

Ubuntu and the Struggle for Reason: Humaneness Beyond Humanism

I. Abstract

This paper examines how modern societies might begin to live by the African philosophy of ubuntu through the prominent example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Following the work of philosophers from perspectives of race and disability, I contend that the liberal conception of rational personhood continues to grapple with problems of exclusion and demonstrate the exigency of theorizing alternative modes of personhood. I then argue in support of ubuntu as a moral system and compare ubuntu with the liberal Kantian tradition. In particular, I hold that ubuntu presents a promising solution to the exclusion problem by viewing personhood as a flexible designation that must be earned through upstanding moral character. I thus find that ubuntu's central notion of "be-ing becoming" presents a fundamental ontological difference with contemporary liberalism's emphasis on rationality and autonomy.

II. Introduction

Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, rationality has figured as a defining paradigm of humanity in the writings of influential thinkers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Locke. Yet, it is worth asking for whom this category of humanity qua reason has been most readily accessible and why. As Mogobe Ramose writes in *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, "[t]he belief that 'man is a rational animal' was not spoken of the African, the Amerindian and the Australasians."¹ It is therefore no surprise that the rise of the rational subject vis a vis liberal humanism coexisted with extensive conquest, colonization, and slavery. In this vein, critical theorists such as Sylvia Wynter have increasingly problematized the continued dominance of the rational human in Western thought by revealing the intricate linkage between liberalism and empire. For Wynter, with the advent of the Enlightenment, both indigenous and African peoples were constructed as "the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other" in order to cohere the rational ideal of *homo politicus* "as the descriptive statement [of humanity] that would be foundational to modernity."²

Moreover, given that European powers long denied that African peoples had any capacity for rationality, it implicitly followed that "the African by nature was incapable of producing any philosophy at all."³ Ramose thus argues that the contemporary practice of philosophy as a whole has been decontextualized and unresponsive to the lived African experience. The presumption against African philosophy manifests today in the teaching practices of philosophy departments around the world. African philosophy is often absent from philosophy curricula, or, where it is taught, "epistemic control over these courses is vested in white academics with rather dubious credentials."⁴ In short, the struggle for reason—that is, the struggle over the power to define who

¹ Mogobe Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Zimbabwe: Mond Books, 1999), 1.

² Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 266.

³ Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, iii-iv.

⁴ Ndumiso Dladla, "Racism and the Marginality of African Philosophy in South Africa." *Phronimon* 18 (2017): 224.

is and who is not a rational animal— continues to have broad ramifications on the practice of philosophy itself.

In light of this context, I argue below that the indigenous African philosophy of *ubuntu* offers a valuable corrective to the troubled history of rational personhood. Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu word, roughly translated as “I am because we are,” that may be illustrated by the maxim *umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu*, meaning “to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis establish human relations with them.”⁵ A being who possesses ubuntu, as referenced by this maxim, is said to be an *umuntu*. According to ubuntu, actions are not judged to be wrong because they bring about harmful consequences or violate human rights, but because they disrespect friendship and community.⁶ Much of what I will discuss regarding ubuntu was embodied by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, which was formed to address the legacy of apartheid. According to the TRC, the correct response to apartheid was to heal the nation’s divisions and wounds by affirming communal principles—to seek reconciliation, not retribution. In this context, reconciliation entailed not only forgiveness on the part of the oppressed, but more importantly active efforts at reparation on the part of oppressors as well.⁷ Forums like the TRC facilitated this process by creating a space for honest dialogue between the two groups. For this reason, chairperson Desmond Tutu explicitly invoked the language of ubuntu by maintaining that “what constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution, to be magnanimous and ready to forgive rather than to wreak revenge, was *Ubuntu*.”⁸

I will begin my argument in this essay by drawing from disability critiques of the Kantian tradition to demonstrate the continued problems of exclusion in modern liberalism. I will then introduce ubuntu and outline a brief defense of its ethical claims centering around community and character. I will argue that ubuntu shifts the definition of the human to lend moral culpability to immoral actors by virtue of them not performing humaneness in the form of affirming relationality with others. Under ubuntu, I note two key ideas that distinguish it from liberal humanism: first, personhood is an embodied practice of relationality, not static characteristic that one possesses, and secondly, to qualify as human, one must also treat non-humans with respect. Ultimately, I conclude that ubuntu offers a promising alternative to liberal personhood because of the complex process of relationality that it demands of moral agents.

III. The Problem with Rational Personhood

Although I do not extensively engage with disability theory here, critiques of rational personhood from a disability standpoint prove to be a useful framework for theorizing an

⁵ Domoka Lucinda Manda, “The importance of the African ethics of ubuntu and traditional African healing systems for Black South African women’s health in the context of HIV and AIDS,” PhD dissertation (University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2007), 31.

⁶ Thaddeus Metz, “Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa.” *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11, issue 2 (2011): 540.

⁷ Thaddeus Metz, “What Archbishop Tutu’s ubuntu credo teaches the world about justice and harmony,” *The Conversation*, Oct. 4, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/what-archbishop-tutus-ubuntu-credo-teaches-the-world-about-justice-and-harmony-84730>.

⁸ Fainos Mangena, “Hunhu/Ubuntu in the Traditional Thought of Southern Africa,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed Mar. 1, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/hunhu>.

alternative to liberal theory. Analyzing the treatment of disability within the Kantian social contract tradition, for example, Lucas Pinheiro writes that “[w]hile the classical social contract broaches a conjectural theory of universal freedom and inclusion, the sexual, racial, and ableist contracts disclose veiled historical realities of targeted subjection.”⁹ More specifically, Pinheiro finds that throughout Kant’s empirical writings, disabled people are intentionally and explicitly excluded from his moral and political philosophy as a non-human second class. For Kant, the intellectually disabled pose a barrier to the civil state because he believes that they are unable to be guided by reason, and by extension, to be autonomous and free. Thus, Pinheiro concludes that the exclusion of disabled people is not merely incidental to Kant’s writings, but rather integral to Kantian philosophy itself: “Kant’s moral theory would only fall apart if he had not explicitly excluded the intellectually disabled,” Pinheiro writes, since otherwise “a contradiction between what holds in theory (i.e., his categorical imperative) and what Kant deems as observably verifiable in practice (i.e., his empirical ethics)” would arise.¹⁰

However, that more recent thinkers may not explicitly exclude disabled people in the way Kant did does not mean that questions of disability, and more broadly those of exclusion, are not still relevant. Indeed, as Barbara Arneil has argued, it seems to be inevitable that philosophers who draw from the Kantian tradition are “forced to define those incapable of ‘rationality’ as outside the ‘normal’ meaning of personhood.”¹¹ For instance, recent attempts to defend animal rights by authors such as Jeff McMahan and Peter Singer make recourse to an animal potential for rationality. Yet, these projects have been criticized by scholars for the same problematic assumptions that underly the elevation of cognitive ability as the defining feature of personhood. It thus remains an open question whether “the threshold of reason represents an insurmountable barrier to entry for the severely intellectually disabled.”¹² Insofar as theorists largely continue to draw from the Kantian social contract tradition in contemporary political theory, there is an urgent need to theorize an alternative to rational personhood.

In response to forms of exclusion posed by modern liberalism, Barbara Arneil argues in favor of a new personhood based in interdependency. For Arneil, the primary challenge is the “binary at the base of liberal/republican theory between an autonomous rational agent who is to be part of dignity [...] and his or her opposite, the ‘disabled.’” In other words, contrary to the liberal ideal of a rational agents with a self-legislating will, interdependency recognizes and embraces that “we are all in various ways and to different degrees both dependent on others and independent.”¹³ Under an interdependency model of personhood, each human being is deserving of dignity regardless of their capacity for reason. Arneil’s emphasis on interdependency finds similarities in other philosophies such as a feminist ethics of care or, as I later discuss, ubuntu. However, although Arneil provides a convincing argument that interdependency and not rationality is intrinsic to human existence, the question then becomes: what, if not rationality, is

⁹ Lucas G. Pinheiro “The Ableist Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Limits of Justice in Kant’s Political Thought” in *Disability and Political Theory*, ed. Barbara Arneil and Nancy J. Hirschmann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 45.

¹⁰ Pinheiro, “The Ableist Contract,” 75.

¹¹ Barbara Arneil. “Disability, Self Image, and Modern Political Theory.” *Political Theory* 37, issue 2 (2008): 225.

¹² Pinheiro, “The Ableist Contract,” 46.

¹³ Arneil, “Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory,” 234.

the defining characteristic for personhood, and how can it ground a right to human dignity? I argue below that ubuntu provides one possible solution to this problem.

IV. I Am Because We Are

I now turn to a discussion of ubuntu and attempt to sketch a plausible defense of two of its central normative and ontological claims. The first such claim is ubuntu's emphasis on the place of moral character in ethics. Ubuntu is an agent-centered philosophy, emphasizing "the growth and development of good character through the performance of good actions."¹⁴ Supporting this idea in the broader context of African societies, Kwame Gyekye writes that "[g]ood character is the essence of the African moral system."¹⁵ Character, on this view, results from the habitual actions of a person who practices the application of moral principles to appropriate situations. For example, if someone reacts with kindness and concern every time they see others suffering, this pattern of behavior eventually becomes second nature, at which point they have acquired a compassionate character. Because of this habitual nature, community plays an essential part in shaping a person's character to be good. Through moral instruction, stories, and proverbs, communities constantly inculcate a variety of moral principles into their members. At the same time, because character is habitual, it continues to be shaped and re-shaped in subsequent interpersonal interactions. In this context, it is easy to see why ubuntu prizes character so highly: forming bonds of friendship does not come from one-off gestures of kindness, but rather requires individuals to emphatically reaffirm their bonds with others, internalizing the value of such relationships.

The second and most important feature of ubuntu that I discuss here is the primacy of relationality and community. In arguing in support of ubuntu's conception of relationality, I first want to distinguish between value in an instrumental sense and in an ethical sense. While instrumental value can arise as a product of biological necessity, ethical value requires that the thing in question have some greater meaning or significance. For example, I can value food in the instrumental sense that it is biologically necessary and so I desire it, but this does not place any higher obligation on me to act in pursuit of food. Particularly, people may intentionally forgo food as part of a fast for a noble cause, or they might lack food because someone has taken it from them. In these cases, food can take on a qualitatively different ethical significance based on its contextual meaning. Hence, ethical valuation is distinct because it requires a consideration of a thing's broader connection to other objects and the lives of others. When people ask questions such as whether something is moral, they seem to be concerned with valuation in the second ethical sense—they are asking for a reflective evaluation of meaning.

Ubuntu's crucial observation is that ethical value, as I have described it, can only arise as a product of our relationships with others. If valuation is a process of reflecting on something's connection to one's life and the lives of others, this reflection takes place in the context of socially constructed systems of meaning. In our everyday valuations, we commonly rely on systems such as language, family, or the law to make decisions about what we should do. Each

¹⁴ Manda, "African healing systems," 62.

¹⁵ Kwame Gyekye, "African Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2011, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics/>.

of these systems “has no meaning if there are not ‘others’ (abanye abantu) in its description, definition and practice.”¹⁶ In this view, character represents the internalization of systems of meaning such that valuation becomes more or less an unconscious process. Ubuntu’s emphasis on community is therefore a recognition of the fundamental, inescapable interdependence, both physical and moral, at the core of human subjectivity. In this sense, ubuntu may be considered similar to a Lévinasian account of human existence as infinite responsibility to the Other. Being-in-the-world, to borrow from Lévinas, means that “my subjectivity has been constituted within a series of intimate and dependent relationships that make my meaningful relations to the world possible.”¹⁷ Thus, while liberalism views the human as rational and autonomous, ubuntu locates the human as always implicated in a complex relationality and calls on us to affirm our humanity by affirming that relationality. To ask why we should value social relations is itself a question of valuation that “always comes too late” because valuation already presupposes that our relations with others are valuable.¹⁸

We are now in a better position to understand the everyday practice of ubuntu and how we can affirm our relationality with others. Recall that under ubuntu, the community is a primary source of support, both moral and physical, in developing a more ethical character because both moral instruction and interaction with others shape our responses to future situations. To practice ubuntu thus entails developing one’s character in a way that supports one’s own communities as a central part of not only one’s own ethical growth, but also that of other individuals. Since communities are groups of people sharing a way of life, this could take the form of developing virtues aimed at concern for others, such as empathy, patience, or love. It may be objected here that this argument only requires people to embrace relations within their own community, leaving open the possibility of deep divisions and tribalism. Yet, I would argue that ubuntu cannot be unconditionally exclusionary; it requires us to treat each person as a potential member of our community, regardless of whether they are currently a member of our immediate community. Treating a stranger cruelly, for example, would violate ubuntu for two reasons: first, it fails to recognize the person as a being in the process of their own character development, and secondly, it demonstrates a profound moral failure of the agent in question to exhibit traits like empathy and compassion. For this reason, despite the moral prominence given to their own community, indigenous sub-Saharan societies have traditionally welcomed strangers to their villages.¹⁹

V. Personhood as Be-ing Becoming

Against this backdrop, what might ubuntu have to offer in current conversations on personhood? To begin, it is common in Zulu societies to say “*Wo, akumuntu lowo*’ (Oh, that is no person)” whenever someone acts immorally or fails to exhibit ubuntu.²⁰ Here, this saying does

¹⁶ Ndumiso Dladla, “Towards an African Critical Philosophy of Race: Ubuntu as a Philo-praxis of Liberation.” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 6, no. 1 (Jan. 2017): 54.

¹⁷ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 133.

¹⁸ Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 134.

¹⁹ Thaddeus Metz and Joseph B. R. Gaie, “The African ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: implications for research on morality.” *Journal of Moral Education* 39, issue 3 (2010): 283.

²⁰ Sabelo Mhlambi, “From Rationality to Relationality: Ubuntu as an Ethical & Human Rights Framework for Artificial Intelligence Governance,” *Carr Center Discussion Paper Series* (July 8, 2020): 14. (Italics mine)

not mean literally that the person is not a *homo sapiens* in a biological sense, but rather that *ethically*, they are not considered human because they lack the upstanding moral character required by ubuntu.²¹ An important distinction between ubuntu and liberal personhood thus begins to emerge from this proverb. In contrast to the liberal notion of personhood as a rigid category determined by whether one possesses requisite ideals of rationality, ubuntu views personhood as something that must constantly be earned. Clearly then, personhood is a much more flexible idea under ubuntu than under liberal humanism. In fact, if humanity is earned as ubuntu suggests, then it is illogical to make categorical judgements based on the personhood of others, because their status as a person is always subject to change.

Not only does this way of thinking seem to accord better with common intuitions, but it also offers a unique response to the exclusion problem raised by liberalism. Most people find it morally wrong, without regard to rationality, to inflict unnecessary violence on living beings—even when, as in the case of animals, they are not human even in a biological sense. Despite this fact, one might condemn such an action by making judgment of character: committing unnecessary violence against living beings is morally wrong because it demonstrates cruelty on the part of the perpetrator. Under ubuntu, the immorality of such violence—or more broadly, oppression of others—would similarly be attributed to a lack of good moral character and designate the perpetrator as non-human. Yet, the proper response is not to be violent in return and thereby degrade one’s own humanity, but rather to establish genuine relations with those lacking humanity in an attempt to guide them toward a humane character. In this vein, ubuntu provides a promising approach to achieving Arneil’s model of interdependency and addressing concerns of exclusion. Ubuntu rejects the idea that we should use the category of the human to determine who is worthy of compassionate treatment. Instead, given ubuntu’s emphasis on character and community, ubuntu embraces dependency and provides greater flexibility in engaging with others (such as those with disabilities), since one’s orientation towards others is always contextual to those particular relationships. In other words, my interpretation is that ubuntu shifts the focus of ethics to be one of *humaneness* (as a quality of character) instead of a category of humanity.

This interpretation of ubuntu is further supported by the etymology of ubuntu itself, as Ramose explains in *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*:

“*Ubuntu* is actually two words in one. It consists of the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *ntu-*. *Ubu-* evokes the idea of be-ing in general. It is enfolded be-ing before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence of a particular entity. *Ubu-* as enfolded be-ing is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of being. In this sense *ubu-* is always oriented towards - *ntu*.”²²

Ramose’s notion of incessant unfoldment, which he also refers to as “be-ing becoming,” means that *ubu-*, or be-ing, is always unfolding and becoming -*ntu*, or particular manifestations of be-ing. This concept of incessant unfoldment represents the importance of character in ubuntu—

²¹ Dladla, “Philo-praxis of Liberation,” 53.

²² Ramose, “African Philosophy Through Ubuntu,” 50.

namely, that one's existence is always being shaped and reshaped by the surrounding community and interactions with others. Ramose similarly explains the term *umuntu* by calling attention to the prefix *umu-*: "Whereas the range of *ubu-* is the widest generality, *umu-* tends towards the more specific." As a result, *umuntu* is a being with *ubuntu*, "the specific entity which continues to conduct an inquiry into be-ing, experience, knowledge, and truth."²³ Hence, when taken altogether, the word *ubuntu* itself already instructs us to recognize the value of communal relationships in becoming human.

Moreover, the idea of be-ing becoming as embodied in the etymology of *ubuntu* further sharpens its distinction with liberalism. In the same chapter, Ramose makes it clear that *ubuntu* "is always a -ness and not an -ism." Clarifying this point, he states that "[t]he -ism suffix gives the erroneous impression that we are dealing with verbs and nouns as fixed and separate entities existing independently." Here, Ramose refers back to an earlier characterization of *ubuntu* as a "verbal noun": *ubuntu* cannot be thought of as only a state of humaneness which one can attain, but is rather the active practice and manifestation of relationality that one must continuously work towards.²⁴ It is the recognition that the actor, the action, and the acted-upon are inseparable, simultaneously reflecting and shaping character. By theorizing humanity as an ongoing process of relationality emerging out of surrounding contexts and histories, *ubuntu* contrasts greatly with the liberal ideal of the human as a singular noun (that is, individual and autonomous). *Ubuntu* thus both exceeds and transforms our current understandings of personhood as bracketed by the modern Western tradition.

VI. Conclusion

Returning to the example of the TRC given at the beginning of this essay, it is now apparent why Tutu's invocation of *ubuntu* demanded a reconciliatory and not retributive approach to apartheid. Following *ubuntu*, the TRC condemned apartheid not only because it inflicted violence on oppressed groups, but also because it damaged the moral character of the oppressors and made them less human.²⁵ The appropriate response, therefore, was not to also become less human by enacting revenge on oppressors, but instead to break the cycle of inhumaneness: to guide a divided nation towards *ubuntu* by encouraging reparation and forgiveness between oppressors and oppressed. Furthermore, although racism is still prevalent in South Africa and the TRC's mission is clearly far from fulfilled, it is important to remember Ramose's wisdom that *ubuntu* is not something which may be fully achieved, but rather must always be worked towards through a conscious embodiment of relationality. In struggling against injustice, one must always recognize that the struggle is larger than oneself or one's lifetime, but rather extends out to the community and into the future to be carried on by subsequent generations.

In short, examples like the TRC demonstrate that by viewing personhood as something which must be earned through humaneness and good moral character, *ubuntu* marks a radical shift from the liberal conception of rational personhood. *Ubuntu* demands compassion and

²³ Ramose, "African Philosophy Through Ubuntu," 51.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Metz, "Archbishop Tutu's ubuntu credo"

respect for others, especially towards non-humans, because to act violently towards others degrades one's own humanity. Further, examining the etymology of ubuntu as a verbal noun also reveals its deeper ontological connotations of be-ing becoming. Ubuntu is thus a fruitful addition to ongoing conversations by scholars from disability, race, and other perspectives critiquing the ongoing exclusions of liberalism. By theorizing humanity as an ongoing process, ubuntu is an embodied practice of relationality, not just a stagnant definition of the human.

This essay should be read as only a small part of a much larger ongoing conversation on personhood. Given the divergent expressions of ubuntu across different Bantu languages and cultures, I have offered merely one possible interpretation of ubuntu out of many, specifically putting it in dialogue with liberalism and critiques of the Kantian tradition. Much remains to be said regarding ubuntu's connection to other scholars writing within liberalism and beyond as part of this broader conversation. While ubuntu cannot literally be translated into the English language, it is my hope that this essay provides a starting point for readers to live by the spirit of ubuntu and rethink their relations towards those often forgotten by liberalism.