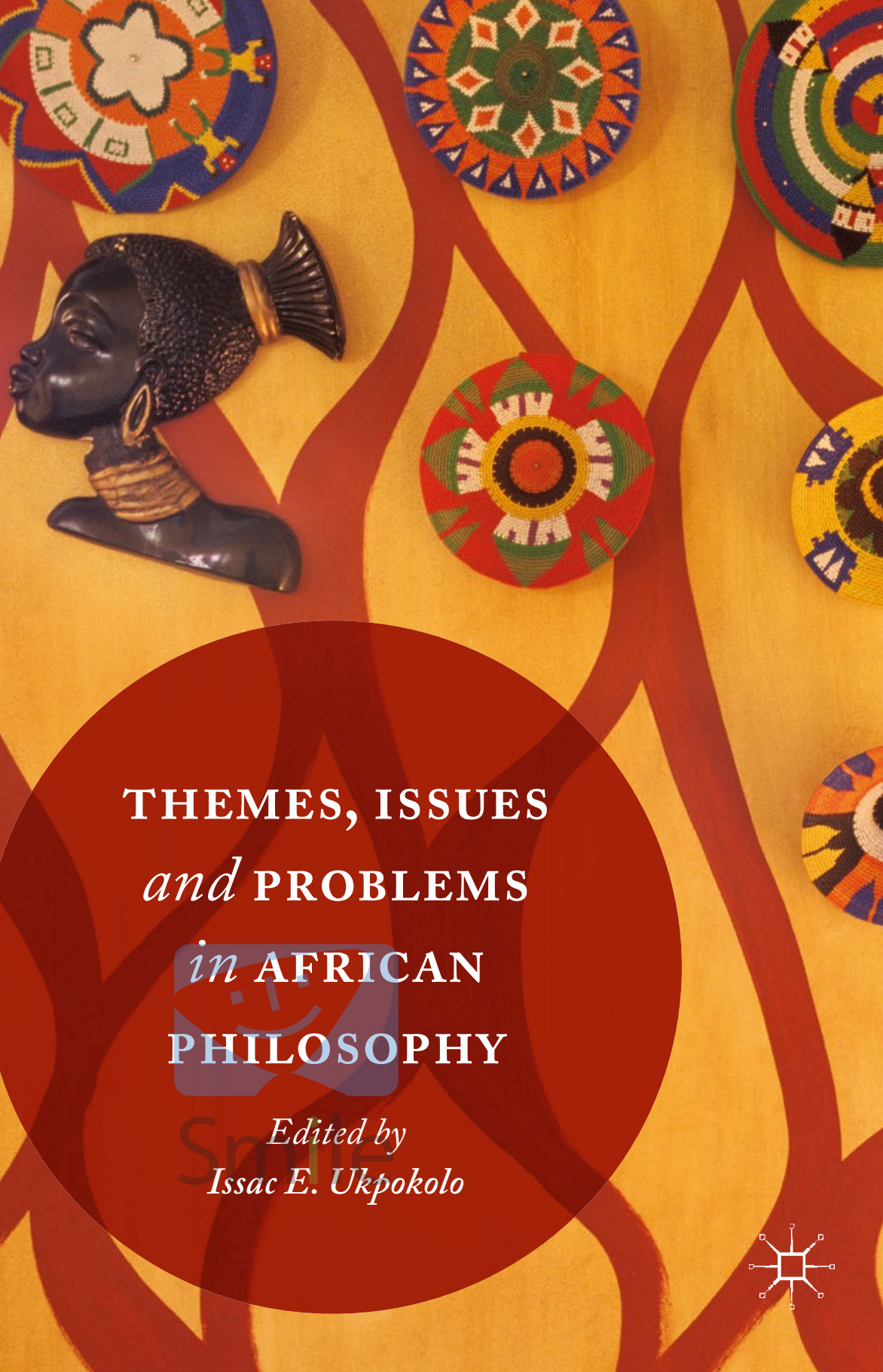

THEMES, ISSUES *and* PROBLEMS *in* AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy

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Toward an African Moral Theory (Revised Edition)

Thaddeus Metz

In the literature on African ethics, one finds relatively little that consists of normative theorization with regard to right action, that is, the articulation and justification of a comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones.[1] By "African ethics" I mean values associated with the largely black and Bantu-speaking peoples indigenous to the sub-Saharan part of the continent, thereby excluding Islamic Arabs in North Africa and white Afrikaners in South Africa, among others. The field lacks a well-defended general principle grounding particular duties that is informed by such values and that could be compared to dominant Western theories, such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons. In this essay, I aim to help develop such a principle.[2]

[1] One more often finds something closer to moral anthropology or cultural studies, that is, discussion recounting the ethical practices or norms of a certain African people. For representative examples, see Anthony Kirk-Greene, "Mutumin Kirki: the concept of the good man in Hausa," reprinted in *African Philosophy: An Anthology,* ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), ch. 14; and John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji, "Ethics and morality in Yoruba culture," *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 396–403. I do not mean to disparage these discussions; I aim merely to distinguish them from this one.

[2] I focus exclusively on right action and set aside issues of good character (e.g., motives, virtues), saving them for another occasion.

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Some have approximated this project on occasion, but no one has made it a primary aim that has been pursued in a systematic, analytic way.[3] Furthermore, the attempts so far, in my judgment, err in one of two major ways. Some advocate principles that clearly cannot capture core aspects of African values and hence are "too Western." Others suggest principles that promise to capture them but cannot as they stand since they are too vague or limited. My goal is to present an ethical principle that not only grows out of African soil and differs from what is widespread in the West, but that also is specific and complete—or that at least has more of these qualities than what one has for a long while been able to find in the literature.

I begin by clarifying the nature of my project in more detail (section "Clarification of the Project"). I explain that I seek a theory of rightness that rationally reconstructs primarily those values associated with talk of *ubuntu* and cognate terms for morality that are prevalent among sub-Saharan Africans. I also present criteria by which to judge whether a theory of right action grounded on *ubuntu* is acceptable. I evaluate a theory by the extent to which it accounts for two classes of particular moral judgments, those that are deemed uncontroversial to more or less the same degree by both Africans and Westerners, and those that tend to be deemed uncontroversial more by Africans than by Westerners. In the following section, I distinguish between six distinct theories that are found in, or suggested by, the literature on African ethics, and I contend that one promises to account for all these commonsensical intuitions much better than the others (section "*Ubuntu* as a Moral Theory"). Then, I refine the theory in a crucial respect so that it is more precise and complete (section "Developing the Favoured Account"). I conclude the paper by noting several ways in which the theory still needs to be developed in future work (section "Conclusion: Topics for Future Work").

Clarification of the Project

In seeking to construct an African theory of right action, my aim is to develop a principle that indigenous sub-Saharan Africans ought to believe, given their adherence to claims they typically deem to be less controversial than the proposed principle. Hence, this largely epistemic project is neither simply moral

[3] Others reject this essay's aim outright, maintaining either that there is nothing about African morality that significantly differs from Western morality, or that, while there are important differences, African morality cannot be codified and is to be known merely on a "know it when I see it" basis. For the former criticism, see Mamphela Ramphele cited in Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke, "Can *ubuntu* provide a model for citizenship education in African democracies?" *Comparative Education,* 40 (2004), 548. For the latter, see Yvonne Mokgoro, "*Ubuntu* and the law in South Africa," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal,* 1 (1998), 16. My chapter as a whole, if successful, refutes both objections.

anthropology nor even straightforwardly normative ethics. First, it is not merely descriptive, for I am not just recounting what sub-Saharan Africans, or a majority of them, happen to believe about rightness. I go beyond moral anthropology in that I seek to unify variegated commonsensical beliefs and to argue that one such unification (which may not be widely held) is better than others. Second, this project is also not plainly prescriptive, for I do not assert that the favoured theory is in fact true—in other words, that people should indeed conform to it. I argue that there is strong epistemic reason to hold it, in relation to certain moral intuitions common to sub-Saharan Africa and in comparison to other theoretical expressions of African morality. I do not claim that the theory is more justified than any non-African conception of morality, let alone that it corresponds to the moral facts. My goal is to present a fundamental and general principle prescribing right actions that is epistemically justified relative to the circumscribed set of African competitors and that could in future work be paired up against Western moral theories.

To obtain focus in the search for an attractive African normative principle, I address the (English-speaking) literature that comes closest to my project. Most of this literature analyzes the values associated with the term *ubuntu* and related terms in sub-Saharan Africa and draws out their practical implications for political power, workplace organization and the like. *Ubuntu* is a word used by the Nguni-speaking people of South Africa,[4] and it is difficult to translate into English because it has many different connotations associated with it.[5] Roughly, it means humanness, and it often figures into the maxim that "a person is a person through other persons." This maxim has descriptive senses, to the effect that one's identity as a human being causally and even metaphysically depends on a community. It also has prescriptive senses, to the effect that one ought to be a *mensch*, or, in other words, morally support others in certain ways. Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Peace Prize winner renowned for supervising the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), provides a rough gloss of the normative connotations of *ubuntu*:

> When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "*Yu, u nobuntu*"; "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours."[6]

[4] There are cognate terms and associated ideas associated in at least all the other Bantu languages of sub-Saharan Africa, such as *Hunhu* in Shona (Zimbabwe) and *Utu* in Swahili (Kenya), on which see Johann Broodryk, *Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 2002), p. 14.

[5] For discussion of the etymology of *ubuntu*, see Mogobe Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), pp. 49–53, and "The ethics of *ubuntu*," *Philosophy from Africa*, 2nd edn, ed. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 324–28.

[6] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 31.

In this chapter, I critically discuss the ways that the literature construes *ubuntu* as grounding a normative ethical theory of right action (or at least brings to mind such a construal), analytically setting aside *ubuntu* as a comprehensive worldview or a description of a way of life as a whole.

To give the reader more of a sense of what the morality of *ubuntu* involves, and to present some criteria for an adequate moral theory, I here review some intuitions that most friends of *ubuntu* firmly hold. More specifically, it will be revealing to distinguish between two groups of such intuitions, those held by Westerners and Africans to roughly the same extent, and those more often held by Africans than by Westerners. I seek a theory inspired by *ubuntu* that best accounts for both groups of intuitions.

First, consider particular moral judgments that are commonly accepted by both adherents of *ubuntu* and Western people in modern, industrialized, constitutional democracies. For both groups, it is by and large uncontroversially *pro tanto* immoral:

A. to kill innocent people for money.
B. to have sex with someone without her consent.
C. to deceive people, at least when not done in self- or other-defence.
D. to steal (that is, to take from their rightful owner) unnecessary goods.
E. to violate trust, for example, to break a promise, for marginal personal gain.
F. to discriminate on a racial basis when allocating opportunities.

I take it these judgments are self-explanatory, needing no elaboration.

Before sketching the intuitions that I maintain indigenous Africans hold more often than Westerners, I warn the reader that I do not mean to suggest that all sub-Saharan societies, let alone all individuals in them, hold these intuitions. What I claim are moral judgments more common among Africans than Westerners are values that have been more widespread in the sub-Saharan part of the continent than in Europe, North America or Australasia. They are values that have been more often found across not only a certain wide array of space, from Ghana to South Africa, but also across a long span of time in that space, from traditional societies to the contemporary African intellectual milieu. They are also values that recur more often in the literature on African ethics than in that on Western ethics. So I am speaking of tendencies, not essences. If I am to develop a moral theory that has an African pedigree and differs from what one standardly finds in Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, then it will be important to find a principle that entails and well explains these kinds of intuitions. Because they might be less familiar to the Western reader, I

provide a brief explanation of them. More often for Africans than for Westerners, then, it is uncontroversially *pro tanto* immoral:

G. to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus.

In the political realm, unanimity is prized and majoritarianism is typically seen as a morally inadequate way to resolve conflicts of interest or to determine law. In many small-scale African communities, discussion continues until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree to the outcome.[7] Some contemporary African philosophers have sought to extend consensus-based decision-making to a modern, urban setting, proposing fascinating and under-explored models of representative democracy quite different from the winner-take-all system in the United States and the parliamentary systems in Europe. For instance, drawing on the consensual politics of the Akan people in Ghana, Kwasi Wiredu advocates a "non-party polity," a type of democratic system in which a candidate who wins a majority of votes would not represent a party once in office, but would instead represent the public as a whole. That is, a representative who has been elected would not aim to promote his constituency's interests, but would instead share power with other representatives by seeking consensus with them in the adoption of every statute.[8]

H. to make retribution a fundamental and central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to seeking reconciliation.

By "retribution" I mean any consideration that could be invoked to justify punishing a law-breaker fundamentally for, and in proportion to, wrongdoing. For example, one retributive reason to punish an offender could be the bare fact that he justly deserves condemnation because of, and to the same degree as, his having done wrong in the past. In contrast to such a backward-looking rationale for punishment, many African communities believe it appropriate to respond to crime with the expectation of a good result of some sort, whether to appease angry ancestors and thereby protect the community from their wrath, or to mend a broken relationship between the offender, his

[7] For an anthropological overview of traditional African politics and the role of consensus in it, see the classic text, Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, eds, *African Political Systems* (London: Kegan Paul, 1994).

[8] See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pt. 4. See also Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, pp. 135–53.

victim and the community.[9] For two examples from South Africa, an *ubuntu* ethic is usually credited for helping to ground a restorative, rather than punitive, response to apartheid-era political crimes in the form of the TRC,[10] and the justices of the South African Constitutional Court have uniformly judged *ubuntu* to be incompatible with the death penalty or any retributive reasoning that could underwrite it.[11]

I. to create wealth largely on a competitive basis as opposed to a cooperative one.

In many traditional African societies land is ultimately owned in common, and it is held that labour should be undertaken for the sake of the community, neither in order to make a profit in light of demand nor simply to care for one's immediate family.[12] The "empire building" of a Warren Buffett is anathema here, where the point of work should not be to amass wealth for oneself or for its own sake, but rather to benefit others. That is one reason why so many African societies adopted (quasi-)socialist economic systems after independence in the post-war era; free markets seemed, if not inherently wrong, then at least something that would hinder morally desirable behaviour. And one continues to find contemporary African thinkers railing against Western "brash competitiveness,"[13] "single-minded commercialism,"[14] "unbridled individualism"[15] and "morally blind, purely economic logic,"[16] instead tending to favour certain kinds of cooperatives.

[9] "Law…directs how individuals and communities should behave towards each other. Its whole object is to maintain an equilibrium, and the penalties of African law are directed, not against specific infractions, but to the restoration of this equilibrium", J. H. Driberg, "The African conception of law," *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 16 (1934): 231. For a concrete example among the Akan in Ghana, see Kwasi Wiredu, "Moral foundations of an African culture," *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies,* ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), p. 204. For another example among the Tiv in Nigeria, see Richard Miller, *Moral Differences* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 21–8.

[10] On which see Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

[11] Constitutional Court of South Africa, *The State vs T Makwanyane and M Mchunu* Case CCT 3/94 (1995).

[12] See, e.g., Leo Marquard and T. G. Standing, *The Southern Bantu* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), esp. pp. 20–32; Stanlake Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwean Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Harare: Graham Publishing Company, 1980), esp. pp. 80–7; and Segun Gbadegesin, "Yoruba philosophy: individuality, community, and moral order," *African Philosophy*, ed. Eze, pp. 132–3.

[13] Broodryk, *Ubuntu*, p. 54; cf. pp. 66–7.

[14] Wiredu, "Moral foundations of an African culture," p. 202.

[15] N. K. Dzobo, "Values in a changing society: man, ancestors and God," *Person and Community*, ed. Wiredu and Gyekye, p. 226.

[16] Godfrey Tangwa, "The HIV/AIDS pandemic, African traditional values and the search for a vaccine in Africa," reprinted in *Ethics & AIDS in Africa,* ed. Anton van Niekerk and Loretta Kopelman (Claremont:

J. to distribute wealth largely on the basis of individual rights, as opposed to need.

The requirements of an individual to help others are typically deemed heavier in African than in Western morality. People in the West tend to think that individual rights should largely determine the resources one may possess; for example, one has a right to keep what one deserves for having been productive, a right to shares in virtue of having contributed to a cooperative scheme, or a right to keep what one has received by voluntary transfer from a previous owner. Giving to others what they have no right to is not thought of as upholding a duty but as being generous. In contrast, a greater percentage of Africans think that one is morally obligated to help others, roughly to the extent that one can and that others need, with rights not figuring into the analysis of how much one ought to transfer wealth, time or labour.[17] Illustrative is the parable of the cow (and similar widespread sayings): "[I]f you have two cows and the milk of the first cow is sufficient for your own consumption, *Ubuntu* expects you to donate the milk of the second cow to your underprivileged brothers and sisters."[18] Conversely, more Africans than Westerners think that it is permissible to take goods such as food without others' consent, so long as one does not overdo it.[19]

K. to ignore others and violate communal norms, as opposed to acknowledging others, upholding tradition and partaking in rituals.

A nice illustration of this point is a study recounted by Augustine Shutte in his book devoted to *ubuntu*.[20] He notes a survey that was taken of two groups of nuns at a convent. After the obligatory chores and praying were done, the study found that the German nuns often continued to work by knitting or sewing, while the African nuns did not and instead spent time in

David Philip Publishers, 2005), p. 181.

[17] For discussion, see Wiredu, "Moral foundations of an African culture," pp. 198–202; Kwame Gyekye, "Person and community in African thought," *Person and Community*, ed. Wiredu and Gyekye, pp. 113–21; Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, pp. 150–1; and D. A. Masolo, "Western and African communitarianism: a comparison," *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Wiredu, esp. pp. 488–96.

[18] Walter Sisulu, quoted in Broodryk, *Ubuntu*, pp. vii; see also pp. 1, 36–39.

[19] Tangwa, "The HIV/AIDS pandemic, African traditional values and the search for a vaccine in Africa," p. 180; and Heidi Verhoef and Claudine Michel, "Studying morality within the African context," *Journal of Moral Education*, 26 (1997), 399. Note that such taking would not count as "stealing" since the person in possession of the item is presumably not its rightful owner in light of the other's need for it.

[20] Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for the New South Africa* (Cape Town: Cluster Publications, 2001), pp. 27–8.

conversation. The study noted that each group of sisters deemed the other morally lacking; the Germans judged the Africans insufficiently diligent, while the Africans considered the Germans to objectionably care more about practical matters than about people. More generally, it is common among Africans, more so than among Westerners, to think that one has some moral obligation to engage with one's fellows and to support the community's way of life.[21] This does not mean that African values forbid individuality, creativity or nonconformity, but it does mean that some weight in moral thinking is given to whether behaviour upsets communal norms.[22]

L. to fail to marry and procreate, as opposed to creating a family.

Many African people think there is some strong moral reason to extend familial relationships by finding a (heterosexual) spouse and having children.[23] Polygamy is often permitted, and indeed welcomed, because of its effectiveness at generating more children than monogamy would.[24] The point is not merely that, having wed, one is morally obligated to keep one's vows, or that, having had children, one is obligated to ensure they are well cared for; these norms are of course quite widespread in Western societies. The point is rather the stronger claim that one has some obligation to wed and procreate in the first place, a view that is much less common in the West.

We now have twelve firm moral intuitions, six both Western and African and six more African than Western, by which to evaluate moral theories in the rest of this essay. I seek to discover a principle that both entails and well explains all twelve. The field is not yet aware of such a principle, and it is my task in the rest of this chapter to find one.

More specifically, I make it my task to find a principle that captures all of the commonsensical moral judgments outlined above and that is fundamentally secular. There is debate about the respects in which religion and morality relate to each other in African thinking, with some arguing that religion is

[21] John Mbiti, the influential scholar of African thought, makes this point and is approvingly cited in Dzobo, "Values in a changing society," p. 229.

[22] The standard objection to African ethics is that it is overly restrictive of individual liberty, sometimes called the "dark side" of *ubuntu*. For discussion, see Dirk Louw, "*Ubuntu* and the challenges of multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa," *Quest,* 15 (2001), esp. pp. 19–26.

[23] Dzobo, "Values in a changing society," pp. 227, 233; Wiredu, "Moral foundations of an African Culture," p. 205; Godfrey Tangwa, "Bioethics: an African perspective," *Bioethics,* 10 (1996), 194–5; Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 6–7, 34–54.

[24] Ramose, "The ethics of *ubuntu*," p. 329.

foundational with respect to morality and others denying it.[25] Based on my familiarity with this literature, I think it is clear that at least many African societies are best interpreted as believing moral norms to be logically independent of theism. And if I am correct below that reference to supernatural elements is unnecessary to account well for the twelve intuitions, then this essay may be read as supporting such an interpretation. However, I am not out to defend an anthropological representation of the nature of African belief systems here; I instead *stipulate* that I seek to develop a moral theory that is non-religious at its base. I do so partly since I favour ethical naturalism on meta-ethical grounds, and partly since it is a sufficiently large and coherent project to critically analyze those accounts of *ubuntu* that make no reference at bottom to, say, ancestors or God (but that could account for the right way to relate to these spiritual beings, supposing they exist).

Ubuntu as a Moral Theory

In this section, I point out that there are six competing theoretical interpretations of *ubuntu* to be found in the literature. I distinguish between them and argue that one promises to do much better than the other five at accounting for all twelve of the intuitions canvassed in the previous section (which is not to say that I believe it is adequate as it stands). Here is the first account of *ubuntu* as a moral theory:

U1: *An action is right just insofar as it respects a person's dignity; an act is wrong to the extent that it degrades humanity.*

This principled rendition of *ubuntu* states that there is value intrinsic to something about human nature that demands honouring. It is inspired by some remarks of members of the South African Constitutional Court, which has on occasion appealed to the value of *ubuntu* when making legal decisions. For instance, Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks: "[H]uman rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person. This, in my view, is not different from what the spirit of *ubuntu* embraces."[26]

[25] Some key texts include J. N. Kudadjie, "Does religion determine morality in African societies?" *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, ed. J. S. Pobee (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 60–77; Wiredu, "Moral foundations of an African culture"; Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); M. Akin Makinde, "African culture and moral systems," *Second Order,* 1 (1988), 1-27; Gbadegesin, "Yoruba philosophy"; and Peter Kasenene, *Religious Ethics in Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1998).

[26] Justice Yvonne Mokgoro of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, *The State versus T Makwanyane and M Mchunu*, para. 309. See also the remarks of Justice Langa in the same case, para. 225.

One might suspect from the judge's remarks that her conception of the dignity of humanity is Kantian, or in other words that she deems what is special about human beings to be their capacity for free will or reasoned choice. However, Kantian respect for persons is a classically Western theory that cannot easily accommodate many of the African but not Western intuitions discussed above. In particular, if respect for humanity means respect for the capacity for autonomy, then the theory has difficulty accounting for the moral duties to prize reconciliation over retribution in criminal justice (H), to uphold tradition and rituals in civil society (K), or to procreate in the family (L).

Fortunately, there is another way to construe Justice Mokgoro's remarks regarding respect for human dignity, namely, in terms of honouring human life.[27] Another African thinker, Godfrey Onah, thinks that such a principle grounds African values:

> At the centre of traditional African morality is human life. Africans have a sacred reverence for life….To protect and nurture their lives, all human beings are inserted within a given community….The promotion of life is therefore the determinant principle of African traditional morality and this promotion is guaranteed only in the community. Living harmoniously within a community is therefore a moral obligation ordained by God for the promotion of life.[28]

While this conception of respect for human dignity is more African in flavour than the Kantian conception, I submit that it also fails to account for several of the intuitions. If respect means treating human life as the most important intrinsic value in the world, then it cannot easily account for the wrongness of deceiving (C) and breaking promises (E), for such actions need not eradicate, impair or degrade life. In addition, it is unclear how respect for life provides reason to seek consensus when establishing policy (G) or to cooperate rather than compete when generating wealth (I).

In reply, the quotation from Onah suggests that communal harmony will have the function of protecting life, where lies, distrust, dissensus and competition would undermine community.[29] That might well be true for small-scale societies. If there were much conflict in them, they would be much less effective at hunting, farming, rearing children and dealing with aggressive

[27] She says that "life and dignity are like two sides of the same coin. The concept of *ubuntu* embodies them both" (*Ibid*., para. 311).

[28] Godfrey Onah, "The meaning of peace in African traditional religion and culture" [http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/goddionah.htm]. See also Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, esp. pp. 2, 52, 62, 66, 88; and Francis Deng, "Human rights in the African context," *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Wiredu, pp. 499–508.

[29] Cf. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, p. 88.

neighbouring groups. However, that is to posit a merely contingent relationship between the protection of life, on the one hand, and truth-telling, promise-keeping, consensus-seeking and cooperating, on the other. In modern societies, for example, life is not threatened by the occasional or even somewhat common absence of such actions, and yet many Africans would find them morally appropriate even in such a context. The principle of respect for life therefore fails to account for a number of core values associated with *ubuntu*, leading me to consider another principle.

U2: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to enhance the welfare of one's fellows.*

As opposed to the respect-based understanding of *ubuntu* in U1, U2 is a more utilitarian understanding. Something like it is a common interpretation in the literature, advocated by the renowned philosophers from Ghana, Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, both of whom conceive of African morality as a function of improving people's quality of life. Wiredu speaks of "the harmonization of interests as the *means*, and the securing of human well being as the *end* of all moral endeavor," and he is partial to the Golden Rule, while Gyekye mentions that "norms, ideals, and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect, and concern for others; in fine, any action or behavior that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others."[30]

The problem facing this construal of *ubuntu* is the problem facing just about any welfarism: An exclusive focus on human well-being has notorious difficulties grounding constraints, for example, against stealing (D) or discriminating (F) as means to the greater good, at least when done without the knowledge of those intuitively wronged. To avoid this problem, consider a theory that includes such constraints at a fundamental level.

U3: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others without violating their rights; an act is wrong to the extent that it either violates rights or fails to enhance the welfare of one's fellows without violating rights.*

[30] Kwasi Wiredu, "Custom and morality: a comparative analysis of some African and western conceptions of morals," *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 65; Gyekye, "Person and community in African thought," p. 109. For other largely welfarist interpretations of African morality, see Tangwa, "Bioethics," esp. pp. 189, 192; Polycarp Ikuenobe, "Moral education and moral reasoning in traditional African cultures," *The Journal of Value Inquiry,* 32 (1998), 25–42; and Bewaji, "Ethics and morality in Yoruba culture."

Gyekye advocates this view, which he calls "moderate communitarianism," when he says, "Even though in its basic thrust and concerns it gives prominence to duties toward the community and its members, it does not—cannot—do so to the detriment of individual rights whose existence and value it recognizes, or should recognize."[31] Different interpretations of the view will have different accounts of the relevant rights and of what counts as their violation.

We need not specify which rights there are and what it is to violate them in order to know that this theory has difficulty accounting for all the intuitions at stake. In particular, consensus (G), cooperation (I) and tradition (K), which are *pro tanto* morally desirable from many an African perspective, can be inefficient as ways to promote human welfare. Much social science indicates that people's quality of life—whether understood in terms of pleasurable experiences, satisfied desires, met needs or objective functionings—is raised most effectively with majoritarianism in politics, labour and consumer markets in economics, and innovative and unconventional behaviour in civil society. Let us therefore consider a conception of the good other than well-being, which the next theory offers.

U4: *An action is right just insofar as it fosters self-realization by positively relating to others; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one's valuable nature as a social being.*

This is probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature.[32] Many thinkers take the maxim "a person is a person through other persons" to be a call for an agent to develop her personhood. Shutte, whose book I mentioned above, captures *ubuntu* this way:

> [T]he moral life is seen as a process of personal growth….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.[33]

And Mogobe Ramose, author of another useful book on *ubuntu*, says that "to be a human be-ing is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them….One is

[31] Gyekye, "Person and community in African thought," p. 121.

[32] In addition to quotations in the text from Shutte and Ramose, see Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, pp. 156-57; Mokgoro, "*Ubuntu* and the law in South Africa," p. 3; Drucilla Cornell and Karin van Marle, "Exploring *ubuntu*: tentative reflections," *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 5 (2005), 206; and perhaps Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, pp. 87–94.

[33] Shutte, *Ubuntu*, p. 30.

enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being."[34] Instead of others' welfare being the relevant good for a moral agent to promote, here it is the realization of one's distinctively human and valuable nature, specifically, one's special ability to engage in communal relationships. One is reminded of the young Marx's views[35] and, of course, ultimately of Aristotle's.

This theory will vary depending on how our social nature or capacity for communion gets cashed out. As with the previous theory, however, we do not need to specify the present one in order to become aware of serious problems. I submit that its fundamental emphasis on self-realization has counter-intuitive implications. Suppose that you need a new kidney to survive and that no one will give one to you. Then, to maximize your self-realization, you would need to kill another innocent person so as to acquire his organs. Of course, in killing you would not be realizing yourself, for the theory says that to realize yourself you must do so by positively supporting other persons in some way. However, since you can positively support other persons *in the long term* only by remaining alive, which in this case requires killing another person, the theory counter-intuitively seems to permit murder for one's own benefit (A).

A straightforward way to resolve this problem would be to build constraints into the theory, so that an act is right if and only if it develops one's social nature without violating the rights of others. That manoeuvre avoids the counter-example. However, this version of the self-realization theory still faces the problem that it can never permit, let alone require, giving up one's life for others (J), even for one's children,[36] since one's self-realization would thereby end.[37] At this point, the friend of *ubuntu qua* self-realization must argue that sacrificing one's life for another person would be such a high "spike" in the expression of one's communal nature that one could not express more of it if one were instead to stay alive.[38]

One can obviously question whether killing oneself when necessary to help others is invariably a way to maximize the realization of one's communal nature. However, I shall grant the claim, which, if true, probably enables the present theory to *entail* all the intuitions I have laid out. I now question the

[34] Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, p. 52.

[35] See especially the infrequently read fragment "On James Mill," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings,* ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 114–22.

[36] Consider Tangwa's remark about his people from Cameroon: "Every Nso' person would prefer his/her own death to that of his/her child" (Tangwa, "Bioethics," p. 194).

[37] Assuming, as I do, a naturalist interpretation of the self-realization theory, something neither Shutte nor Ramose does.

[38] This is the way that Aristotle deals with the problem, according to Erik Wielenberg, "Egoism and *eudaimonia*-maximization in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy,* 26 (2004), 277–95.

theory's ability to provide an attractive *explanation* of them. If I ask why I should help others, for example, this theory says that the basic justificatory reason to do so (though not my proper motive for doing so) is that it will help *me* by making me more of a *mensch* or a better person. However, a better fundamental explanation of why I ought to help others appeals not to the fact that it would be good for me, or at least not merely to this fact, but to the fact that it would (likely) be good *for them*, an explanation that a self-realization ethic by definition cannot invoke. Note that one can agree that acting for the sake of others is either constitutive of, or a means to, one's own good without holding, as per the present theory, that it is one's own good that has fundamental moral worth.

Before turning to the remaining two accounts of *ubuntu* as a moral theory, notice that the above four ground morality on something internal to the individual, whether it be her life (U1), well-being (U2), rights (U3) or self-realization (U4). A different understanding of the morality of *ubuntu* includes the idea that moral value fundamentally lies not in the individual, but rather in a *relationship* between individuals. The distinction here is similar to that between individualism and holism in environmental ethics. One might morally value something about animals as they are in isolation (capacity for pleasure, subject of a life), on the one hand, or as being members of certain groups (species, ecosystems), on the other. Similarly, one might morally value something about people as they are in themselves or as being part of, or at least capable of, certain relationships. The idea that relational properties of some kinds have basic moral status is not often found in Anglo-American or Continental normative theory,[39] but it is well worth considering. It is a banality to say that dominant Western moral views are "individualistic" and African ones are "communitarian," and so it is odd that the most common theoretical interpretations of *ubuntu*, which I have explored above, are all more the former than the latter. Let us now consider some properly communitarian renditions of *ubuntu*.

U5: *An action is right just insofar as it is in solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to support a vulnerable community.*

One of the first and most cited books on *ubuntu* advocates this understanding of the basic idea. Its authors say, "Ubuntu is…a concept of brotherhood and collective unity for survival among the poor in every society,"

[39] The closest one gets is the ethic of care and certain strains of communitarianism, far from dominant views these days. See the next section for a brief contrast between the favoured conception of *ubuntu* as a moral theory and these Western views.

and "Disadvantaged groups anywhere in the world survive through collective consciousness and collective unity on all survival issues such as liberation, rent boycotts, strikes and mass actions. The authors of this book refer to this as the *solidarity principle* or *ubuntu*."[40]

This understanding of *ubuntu* is obviously too narrow to be an acceptable moral theory. For one, it prescribes actions only to certain agents, the destitute, and not to others. And even if it were broadened to include all agents (which U5 does), it would still be too limited for prescribing to them the single end of survival, or, again more broadly, flourishing. Surely not every right action is one likely to realize the end of improving the lot of the worst-off. For instance, keeping one's promises (E), seeking consensus in political choice (G), engaging in communal rituals (K) and raising a family (L) are, for many sub-Saharan Africans, morally commendable even when they lack the function of fighting poverty. What is needed is a broader notion of the sort of relationships that morally matter.

U6: *An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop communion.*

This, I submit, is the most promising theoretical formulation of an African ethic to be found in the extant literature, although, as I indicate below, I believe its consequentialist structure is unattractive and ultimately needs to be revised. Tutu expresses it in the following characterization of *ubuntu*:

> 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. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good.[41]

As opposed to well-being or self-realization, this account of *ubuntu* posits certain relationships as constitutive of the good that a moral agent ought to promote. "What is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong."[42]

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[40] Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree, *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management* (Randburg: Knowledge Resources, 1995), pp. 1, 58.

[41] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 35.

[42] Verhoef and Michel, referring to the work of John Mbiti, in "Studying morality within the African context," p. 397. Commenting on the practices of the G/wi people of Botswana, 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

This account of *ubuntu* has the potential to account for all the intuitions addressed here, but not particularly well as it stands, for it is too vague. There are many respects in which the fundamental requirement to promote harmony and to prevent discord could use clarification and specification, a number of which I discuss in the conclusion. I have the space in the body of this chapter to address only one crucial way in which the norm is imprecise, namely, the issue of what constitutes harmony or togetherness. "Harmony" does not refer to any musical output, and "connecting people together" does not denote putting everyone in linked chains. In the following section, I seek to make the metaphors less metaphorical. After doing so, I return to the intuitions and illustrate how well this theory does at accounting for them, relative to the rivals rejected above.

Developing the Favoured Account

In this section, I aim to answer the question of what harmony or togetherness is, so that the prescription to promote it is better understood. Again drawing on the literature on African ethics, I note that there are three analytically distinct ways it has been or reasonably could be understood. One understanding, I argue, is *prima facie* more attractive than the other two, and it enables the theory inspired by Tutu's remarks to account for commonsensical African moral judgments better than other theories suggested by the literature.

H1: *Shared Identity.*

One thing "harmony" and "togetherness" might essentially involve is a common sense of self, which includes at least the following analytically distinct conditions.[43] First, a given individual conceives of oneself as part of a group. You refer to yourself in the first person plural, including yourself in a "we."

Second, the group that you consider yourself a member of also considers you to be a member of it. So, others in the "we" you refer to also include you in their "we." You can hardly claim to share identity with the Zulu people merely on the basis of saying things like, "We Zulus need to stick together." Self-described Zulus must also consider you Zulu.

Third, people share identity when they have common ends, if not also the same motives or reasons that underlie them. It is logically possible to be part

enjoyed end in itself, often as the ultimate rationale for action." See his "Ethics in Small-Scale Societies," *A Companion to Ethics,* ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), ch. 2.

[43] This interpretation of harmony is inspired by some of Gyekye's remarks about what counts as a community in "Person and community in African thought," p. 320.

of a group that does not do anything, but the relevant sort of group under consideration here is one that has some projects.

Fourth and finally, shared identity consists of people in the group coordinating their activities in order to realize their ends, even if they do not use the same means or put forth the same amount of effort.

Families, clubs, churches, schools, firms and nations are instances of shared identity. The greater the common sense of self, the more people think of themselves in terms of their group membership, the more ends they share and cooperatively advance, the higher they rank these ends, the more they share the same reasons for adopting these ends, and the more they will sacrifice to achieve these ends. The opposite of shared identity is division, a matter of defining oneself in opposition to others, others defining themselves in opposition to one, and one adopting ends that conflict with those of others or involve subordinating them. Enemies on a battlefield are clearly divided in this way.[44]

While a shared identity might ground some duties of loyalty, it is hard to see how it could be very morally important in itself. After all, members of the former South African Nationalist Party that enforced apartheid had a common sense of self. One surely has no duty to promote such a group if one is not a member. And if one is a member, though one might owe some fidelity to other members, there is in all likelihood a much stronger duty to try to dissolve the group (and not merely because the group fails to promote the shared identity of others outside the group). Therefore, let us consider a different sort of harmony, one more worth promoting from a moral point of view.

H2: *Good-will.*

Another thing that "harmony" might mean is a certain caring or supportive relationship.[45] One has a relationship of good-will insofar as one: wishes another person well (conation); believes that another person is worthy of help (cognition); aims to help another person (intention); acts so as to help another person (volition); acts for the other's sake (motivation); and, finally, feels good upon the knowledge that another person has benefited and feels bad upon learning she has been harmed (affection). In the model case, there are certain causal relationships that obtain among these pro-attitudes; for example, the intention is partially responsible for bringing about the volition.

[44] Are competitive sports teams also divided? Teams are usually part of an umbrella association (e.g., FIFA), and they coordinate their activity to realize the common ends of entertaining the public or demonstrating skill, which would arguably put them on the "shared identity" side of things. Even so, I accept that the present account of harmony and discord is open to more tightening.

[45] This understanding of community comes to mind from Wiredu's discussion of the "empathetic harmonization of human interests" ("Custom and Morality," p. 64).

Examples of good-will include nursing, teaching and charity work. The greater the good-will, the stronger the desire that others benefit, the firmer the belief they are worthy of it, the higher the ranking of one's end of helping others, the larger the sacrifice on others' behalf, and the greater the empathy with their flourishing or injury. The opposite, ill-will, would consist of outright sadism and *Schadenfreude*.

Good-will and shared identity are logically distinct types of relationship. First off, there are cases of shared identity without good-will. Think about the relationship between management and workers in a firm. There is little or no good-will there—workers do not typically work for the sake of management, after all—but both sides would readily think of themselves as part of a larger group that is involved in joint projects (e.g., "We're MTN").

Conversely, there can be cases of good-will without shared identity. For a fantastic case, think about two people who do not know each other, who are in different rooms and who are unable to communicate. When person A presses a button in his room, he thereby benefits person B (perhaps B is brought a tasty meal or learns that money has been deposited into his bank account), and, likewise, when B presses his button, A benefits. Imagine that A learns of the beneficial effects on B, but that B does not know they come from A; and suppose B knows how his button pressing affects A, but A does not know that B is responsible for his good fortune. Finally, imagine that both parties press their buttons repeatedly. This case is an instance of solidarity without identity, of anonymous do-gooding. We imagine that the parties care for each other, but that the parties neither think of themselves as a "we" nor coordinate their behaviour to achieve common ends.

Good-will without shared identity has more moral value on the face of it than does shared identity without good-will. If we had to choose between promoting relationships of solidarity or identity, solidarity would usually win. However, we need not often choose between them, and the most attractive sort of harmonious relationship to promote is surely one that includes both.

H3: *The Combination of Shared Identity and Good-will.*

While good-will without shared identity is morally more valuable than the converse, it is better still with shared identity. A condition in which individuals anonymously help each other is less desirable than mutually recognizing members of a group who care for one another. Such a communal relationship is perhaps what Mokgoro has in mind when she says of *ubuntu* that "harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group,"[46] and when Segun Gbadegesin says, "Every member is expected to

[46] Mokgoro, "Ubuntu and the law in South Africa," p. 3.

consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all."[47] To be close to others or to be part of the whole is reasonably understood as sharing an identity, whereas to be sympathetic or realize the well-being of others is to have good-will. The combination of the two conditions is what I deem to be the most attractive conception of harmony—or a broad sense of "love." A loving or friendly relationship is a *prima facie* attractive moral value and is the good that, I show below, promises to account for all the relatively uncontroversial intuitions.

Analogies are often drawn between the sort of society many Africans value and an extended family, particularly by post-colonial independence leaders such as Julius Nyerere. Now, the attractive sort of family is one in which people are loving, that is, they have a common sense of self and act for one another's sake. Conceiving of harmony in terms of love or friendliness therefore makes good sense of the analogy. In addition, although the requirement to promote harmony has a basic teleological structure that is familiar in Western ethics, its holistic conception of the good to be promoted differs from what is predominant there, typically either pleasure, preference satisfaction, need fulfilment, autonomy or self-development. As noted above, African thought is often characterized as "communitarian," which the present theory captures markedly better than its rivals. Placing basic moral value in a loving relationship between people, or perhaps in their capacity for it, is more relational than putting it in an individual's life (U1), well-being (U2), rights (U3) or self-realization (U4), even if these latter views entail that individuals ought to sacrifice much for the sake of others. Note that the moral injunction to produce harmony *qua* the combination of identity and solidarity is relational in a way that differs from the most influential forms of holism in contemporary Western ethics. It is less relativist than, say, the views of those communitarians who think that the norms of a particular community are binding on those who are born into it,[48] and it is more impartial than the views of certain care ethicists who believe that one's extant relationships alone have moral status.[49]

I am now in a position to enrich U6, the terse statement that directs agents to produce harmony: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on good-will; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends to encourage the opposites, relationships of division and*

[47] Gbadegesin, "Yoruba philosophy," p. 131.

[48] See, for example, Michael Sandel's notion of "encumbered selves" in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[49] For instance, Nel Noddings once thought that there is "no command to love" and hence no duty to aid strangers since one lacks any caring relationship with them. See *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

ill-will. While this principle still needs clarification and refinement in many respects, which I take up in section "Conclusion: Topics for Future Work", it is less vague and metaphorical than the initial statement. Furthermore, I submit that it is intelligible enough to see that, of the six theoretical accounts of *ubuntu* discussed in section "*Ubuntu* as a Moral Theory", this one best accounts for the twelve intuitions from section "Clarification of the Project".

Recall that both Westerners and friends of *ubuntu* equally hold the following to be wrong: (roughly) killing, raping, lying, stealing, breaking promises and discriminating. On the face of it, these are rather unloving actions. More specifically, these actions do not involve shared identity; they include neither activity coordinated to realize shared ends nor any "we-ness." Furthermore, the actions do not involve good-will, for they tend to reduce people's quality of life and are far from a matter of acting for the sake of others.

Of course, there will conceivably be instances in which one of these discordant actions performed in the short term could produce a greater harmony in the long term, and the teleological nature of Tutu's quotation about *ubuntu*, as it stands, would seem to recommend so acting. I do think this theory needs deontological restrictions built into it.[50] The theoretically neatest way to do so would be to forbid the use of division and ill-will to promote identity and solidarity, a more elegant solution than Gyekye's *ad hoc* combination of rights and utility (U3). I do not have the space here to flesh out this proposal and to ascertain whether it captures all firm intuitions about the aptness of deontological constraints.[51] I merely note that, unlike the other five theories, the present one—at least with restrictions of some kind—*best* accounts for the intuitions more or less equally shared by Africans and Westerners. For instance, it does not entail the odd conclusions that deception has no *pro tanto* moral wrongness when it does not degrade life (U1), or that racial discrimination is a permissible means to producing happiness (U2), or that killing others is permissible if necessary to survive (U4), or that promise-breaking is permissible if it does not affect the worst-off (U5).

Now recall that many friends of *ubuntu,* but comparatively fewer Westerners, uncontroversially find the following to be morally impermissible to some degree: decision-making in the face of dissensus, primarily retributive punishment, intensely competitive economics, a rights-based allocation of wealth, isolation from a society's way of life, and failure to procreate through

[50] As does Tutu, or one of his intellectual biographers. See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), p. 52.

[51] I have undertaken this work in several papers published since this article first appeared. See, for example, Thaddeus Metz, "African Values and Human Rights as Two Sides of the Same Coin", *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 14 (2014), 306–21.

marriage. Let us consider how my interpretation of Tutu's injunction to produce harmony and reduce discord accounts for these judgments.

First off, in the political realm, the most intense sort of shared identity would be one in which all people have come to an agreement—have become of one mind—about major laws. Not only is unanimous decision-making constitutive of shared identity, it is likely to promote both shared identity and good-will in the long run more than majoritarianism since the minority would feel less excluded from the political process.[52] And when it comes to dealing with those who have broken laws, the outcome-based nature of *ubuntu* cannot ground a retributive theory of punishment, which takes the proper amount of punishment to be fixed by past facts about the crime. To punish merely because a wrong was done and in proportion to it is by definition not to punish in order to promote the end of good-will, let alone shared identity.

In the economic arena, to compete with fellow citizens in labour and consumer markets with an eye to maximizing self-interest is of course not to act for the sake of others, and hence is not an instance of good-will. That is so, even if "invisible hand" effects turn out to be indirectly beneficial for society. *Ubuntu* so understood also clearly rules out miserliness when it comes to distributing wealth; its good-will element prescribes generosity, forbidding a stingy reference to individual rights to keep goods regardless of whether they are unneeded by the possessor and others need them.

Finally, the shared identity condition of harmony naturally accounts for the remaining intuitions regarding culture and family. Upholding traditions and participating in rituals is one important way to identify with others, or in other words to think of oneself as a member of a group and to engage in joint projects. Isolating oneself does not help one to do these things. And creating new human beings enables one to expand the range of and to intensify a common sense of self, to enlarge the scope and depth of a "we."

In sum, upon understanding the prescription to produce harmony in terms of the requirement to promote identity and solidarity, or a broad sense of "love," accounting for the twelve intuitions is a fairly straightforward matter. Before concluding, I provide very brief comparisons between my interpretation of Tutu's *ubuntuist* theory and its rivals, with an eye to suggesting reasons why people might have gone astray in finding the rivals attractive. They all have a kernel of truth that U6 arguably best captures while avoiding their problems. Consider, first, the view that *ubuntu* is fundamentally a matter of reverence for human life (U1). Valuing human life, or thinking of others as worthy of flourishing, is of course part of loving others or promoting

[52] As Wiredu argues in *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, pt. 4.

harmony, but it does not exhaust it, while the broader value is needed to account for a much larger array of duties. Next, think about *ubuntu* in its welfarist interpretations (U2 and U3). Harmony, which includes good-will, often ends up realizing well-being, but on my interpretation of *ubuntu*, well-being is not the ground of moral rightness; instead, friendly relationships that tend to produce well-being (but that might ultimately fail to do so) have basic moral value. Now recall the common idea that *ubuntu* prescribes self-realization through communal relationships (U4). What is largely doing the work in this view, I submit, is not the focus on self-realization, but rather the communal relationships. Focusing on relationships, as opposed to self-development, presents an interesting contrast to what is dominant in Western ethics, and in any event it better coheres with firm moral judgments about when, how and why to help others. Lastly, the idea of solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened is morally important (U5), but it is surely not the whole story about right action. Helping to protect the lives or ways of life of vulnerable populations is one way to promote shared identity and good-will, but it is not the only way.

Conclusion: Topics for Future Work

In sum, the most justified normative theory of right action in the current literature that has an African pedigree is the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity. I am aware that this theory is still incomplete and imprecise in many ways. I conclude by listing some questions that one can fairly pose with respect to refining it, questions that need to be addressed elsewhere in order to develop a more clearly adequate moral theory.

Must harmony be realized in order to do right? Suppose one performs an act that one reasonably expects will promote harmony but that happens not to. Has one acted rightly? Or suppose that one acts in a way likely to produce discord, but luckily it does not. Has one acted wrongly?[53]

Must one always be part of the harmony promoted? Suppose one faces a choice of promoting a certain amount of shared identity and solidarity between oneself and others, on the one hand, or promoting a greater amount between others in one's society (excluding oneself), on the other. What is the morally

[53] According to John Mbiti's classic study of African worldviews, "It is not the act in itself which would be 'wrong' as such, but the relationships involved in the act: if relationships are not hurt or damaged, and if there is no discovery of the break of custom or regulation, then the act is not 'evil' or 'wicked' or 'bad.'" See his *African Religions and Philosophy,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1989), p. 208.

right thing to do? Roughly, must one be as loving as possible in the long run, or must one instead be maximally producing of love in the long term?

May one ever promote harmony globally at the expense of the local? A large majority of writers on African ethics believe that, in general, "charity begins at home," but what is the morally best understanding of "home"— lineage, family, existing harmonious relationships, spatial proximity or something else? And suppose one has a choice of promoting a certain degree of harmony among insiders (family, clan) or a greater degree of it among outsiders. Precisely where should one promote communion when one cannot promote it equally everywhere?

Is it even feasible to think of harmony at a global level? Is love necessarily partial? Or can and should one share identity with, and exhibit good-will toward, human beings in general?[54]

What, if any, constraints are there on the way one may promote harmony? Suppose one can create harmony in the long term only by creating some lesser amount of discord in the short term. What is the right thing to do? Are there intuitively objectionable means of promoting the end of harmony that would not involve any discord at all?

After answering these questions, one could provide a complete statement of *ubuntu* as a theory of right action. Until then, it would be difficult and perhaps somewhat unfair to compare the theory to long-standing Western theories. I nevertheless hope this essay has convinced the reader that the most promising way to construct a competitive African moral theory is to develop Tutu's understanding of *ubuntu* in terms of a basic obligation to promote harmonious relationships and to prevent discordant ones. Even without further development, the theory developed here is more African, precise and complete than its rivals in the literature.[55]

[54] As Tutu clearly thinks is warranted in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, pp. 212–13.

[55] A close relative of this essay first appeared in the Journal of Political Philosophy, 15 (2007), 321–41. For written comments on an earlier draft, I thank Robert Goodin, Stephen Kershnar, Dirk Louw, David Martens, Thomas Pogge, Augustine Shutte, Raymond Suttner and three anonymous referees for *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. In addition, for oral comments, I am grateful to participants at the Conference on African Philosophy in the 21st Century held at the University of South Africa; the Annual Conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa held at Rhodes University; the Ethics and Africa Conference held at the University of Cape Town; and a colloquium sponsored by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Philosophy Department. I am also indebted to students in ethics classes that I have instructed in the philosophy departments of the University of Johannesburg and the University of the Witwatersrand. Finally, I am appreciative that some of this work was supported by a Research Promotion Grant from the University of the Witwatersrand Faculty of Humanities Research Committee.