent). It is not hard to see why. Some philosophical questions seem trivial and esoteric, of little interest except to a handful of other philosophers (think: [do holes exist?](https://www.thehumanfront.com/pocketsized-do-holes-exist/)). Philosophical theories are often opaque, dressed up in jargon that only professional philosophers understand. And a great deal of philosophy is concerned with abstract and theoretical matters with little to no practical import. Even in ethical matters, the abstract is often favoured over the concrete. Western ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism and deontology are typically treated through theoretical examples and thought experiments, such as [the trolley problem](https://theconversation.com/the-trolley-dilemma-would-you-kill-one-person-to-save-five-57111), [forced organ transplants](https://utilitarianism.net/objections-to-utilitarianism/rights/), and [whether it’s permissible to lie to an axe murderer](https://myweb.ecu.edu/mccartyr/GW/InquiringMurderer.asp). These might be a source of fun, amusement, and lively discussions in seminar rooms, but removed as they are from everyday life, such thought-experiments help to reinforce the charge that philosophy is disconnected from real-world problems or practical issues.

 Of course, such a charge cannot stick to all western philosophy. The ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of [Stoicism](https://plato.stanford.edu/ENTRIES/stoicism/) is an obvious exception. Stoicism emphasizes the cultivation of inner strength, resilience, and virtue in response to life’s challenges. It encourages living in accordance with reason, wisdom, and the pursuit of moral excellence, with the aim of teaching people to focus on what is within their control and accept what is not. Here, then, is a western philosophy that is not concerned with dry, abstract, theoretical matters, but with everyday life and its challenges. It is also a philosophy that was *lived*, such that its principles shaped and informed people’s own existence and their navigation of the world around them. What is more, Stoicism remains a lived philosophy today, as is clear from the examples of the American prisoner of war [James Stockdale](https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/stoicism1.pdf) and the British illusionist [Derren Brown](https://dailystoic.com/derren-brown/), both of whom publicly have promoted Stoicism and professed to live by its principles. However, it is difficult to say how widely Stoicism is practised beyond this handful of high-profile proponents.

 Yet there are examples of lived philosophies that have been and still are practised widely: a prime example is Ubuntu philosophy. The term “[Ubuntu” has various interpretations](https://doi.org/10.7196/SAJBL.2019.v12i2.679). Among the Bantu-speaking people of southern Africa, where it has its roots, it means ‘[humanness](https://doi.org/10.7196/SAJBL.2019.v12i2.679)’ – [the state of being human](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7947-3.ch001). The Bantu also associate the term with a much deeper relational meaning: The level of Ubuntu that one has depends on how one behaves towards other humans in ways that recognise the interconnectedness, interdependency, and the promotion of community over the individual . In the words of the prominent African philosopher Pascah Mungwini, Ubuntu is rooted in the realization that ‘[human beings must assume the responsibility of creating a humane environment within which they exist together](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZHxcEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=intitle:african+inauthor:mungwini&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)’.

Interpretations of Ubuntu often describe it using Southern African maxims, such as the Zulu phrase [*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430701269291), which means that a person is a person through other persons, or that a person depends on others to be a person.

Ubuntu is not a merely theoretical or abstract philosophical perspective. It is a *lived* philosophy – a set of ethical principles that have been, and still are, actively practised and integrated into life at various levels of African society, from simple everyday interpersonal greetings to advanced national-level administrative activities. Indeed, it continues to shape how people live their lives, relate with other humans, and deal with issues in their environment.

In Ubuntu-practising African societies, the proper upbringing and socialisation of children is seen as [a responsibility of the community](https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ776228), not only the parents. Children are taught the principles of Ubuntu using riddles and stories that demonstrate the individual-level and communal consequences of treating other humans unkindly. This collectivist philosophy disperses into adult behaviour, too. Individuals invoke Ubuntu [when they use proverbs](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90025333.pdf) in their families (e.g., when relatives address conflicts), during bereavement or other moments demanding communal involvement, at public meetings (e.g., where decisions are taken regarding developmental issues) and other social contexts. In addition to shaping individual behaviours, Ubuntu has inspired a communal approach to governance in several African settings. Proverbs are part of the principles that guide state and non-state organisations. For example, [the coat of arms of the city of Gaborone in Botswana](https://twitter.com/city_gaborone) contains the Setswana proverb: [*Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*: ‘a bag of locusts is better carried by many people’](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90025333.pdf)*.* This proverb stresses the value of cooperation and interdependence.

At the village level, disputes between individuals and families are resolved democraticallyby community members and elders. Where there is a community leader, important decisions are rarely taken by them without proper consultation with the community, sometimes through elders. [Sanctioned by the constitution and Customary Act of Botswana](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7947-3.ch006), the indigenous *Kgotla* system of governance involves meetings at the village level in which disputes, development, and other issues of common interest are addressed through [open discussions](https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v7i1.3691) by [community members](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90025333.pdf) before decisions are taken. The Kgotladiscussions are driven by the view that dialogue, not violence, is the proper response to disagreement, as suggested by the Setswana proverb [*ntka kgolo ke molomo*: ‘the big fight (or war) is of the mouth](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90025333.pdf)*’.* Additionally, the Kgotla’s participatory structure exists because of the belief that everyone should be allowed to speak and contribute to decision-making. This is demonstrated by the Setswana proverb [*mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe:* ‘words at the communal meeting place are all beautiful or worthwhile](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90025333.pdf)’.

Ubuntu philosophy has also permeated into justice systems. For example, Ubuntu ideas shaped the formulation and activities of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, founded in 1995 to achieve reconciliation and restore harmony following human rights abuses committed during Apartheid from 1948. Ubuntu justice [uses negotiations to pursue](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1057567710361719) victims’ healing and offenders’ reintegration into society. Indeed, it was this approach to conflict resolution which South Africa has adopted into its justice system.

South Africa is not the only African State to have done so. An indigenous conflict management system known as [*Gacaca,* a Kinyarwanda term meaning ‘justice on the grass’](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667378?seq=6), is also based on the principles of Ubuntu. It was adopted by the Rwandan government as part of its mechanisms for achieving reconciliation following the 1994 genocide and the conflicts preceding it from 1990. Traditionally, *Gacaca* involved offenders, victims, and community members, sitting on the grass or outdoor areas and participating in discussions in order to achieve [negotiated resolutions of conflict or other matters](https://www.davidpublisher.com/Public/uploads/Contribute/55936677d9dde.pdf) and the restoration of community. The local Gacaca courts launched by the Rwandan government in June 2002 differ in some ways from the traditional ones, for example, in terms of their punitive measures, but they possess restorative and communal elements. Like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the post-genocide Gacaca courts coordinated confessions and apologies from perpetrators of abuses, inspired victims’ healing and forgiveness, mitigated grievances, and helped to prevent renewed conflict, through such communitarian approaches.

Ubuntu philosophy is a Pan-African ethic. This is no accident.

Ubuntu philosophy’s distant origin ‘[is attributable to Black Africans as a whole – North, West, East, Central and South of the continent](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2168638)’. Does this mean, however, as some have claimed, that Ubuntu is [culturally unavailable](https://iai.tv/articles/african-philosophy-is-more-than-you-think-it-is-auid-1097) outside Africa? That is, that Ubuntu is so alien to non-African ways of thinking and living that it is irrelevant elsewhere? Not at all: in fact, Ubuntu has gained visible presence outside Africa, with organisations and leaders across the world adopting Ubuntu-inspired strategies. For example, in June 2009, a newly appointed United States Department of States Special Representative for Global Partnerships used the term ‘[*Ubuntu* diplomacy](https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/06a/125278.htm)’ to describe the Department’s desired approach to solving existing global challenges ‘where all sectors belong as partners, where we all participate as stakeholders, and where we all succeed together, not incrementally but exponentially’.

Bill Clinton, the 42nd president of the United States, has expressed his endorsement of Ubuntu. At the second [Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting in September 2006](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YswUI-yqXo) in New York City, he stated that ‘Ubuntu, for us, it means the world is too small, our wisdom too limited, our time here too short to waste any more of it in winning fleeting victories at other people’s expense. We have to now find a way to triumph together’. Similarly, he stated in his address at a [British Labour Conference in 2006](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/5388182.stm) that ‘society is important because of Ubuntu’.

Ubuntu-inspired practices can also be found elsewhere. Existing non-governmental organisations using this ethic include [Ubuntu Australia](https://ubuntuaustralia.com/) in Western Australia, [Ubuntu Counselling Services](https://ubuntucounsellingservices.org.uk/) in Devon, England, and the [Ubuntu Leaders Academy](https://www.academialideresubuntu.org/en/) in Portugal. All apply communitarian understandings of action to their practises.

Yet, while it is clear that Ubuntu is culturally available outside Africa, it has made little impact on Western philosophy, which has continued its focus on dry and abstract intellectual puzzles. This is unfortunate, not least because Ubuntu does not suffer from the problems that bedevil the ethical frameworks manufactured by western philosophers, namely ironing out theoretical kinks and moving from theory to practice. Ubuntu *is* practised, and has been long since before colonial times, thus is not hindered by such difficulties. Its position for supporting a positive way of life is therefore beyond question. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, and the problems of our concrete existence ever more urgent, perhaps it is time for western philosophy to [expand its horizons](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/western-philosophy-departments-must-open-their-minds) and draw inspiration from the rich tapestry of wisdom found in Ubuntu and similar philosophies from around the globe. In a world plagued by division and isolation, Ubuntu offers a timeless reminder of our shared humanity and the power of community in shaping a more just and compassionate society.