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Just the beginning for ubuntu: reply to Matolino and Kwindigwi¹

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In an article titled ‘The end of ubuntu’ recently published in this journal, Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi argue that contemporary conditions in (South) Africa are such that there is no justification for appealing to an ethic associated with talk of ‘ubuntu’. They argue that political elites who invoke ubuntu do so in ways that serve nefarious functions, such as unreasonably narrowing discourse about how best to live, while the moral ideals of ubuntu are appropriate only for a bygone, pre-modern age. Since there is nothing ethically promising about ubuntu for today’s society, and since elite appeals to it serve undesirable purposes there, the authors conclude that ubuntu in academic and political circles ‘has reached its end’. In this article, I respond to Matolino and Kwindigwi, contending that, in fact, we should view scholarly enquiry into, and the political application of, ubuntu as projects that are only now properly getting started.

Introduction

In an article titled ‘The end of ubuntu’ recently published in this journal, Bernard Matolino and Wenceslaus Kwindigwi (2013) argue that contemporary conditions in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent are such that there is no justification for appealing to an ethic associated with talk of ‘ubuntu’, the Nguni word for humanness that is often used by southern Africans to sum up characteristically sub-Saharan approaches to morality. Sociologically, Matolino and Kwindigwi argue that those who have most influentially invoked ubuntu have done so in ways that serve nefarious social functions, such as unreasonably narrowing discourse about how best to live, while, philosophically, these authors contend that the moral ideals of ubuntu are appropriate only for a bygone, pre-modern age. Since there is nothing ethically promising about ubuntu for a modern society, and since appealing to it serves unwelcome purposes there, Matolino and Kwindigwi conclude that ubuntu in academic and political circles ‘has reached its end’ (2013: p. 204).

In this article, I respond to Matolino and Kwindigwi, contending that, in fact, we should view scholarly enquiry into, and the political application of, ubuntu as projects that are only now properly getting properly started. Negatively, I maintain that the considerations they have proffered are insufficient to draw their conclusion, and, positively, I provide reason to think that ubuntu as an ethical theory has a lot going for it as an account of how individuals and institutions should be moral in the twenty-first century.

I have titled my contribution a ‘reply’ to these authors, even though they neither address me by name, nor even cite my work in their essay. I take their piece to be directed at me (among others) because they criticise the view that ubuntu is sensibly viewed as an ‘ethical theory’ (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013: p. 203), and because I believe that I am the one most widely known for interpreting ubuntu in that manner and with that specific phrase (e.g. Metz 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2011, 2012, 2013). In any event, I have spent a large chunk of my research time over the last seven years thinking, writing and supervising postgraduate research about ubuntu, and so have a keen interest in obtaining clarity about why those activities have been worth undertaking and continue to merit pursuit. In the following I draw on my body of work to defend the idea that several of the values and norms associated with ubuntu are a promising ground for a

¹ For comments on a previous version of this draft, I thank two anonymous referees.

contemporary ethical theory, leaving other interpreters of ubuntu to respond to Matolino and Kwindingwi on their own.²

The social functions of ubuntu

Beyond recounting several facets of discourse about ubuntu in contemporary South Africa, Matolino and Kwindingwi make two major critical points about it. One is that such discourse is bankrupt as a moral philosophy, which I address only in the following section, while the other is that, as a sociological phenomenon, those who have appealed to ubuntu at a political level have done so in ways that are either unethical or unwittingly serve an undesirable function.

It is important to see that these two issues are distinct. There are some who would suggest that ubuntu is a bankrupt moral philosophy *because* it serves unwelcome purposes. That inference, however, would be fallacious.

Consider evolutionary theory, and the fact that it has sometimes been put to immoral uses. There are Social Darwinists who maintain that evolutionary theory supports the view that the state should not aid the poor and more generally that it would be best for people struggling to be left alone to die out. I have also read letters to the editor in South African newspapers suggesting that evolutionary theory should not be taught in schools because it suggests that black people lack a dignity for having evolved from apes, which would reinforce white discrimination against them.

However, just because some have misinterpreted or misused ideas about natural selection does not mean that the latter view is false or epistemically unjustified. Surely, evolutionary theory's plausibility as an account of how human beings originated is not called into question by the fact that some have performed, or will perform, wrong actions consequent to believing it (or something like it, or called it). Analogous remarks apply to ubuntu. Even if it were shown that some who believe in ubuntu, or who appeal to the word 'ubuntu', act wrongly or cause harm as a result of doing so, it would not follow that ubuntu as a theory about how one morally ought to treat others is false or epistemically unjustified.

Matolino and Kwindingwi do not make the lame argument that ubuntu is to be rejected as a philosophy because it serves a certain, corrupt social function, but I have encountered that sort of perspective in South African academe, and so have found it worth criticising. Instead, I read Matolino and Kwindingwi as maintaining that talk of and thought about ubuntu ought to die out because there is nothing philosophically worthwhile about it to compensate for its undesirable social function. That argument is *prima facie* much stronger.

What role does ubuntu play in society, according to Matolino and Kwindingwi? They maintain that political actors often invoke ubuntu as part of a 'narrative of return', according to which sub-Saharan peoples in pre-colonial times lived harmoniously, were then conquered by settlers from Europe for several hundred years, and now in the post-independence era have the opportunity to live as authentic Africans again, viz., in accordance with ubuntu.

Matolino and Kwindingwi contend, plausibly, that similar narratives of return have had disastrous politico-economic consequences when taken on by states north of the Limpopo (2013: p. 198), that pretty much any defenders of a narrative of return will 'through their advocacy, shut down space for the possibility of other interpretations of modes of being African that could be at variance with their preferred narrative' (2013: pp. 199, 201–203), and that these narratives will objectionably tend to prize pre-modern or traditional lifestyles that are far from obviously to be preferred relative to modern or contemporary ones (2013: pp. 199, 201–202).

I find it hard to disagree with Matolino's and Kwindingwi's claims, here. They are correct about the undesirable functions of typical narratives of return and also correct that ubuntu is often invoked as part of one in South Africa. However, what follows from those claims with regard to whether ubuntu merits advocacy by an academic?

2 The authors do not engage with the work of those in or associated with South Africa such as Kevin Behrens, Mfuniselwa John Bhengu, Mike Boon, Drucilla Cornell, Michael Oneybuchi Eze, Chuma Himonga, Reuel Khoza, Puleng LenkaBula, Moeketsi Letseka, Nelson Mandela, Lovemore Mbigi, Yvonne Mokgoro, Motsamai Molefe, Mluleki Mnyaka, Munyaradzi Felix Murove, Gessler Muxe Nkondo, Barbara Nussbaum, Leonhard Praeg, Mogobe Ramose, Albie Sachs, Augustine Shutte, Lesiba Joe Teffo, Desmond Tutu, Karin van Marle, Jason van Niekerk or Charles Villa-Vincencio, whom I expect would have responses beyond the ones I make here to the authors' suggestion that ubuntu has reached its end.

As I have made clear above, nothing yet follows about whether ubuntu is a sound ethic, a plausible philosophical account of how to live morally. One might suspect that what does follow is that, even if ubuntu grounded an attractive ethical philosophy, one should not *speak or write about* ubuntu since doing so would reinforce the unwelcome political functions mentioned above. That claim, however, rests on some dubious social scientific claims about the influence of philosophical practice.

Consider: is this very article, which is about ubuntu, likely to support a narrative of return as espoused by South African or other elites in politics and other major institutions? Surely not, if only because they will not read it. And if they did happen to read it, they would presumably encounter Matolino's and Kwindigwi's message, which I have reiterated above and say yet again here, that narratives of return characteristically serve ideological functions (in the perjorative sense) and should be avoided in (South) African political discourse.

Less glibly, I submit that Matolino and Kwindigwi face the following dilemma. Either lecturing and publishing about ubuntu as a philosopher is going to influence the practices of political elites or it is not. If it is not, then one's lecturing and publishing may as well go on ahead, supposing there is some philosophical substance to them (which I address below). If, however, lecturing and publishing about ubuntu can and will influence the practices of political elites, then there is little reason to believe that the influence has to be one of reinforcing their bad practices. Instead, one could, and should, write about ubuntu in a way that criticises them. Supposing influence were forthcoming, it would be up to thinkers and writers to reclaim talk of 'ubuntu', to contest its misuse by elites.

Imagine, though, that Matolino and Kwindigwi could provide good sociological reason to think that philosophical work on ubuntu is most likely to unintentionally reinforce a narrative of return. Even in that case, it would not be obvious that one should stop expounding ubuntu. If the extent of such reinforcement were small, and if the truth or plausibility of ubuntu as a philosophy were great, then one could have all things considered reason to keep spreading the word, at least if philosophical reflection has some value for its own sake.

Ubuntu as a moral theory

Much therefore depends on Matolino's and Kwindigwi's second major claim, that ubuntu is not promising as an ethical theory. If there were nothing philosophically attractive about ubuntu, then that would be good reason for philosophers to drop it, particularly if there were some serious risk of one's philosophising occasioning undesirable social outcomes. Why think that ubuntu stinks as a philosophy?

According to Matolino and Kwindigwi, ubuntu does not apply to contemporary (South) Africa since it is no longer a communitarian society of the sort in which the ethic originated and flourished. In their own words,

What our argument does is simply to point out the lived circumstances that are necessary for the ethic of ubuntu to be a success. Ubuntu, as an ethical theory that is taken to be natural to the people of sub-Saharan Africa, we argue, can only be fully realised in a naturalistic and traditionalistic context of those people. However, such a natural habitat that would favour the chances of ubuntu has largely disappeared because of the irreversible effects of factors such as industrialisation and modernity. The disappearance of such natural and favourable conditions renders ubuntu obsolete. It is obsolete by virtue of the fact that the context in which its values could be recognised is now extinct. We are of the view that in order for these values to be realised they have to be embedded in the strictures of communalism (2013: p. 203).

There are two ways of reading this passage, neither of which I find convincing.

First, one might read the above as suggesting that a theory is appropriate for a society if and only if it was developed or is widely believed there. I do not believe that this is what Matolino and Kwindigwi have in mind, but, since I encounter such a perspective routinely, I dispatch it here.

This account of a theory's truth or applicability is clearly false in the case of scientific theories. The theory that the essence of water is H₂O originated solely in the Western world, but it is universally true. Someone from a society that did not come up with and confirm the claim that water is H₂O would be mistaken if she thought otherwise.

Note that a similar sort of counterexample applies when considering normative, as opposed to descriptive, theories. Take Mill's utilitarianism or Kant's formula of humanity. For most philosophers, whether they are justified moral theories has nothing to do with where they originated or whether the masses already accept them. These principles could be 'true for', or apply to, those living in all societies, even those that are not modern and in which the principles are disbelieved.

And while the phrase above that ubuntu might 'be natural to the people of sub-Saharan Africa' presents a whiff of moral relativism, Matolino and Kwindigwi cannot coherently appeal to that doctrine, for otherwise there would have been no point to them having written their article in which they *argued* that academics should let go of ubuntu. Relativism would entail that they should have rather taken a poll to see what a majority of (South) Africans, or academics there, think about ubuntu and then reported the findings. My hunch is that the findings would not have gone in their favour – and hence the need for them to present argumentation not currently widely accepted against a moral perspective that is widely accepted by those in (South) Africa.

Instead, I suspect that Matolino and Kwindigwi have another, *prima facie* more promising reason for doubting that ubuntu applies to contemporary (South) Africa. They seem to believe that the kinds of behaviours and relationships that ubuntu calls for cannot be exhibited in a modern, urbanised, industrialised and multicultural society. If that were true, then ubuntu would indeed have nothing to offer to twenty-first century ethical and political philosophy, except perhaps an odd and ineffective call to return to a pre-colonial, small-scale way of life.

The question is now what the behaviours and relationships are that Matolino and Kwindigwi believe ubuntu prescribes. Consider, therefore, what they say about ubuntu as an ethic in their article: 'Ubuntu rests on some core values such as humaneness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion' (2013: p. 199). This is one of the clearest statements about what ubuntu essentially consists of according to the authors themselves, as opposed to their reports of how others understand it.³

Now, it certainly seems possible for people currently residing in, say, Johannesburg to live up to these values. Surely, those in large-scale, technologically developed societies can be humane, respectful and compassionate and can share what they have with others. Given the authors' own account of the 'core' of ubuntu, then, there is, so far, no reason to think that it is unique to a pre-industrial, small-scale setting.

There is one more passage that helps to shed light on what the authors plausibly have in mind. They also say this:

The success of ubuntu largely depends on undifferentiated, small and tight-knit communities that are relatively undeveloped. Through mutual recognition and interdependence members of these communities foster the necessary feelings of solidarity that enable the spirit of ubuntu to flourish....Without the existence of such communities the notion of ubuntu becomes only but an appendage to the political desires, wills and manipulations of the elite (2013: p. 202).

The idea appears to be that one can display ubuntu, human excellence as characteristically conceived by indigenous black peoples below the Sahara, only in the context of a society without much division of labour and in which everyone knows everyone else. Only in such a society, so the argument goes, could one find practices such as all able-bodied people in a society moving from farm to farm to help to clear harvests for those living on them (often called '*letsema*' in South Africa), or adults in a village generally looking after the children, or everyone (or at least elected elders) talking until they come to a consensus about how to deal with a controversy

³ The other one is, 'At the core of ubuntu is the idea that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, that is, a person depends on others to be a person' (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013: p. 200).

(‘*lekgotla*’). The prospect of encountering precisely *these kinds* of caring and sharing relationships in Johannesburg is remote. Matolino and Kwindigwi are maintaining.

I have three replies to make to this thoughtful and interesting claim, before concluding. First, recall that another quintessential feature of ubuntu is not a function of intimate relationships, but is instead a matter of being hospitable to strangers. I have in mind the practice, widespread in pre-colonial Africa, of welcoming visitors to a village to the point of sharing one’s best food with him or her, at least for a time (e.g. Mandela 2006a; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2009). Viewing everyone, regardless of whether they are related to oneself, as part of a human family and someone with whom to commune is also a core aspect of ubuntu (as per Shutte 2001: pp. 25–30; Mandela 2006b; Gyekye 2010). These facets of ubuntu are clearly not applicable only to members of ‘small and tight-knit communities that are relatively undeveloped’.

Second, I maintain that ubuntu provides all-things-considered justification for certain relationships in contemporary (South) Africa that admittedly lack ubuntu to some (*pro tanto*) degree. Take a state bureaucracy, for example, in which clients are treated as mere numbers and must conform to a pre-defined system of rules in order to obtain benefits. On the face of it, there is indeed *some* absence of ubuntu here, for there is a lack of a sense of togetherness between clients and bureaucrats and their interaction is not cooperatively determined. They are not fully sharing a way of life.

However, the bureaucrats’ behaviour collectively makes up the agency of the state, which *itself* as an institution needs to exhibit ubuntu with respect to the residents in its territory. Imagine a state that were inconsistent with respect to the way clients are treated, and instead related to them on a contingent basis, depending on how well they get along with given administrators. Such a state would be missing some substantial ubuntu in terms of how it relates to its citizens. For the state as a distinct agent to foster a shared way of life between it and its residents, or to treat their capacity for such sharing as equally valuable, the state needs its administrators generally to maintain distance from clients and to follow impartial rules in how they are treated (on which see Metz 2009b).

Still more, in order for the state to serve large numbers of people efficiently, it must operate according to fairly standardised procedures. Although we tend to think of bureaucracies as being inefficient, sociologists such as Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas have known for a long while that they are much more efficient than anything else that has been tried out when it comes to dealing with the interests of mass society. One major part of ubuntu is sharing a way of life, but another is caring for others’ quality of life. Since the state must be concerned for its people and do what it takes to meet their needs, it must reduce some ubuntu when it comes to identifying closely with clients in order to produce much more ubuntu when it comes to improving the quality of their lives (cf. Metz 2010b: pp. 386–387). I strongly suspect that a similar argument applies to a market-oriented economy (though probably not a full-blown capitalist one).

Matolino and Kwindigwi would likely respond that ubuntu is a matter of the *intense* realisation of *both* sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life, so that the relative absence of either one means that ubuntu has disappeared. In reply, I think another interpretation is no less plausible, namely, that ubuntu as a plausible ethical theory prescribes honouring relationships of sharing and caring and, as a corollary, doing what it takes in a given circumstance to strike a decent balance between the two. *Ideally* one would ‘max out’ along both dimensions of identifying with others and working to improve their lives, but conditions do not always permit the ideal to be realised.

My third response to Matolino’s and Kwindigwi’s suggestion that it is impossible to exhibit ubuntu in contemporary (South) Africa is to contend that much more sharing and caring is in fact possible in it. Return to the above three examples of ubuntu in more simple, traditional societies and consider how something akin to them could be realised precisely in a place like present-day Johannesburg.

First, recall the practice of *letsema*, where instead of those living on a piece of land being solely responsible for gathering up the produce from it, all those who had harvesting to do would collectively move from field to field to help one another. How might such a practice be realised in today’s (South) Africa?

Here is one idea, which involves planting seeds more than reaping plants. What if the government asked everyone in society to lend a hand to help improve education and then coordinated their contributions? Of course, the state should do what it can to fund and otherwise improve public education as usual, but it could also work to organise the efforts of many other, private agents. For instance, it might ask: construction companies to put up some rooms that would serve as a school library (or a chemistry centre, or chess club, etc.); wealthier individuals with extra books to donate some to the libraries, taking the time to collect from houses in their neighbourhoods; and retired persons from the local community to volunteer their time to run the library. And it could widely publicise, on the internet, radio and television, a list of who has contributed and how, indicating to society how far it has come towards its goal of X number of new libraries and how far it has yet to go.

A state that mobilised a wide array of actors to help achieve a common goal in this way would exhibit and foster a lot of ubuntu in one shot: it would improve social cohesion, enable people to give their time and other resources towards a concrete and desirable goal, and of course help to improve students' education. Similar kinds of projects could be done in a variety of areas.

Second, if it takes a village to rear a child, then why not create a village? What if a government designed city housing so that a dozen or so units formed a collective compound reserved for those with children and those interested in supporting them? Perhaps the units form a circle, so that the middle is a play area for children, on which all adults could then keep an eye. Maybe the units are spaced far enough apart for there to be privacy, and yet they are close enough for others to hear if there is serious fighting and abuse. Possibly the compound requires a certain balance in terms of the genders and ages of its residents, and it might favour some women with children who have suffered abuse and need shelter. It might be that two or three of the residents stay home to watch over the younger children during the day, and that they are financially supported by others who work outside the compound or by the state. One could suppose that there is a collective area where all children do their homework, or that there is a compound rule that no one may play outside until her homework is done, or that television broadcasts are turned off between 16:30 and 19:00. It could be that the parents meet together every two weeks or so to talk about parenting issues or matters of collective concern regarding the compound, or that they listen to outside experts such as social workers and child psychologists during this time.

Third, with regard to *lekgotla*, contemporary sub-Saharan political philosophers from a variety of places on the continent are well known for having proposed consensus-based models of democracy for large-scale, modern societies. For instance, Kwasi Wiredu (2000) has famously put forward a proposal for a 'non-party polity' in which legislators, who have been elected by a majority of the populace (such being practically necessary in urban environments), would not be affiliated with a particular constituency for the sake of which they would jockey for a majority of votes; instead, they would propose policies that they think are good for the public as a whole, and would adopt only those that are the object of unanimous agreement among themselves. Similar models have been suggested by many other theorists, including the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1992), the Congolese theologian Bénézet Bujo (2009) and South Africa's Mogobe Ramose (1999: pp. 135–152) and Lesiba Teffo (2004).

There is, of course, little chance of the Constitution being altered to require parliamentarians to come to consensus in order to ratify legislation. However, the dominant political majority of our time in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), could readily be less opportunistic with regard to the power it has legally secured. Considerations of ubuntu entail that it should be doing much more to promote a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, government of national unity. Above all, it should make appointments based much more on qualifications, including integrity, and much less on party membership and patronage, so as to do what is much more likely to improve citizens' quality of life. In addition, for the sake of sharing a way of life with them, it could appoint more persons to cabinet who are not necessarily ANC members, as well as consult, and more generally meaningfully engage, with those likely to be affected by proposals as well as with experts who are not part of the government. Working together, South Africans could do more! Or so ubuntu plausibly entails.

Conclusion: traditional ethics for contemporary Africa

Dear Reader, do the above examples pique your interest? Do they merit not only more ethical reflection, but also psycho-socio-politico investigation to see whether they would be practically feasible? Do they deserve to be tried out in pilot programmes to see whether they are successful?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to these questions, then you agree with me that ubuntu is far from at an end. It is rather just getting started, in the sense of now being in a terrific position to steer away from undesirable ways of life with which it has been associated, such as sexism and conservatism, and to incorporate the insights of science, the benefits of technology and, more generally, the desirable facets of modernity.⁴

I conclude by articulating in a little more detail the ethical theory that underlies the above examples of how contemporary society could be organised so as to manifest more ubuntu. Why are they so attractive, or at the very least not to be dismissed? My suggestion is that they are grounded on a moral principle that is philosophically powerful and under-explored in the international literature (Metz 2011; Metz and Gaie 2010).

I have said that ubuntu, when interpreted as an ethical theory, is well understood to prescribe honouring relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life. Sharing a way of life is roughly a matter of enjoying a sense of togetherness and engaging in joint projects, while caring for others’ quality of life consists of doing what is likely to make others better off for their sake and typically consequent to sympathy with them. Notice that the combination of these two relationships is more or less what English speakers mean by ‘friendship’ or a broad sense of ‘love’. To be friendly (or loving) is basically to identify with another and to act for her sake and out of sympathy.

Consider, now, that friendliness (or love) has not grounded any influential contemporary ethical theory, conceived as a principle that purports to capture what all wrong (or, conversely, right) actions have in common. The dominant players have been utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractualism, egoism, divine command theory and virtue theory. The idea that an act is impermissible (roughly) because it is unfriendly is a novel idea when construed as a theoretical account of what in general makes actions wrong. A prescription for individuals to be friendly and to spread friendliness (at least among those similarly disposed) is what probably underlies practices such as *letsema*, *lekgotla* and the potential modern refurbishments of them that I sketched above.

Such an ethic is what I, as an analytic moral philosopher, have found so promising in the African tradition and what I have sought to articulate, refine, apply and export to a local and international audience. That project has only just begun, and I hope the reader agrees that it is worth continuing as one that merits pride on behalf of sub-Saharanans and does so because it is so philosophically interesting and compelling.

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4 For another, extensive defence of a similar conclusion, see Eze (2010).

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