

Chapter 2

Ubuntu Ethics

Beauchamp and Childress define the term ethics as a “generic term covering several different ways of examining and understanding the moral life.”¹ Childress and Macquarrie describe ethics and ethical questions in three different ways. The first are “questions as to what is right, good, etc, or of how we ought to behave (normative ethics, morals).” The second are “questions as to the answers given by particular societies and people as to what is right or good.” The third are “questions as to the meanings or uses of the words used in answering questions of what is right, good.”² Emmet describes morality as “Considerations as to what one thinks it important to do and in what ways; how to conduct one’s relations with other people; and being aware and prepared to be critical of one’s basic approvals as disapprovals.”³ Dewey asserts that “interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest.”⁴

As an ethic, Ubuntu is generally in conformity with the definitions and descriptions of ethics given above. Ubuntu, however, is unique in its substance, in its method and in its worldview. As an indigenous culture Ubuntu presents an ethical worldview (referred to in this work as Ubuntu ethics) with three constituent components. The first component of Ubuntu ethics deals with the tension between individual and universal rights; the contribution of this component to global bioethics emerges by considering the Ethics of Care as a crucial aspect of bioethics discourse.

The second component of Ubuntu ethics concerns the cosmic and global context of life; the contribution of this component to global bioethics emerges by considering UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights as crucial for bioethics discourse. The third component of Ubuntu ethics deals with the role of solidarity that unites individuals and communities within a cosmic context; the contribution of this component to global bioethics emerges by considering the Roman Catholic tradition on social ethics as a significant aspect of discourse on global bioethics. This chapter explores those three major components of Ubuntu ethics.

¹ Beauchamp and Childress (2009, p. 1).

² Childress and Macquarrie (1986, p. 206).

³ Emmet (1979, p. 7).

⁴ Dewey (1929, p. 418).

2.1 Tension Between Individual and Universal Rights

The first major component of Ubuntu concerns the tension between individual and universal rights. The meaning of this context is enlightened by considering the Ethics of Care. This component has three related concepts. The first concept is inalienable rights. Every human individual has inherent inalienable rights to be recognized and respected by other human beings. The second component is human relationships. Recognition of personhood necessitates the development of human relationships with other persons in the society and with the society as a whole. The third concept is reciprocity of care. Fostering reciprocity of care occurs through personal acceptance and assumption of duties and responsibility in society.

2.1.1 *Inalienable Rights*

Ubuntu protects the inalienable rights of individuals. Each person's uniqueness is connected with rights and obligations.⁵ However, individual rights are only recognizable in the context of society.⁶ In Ubuntu culture every human being is entitled to all basic human rights. However, there is a very deep implied understanding that personal human rights are subordinate to, and dependent on, the basic communitarian interests and wellbeing.⁷ Even if a person has inalienable rights such as right to life and to personal human dignity, it is the community that recognizes those rights. There is, therefore, a tension between individual human rights and societal basic rights and interests.

2.1.1.1 Personal Rights within Communitarian Context

One of the greatest scholars of African communitarianism is Leopold Senghor from Senegal. In his view Africans view community as precedent to its component individuals. Consequently the community is more important than it's the individuals who make it. Likewise, according to Senghor's views, solidarity should take precedence to individual decision and activity. Community needs should be precedent to individual needs. He contends that Africans place more emphasis on the "communion of persons than on their autonomy."⁸ In his work titled *Consciencism*, Nkrumah argues that from the African perspective everything that exists is in a complex web of dynamic forces in tension but with necessary interconnection and complementarity.⁹ Nkrumah's views are consistent with Senghor's observation of

⁵ Macquarrie (1972, p. 110); Shutte (1993, p. 49, 51).

⁶ Holdstock (2000, pp. 162–181).

⁷ Asante et al. (2008, p. 115).

⁸ Senghor (1964, p. 49, 93–94).

⁹ Hord and Scott Lee (1995, p. 58).

the African worldview. However, Nkrumah emphasizes the inevitable conflict and tension within the African ideal of universal unity in Ubuntu culture while Senghor places greater emphasis on the importance of societal and cosmic unity within African culture.¹⁰ Both authors shed light on the examination of the conflict between individual and universal rights while simultaneously considering the individual's inalienable rights.

Gyekye explores the tension between basic personal rights (autonomy, freedom and dignity) and the underlying need for the society in realization of individual's potential.¹¹ Gyekye states that there is a relationship between the individual and the society which is reflected in the "conceptions of social structure evolved by a community of people."¹² To explain the relationship between the society and the individual, Gyekye cites an Akan proverb which goes, "The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand *individually* when closely approached."¹³ This proverb is an analogy which implies that even though some branches of the trees may touch, or even interlock each tree stands individually and has its own identity. Relationships in Ubuntu should not overshadow the importance of individual autonomy. There is need for discernment and distinction of the delicate balance between the two aspects of Ubuntu.

In sum, Gyekye observes an inevitable symbiotic mutuality between personal inalienable rights and the society. The society is a needed context for realization of personhood and self-actualization. However, "Individuality is not obliterated by membership in a human community."¹⁴ Each individual retains his or her uniqueness and basic human rights regardless the role and importance of community to the individual. According to Gyekye "the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing."¹⁵

The Ubuntu ideal of maturity is such that one retains one's individual rights without losing touch with the community which facilitates individuality. Ntibatagirirwa states that Ubuntu arms one with "normative principles for responsible decision-making and action, for oneself and for the good of the whole community."¹⁶ Individualistic action which leaves out the community would consequently be unethical. Once an individual has acquired enough ethical maturity to act simultaneously for self and for the community, such person is considered morally mature. In the words of Ntibatagirirwa, "S/he no more does things because the community expects him/her to do so, but because it is the right thing to do for both him/herself

¹⁰ Hord and Lee (1995, pp. 46–50).

¹¹ Gyekye (1997, p. 35).

¹² Gykye (1997, p. 35).

¹³ Gykye (1997, p. 40).

¹⁴ Gykye (1997, p. 40).

¹⁵ Gykye (1997, p. 41).

¹⁶ Ntibatagirirwa (1999, p. 104).

and the community.”¹⁷ In Ntibatirirwa’s view “It is Ubuntu alone that can allow the individual to transcend, when necessary, what the customs of the family or the tribe requires without disrupting the harmony and the cohesion of the community.”¹⁸

2.1.1.2 Individual’s Personal Rights are Defined by Others’ Personal Rights

One of the criticisms against Ubuntu is that it limits personal autonomy and freedom. On the contrary, Ubuntu champions realistic ethical freedom. Weil explains this position when he states that “It is not true that freedom of one man is limited by that of other men.” Freedom is always relative to the freedom of others. “Man is really free to the extent that his freedom fully acknowledged and mirrored by the free consent of his fellow men finds confirmation and expansion of liberty. Man is free only among equally free men.” Ubuntu recognizes the fact that “the slavery of even one human being violates humanity and negates the freedom of all.”¹⁹ Freedom in particular and virtue in general, therefore, are contingent to, and defined by community society and the common good. No individual is greater than the society; individual members of the society are parts of, and enabled by the society. However, Kasanene notes, “individuals are able to think and act independently, as long as their actions do not harm others, and so the individual has to always bear in mind that excessive individualism is regarded as being a denial of one’s corporate existence.”²⁰

Thus, strictly speaking, from the perspective of Ubuntu there can be no absolute individual rights. All individual rights are understood within the matrix of the community. Consequently, Kamwangamalu argues that Ubuntu is communitarian since “the group constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society at large...the good of all determines the good of each or... the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all.”²¹ Since the individual rights are based on, and facilitated by, common good, individuals in the culture of Ubuntu should act for themselves and the community rather than for themselves against the community. The tension between individual rights and the community is resolved by considering inalienable individual rights in the context of societal common good.

2.1.2 Human Relationships

Ubuntu protects human relationships. Although personhood is intrinsic and innate to human beings its recognition is of vital importance. Morality is based on mutual recognition of personhood in any human parties in relationship with each other.

¹⁷ Ntibatirirwa (1999, pp. 104–105).

¹⁸ Ntibatirirwa (1999, p. 104).

¹⁹ Weil (1973, p. 182, 188–189).

²⁰ Kasanene (1994, p. 143).

²¹ Kamwangamalu (2008, p. 115).

Thus, independent of human relationship the innate personhood in human beings remains only potential.²² In Ubuntu culture, it is the community that defines a person by judging whether one has attained full moral maturity. This judgment is based on the individual's relationships with the community, that is, whether one has moral values, feelings and empathy that facilitate others' wellbeing. One contributes to the definition of oneself through everything one does. A person's identity or social status and the rights that are attached to that identity go hand in hand with that person's responsibility or sense of duty towards, and in relation to, others.²³

2.1.2.1 Anthropological and Epistemological Perspective

In order to understand Ubuntu ethics, one has to first understand African anthropology and epistemology. One of the most important clues into Ubuntu mindset is an insight into the African traditional way of thinking. Traditional African thinking is "not in 'either/or,' but rather in 'both/and' categories."²⁴ The second clue is related to the first. That is, understanding the primacy of community in Ubuntu ethics. Bujo recognizes "community as a starting point in African ethics."²⁵ John Macquarrie explains that in Ubuntu individuals can only exist as human beings in their relationship with other humans. The word "individual" therefore, "signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands." Hence, "being an individual by definition means 'being-with-others.'"²⁶ The phrase 'being-with-others' in itself defines the nature of the relationship either as good or bad, right or wrong. It is evaluative. Relationships reveal how beneficent the parties are.

2.1.2.2 Otherness

To underline the importance of human relationship in the culture of Ubuntu, Van Der Merwe emphasizes the importance of the concept of otherness, which implies relationship. He observes that the African worldview is based on the understanding that "A human being is a human being through the *otherness* of other human beings."²⁷ This observation is far reaching in Ubuntu Ethics since it is the 'otherness' of another human which helps to prove one's humanity. Consequently, personal maturity is measured by the way one relates with others. That is, self-actualization happens in the process of fulfilling one's obligations and duties toward others. Menkiti states that assumption of responsibility towards others "transforms one from the *it*-status of early child-hood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the personhood

²² Shutte (1995, p. 46); Holdstock (2000, pp. 162–181).

²³ Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2003, p. 224).

²⁴ Bujo (2001, p. 1).

²⁵ Bujo (2001, p. 1).

²⁶ Macquarrie (1972, p. 104).

²⁷ Van Der Marwe and Willie (1996, pp. 1–3).

status of later years marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.”²⁸

Due to the importance of “otherness” in self-recognition, self-actualization and moral development, human relationship is vital in the culture of Ubuntu. It is the community which defines a person and enables that person to find the self through the vehicle of human relationships. Thus, there is a delicate balance between individual autonomy and the role of society in personal life within Ubuntu culture. Using the words of Macquarrie, true Ubuntu “preserves the other in his otherness, in his uniqueness, without letting him slip into the distance.”²⁹ This statement indicates the role and importance of human mutuality and interdependence. The self always stands in need of an-other both for the self and for the other, since there cannot be self without an-other.

2.1.2.3 Communitarianism

One of the distinguishing features of Ubuntu ethics is the significant role of community in comparison to that of individuals in any particular ethical situation. Ubuntu ethics is based on, has as its goal, and is validated by societal common good. The role of community in Ubuntu ethics is based on the premise that none of community members would be what he or she is without the community. Thus, naturally the community takes precedence over the individual without underestimating individual personal rights. Teffo argues that Ubuntu “merely discourages the view that the individual should take precedence over the community.”³⁰ The objective of Ubuntu ethics is the balance between individual rights and the necessary communitarian conditions which facilitate and support those rights.

Each member of the community has a right to self-determination which finds its limitation in common good. The justification of this assertion is given by a number of Ubuntu scholars. Michael Battle argues that personhood happens through other persons. He observes that “we don’t come fully formed into the world...we need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness; we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence.”³¹ Mkhize states that “the African view of personhood denies that a person can be described solely in terms of the physical and psychological properties. It is with reference to the community that a person is defined.”³² However, Ubuntu neither overlooks nor underestimates individual self-determination.

Macquarrie, writing in *Existentialism*, cautions against a misunderstanding of Ubuntu. He states that when communitarianism becomes oppressive, then Ubuntu is

²⁸ Menkiti (1984, p. 172).

²⁹ Macquarrie (1972, p. 110); Shutte (1993, p. 49, 51).

³⁰ Teffo (1994, p. 7, 12).

³¹ Battle (1997, p. 65).

³² Nhlanhla Mkhize, “Culture, Morality and Self, In Search of an Africentric Voice,” Cited in, Barbara (2003) <http://www.barbaranussbaum.com/downloads/reflections.pdf>, February 15, 2012.

abused. Ubuntu respects individual autonomy, “true Ubuntu incorporates dialogue. It incorporates both relation and distance.” Ndaba addresses the two aspects of Ubuntu when he argues “that the collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or rudimentary collectivity...it simply means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others.”³³

Because of the role of community and human relationships in Ubuntu, Nkonko Kamwangamalu argued that Ubuntu is communitarian since, in his view, the society dictates “not only the rights of an individual but also individual’s duties, obligations and limitations/boundaries.”³⁴ What underlies this observation, however, is the important role of human relationship in Ubuntu culture. In his work, *Ubuntu in Comparison with Western Philosophies*, Ndaba asserts that “African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others.”³⁵ Ndaba’s assertion, however, is not limited to Africans. All human beings stand in need of human interaction for their personal actualization and thriving of the society.

2.1.3 Reciprocity of Care

Ubuntu fosters reciprocity of care. Individual/universal human rights are conjoined with human reciprocity of care and the assumption of responsibility.³⁶ All beings exist in reciprocal relationship with one another. In Ubuntu culture every individual has an irreplaceable role to play. Everything that exists contributes to the equilibrium necessary for sustenance of ecosystems and integrity of the biosphere and the cosmos.³⁷ It is the reciprocation which facilitates individual, societal and the biospheric survival and progress. Proper reciprocation generates harmony while failure to do so may generate violence.³⁸ Reciprocity is a sacred duty. Exploitation is unethical and immoral. Life from this perspective is only real if it is shared and shares in the lives of others. In his work *Ubuntu Management and Motivation*, John Broodryk notes that Ubuntu is both a state of being and of becoming, both of which are anchored in reciprocity of care, thus as a process of self-realization through others, Ubuntu enhances the self-realization of others.³⁹ Ethics of Ubuntu rest on the assumption that as one is enabled by the community to find oneself and grow as human person, one should use one’s potential for the good of the community. Life is about receiving and giving. Failure to reciprocate is tantamount to violence. It is unethical.

³³ Teffo (1994, p. 7, 12).

³⁴ Kamwangamalu (2008, p. 115).

³⁵ Ndaba (1994, p. 14).

³⁶ Van Der Marwe and Willie (1996, pp. 1–3).

³⁷ Richards (1980, pp. 76–77).

³⁸ Richards (1980, pp. 76–77).

³⁹ Broodryk (1997, pp. 5–7).

2.1.3.1 Reciprocity as the Bond Between the Community and an Individual

Broodryk posits that, “as a process of self-realization *through* others, Ubuntu enhances the self-realization *of* others.”⁴⁰ Macquarrie observes that “being with others...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related. By nature, a person is interdependent with other people. Due to this interdependence, reciprocity is *sine qua non* within the culture of Ubuntu. By nature a person receives and reciprocates care. The community or society is a prerequisite for personhood. Society facilitates reciprocation which, in turn, facilitates personhood and self-actualization. Personal reciprocation of care creates, sustains and strengthens the community. Reciprocity in form of giving back to the community and proactive living for the community and others defines a person and his moral maturity. This approach to morality is unique since it defines personhood for community not *against* community. Macquarrie explains this perspective in detail in his work titled *Existentialism*.⁴¹

Morality is about human relationships while a human relationship is about reciprocity. Wrong doing separates people, disturbs harmony, and is against life. Verhoef and Michel, in their article titled “Studying morality within the African context,” assert that “what is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong.”⁴² Now what connects people together involves reciprocity since human relationship is anchored on reciprocity. In agreement with Verhoef and Michel, Thaddeus Metz identified a concise ethical principle based on African relationality, solidarity and reciprocity: “an act is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an act is wrong.” In other words indigenous sub-Saharan ethics’ (Ubuntu) objective is harmony which favors human life. Harmony, however, is a product of mutually favorable human actions. Reciprocity is a necessary component in sub-Saharan ethics. Metz explains solidarity with one another as “to act in ways that are expected to benefit each other...solidarity is also a matter of people’s attitudes such as emotions and motives being positively oriented toward others, say by sympathizing with them and helping them for their sake.”⁴³

2.1.3.2 Ujamaa as Praxis of Ubuntu Reciprocity

Many post-colonial African intellectuals tried to force Ubuntu into a political theory. Politicians such as Julius Nyerere⁴⁴ of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah⁴⁵ of Ghana

⁴⁰ Broodryk (1997, pp. 5–7).

⁴¹ Macquarrie (1972, p. 104).

⁴² Verhoef and Claudine (1997, p. 397).

⁴³ Metz (2010, p. 84). <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjhr20>, February 15, 2012.

⁴⁴ See Nyerere (1968, 1973); Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for African Studies (2005).

⁴⁵ See Nkrumah (1964). Although Nkrumah’s objective was to help Africa deal with the changes from Islam and the West without losing its Identity, Ubuntu remains the most important element within African cultural identity.

and Leopold Senghor⁴⁶ of Senegal are some of the leading examples. Their zeal for Ubuntu as a political theory failed to come to fruition primarily because Ubuntu, being an ethic, could not be reduced to a political ideology. This section explores Nyerere's *Ujamaa*, a Swahili word for familyhood or fraternity, (which Nyerere interpreted as African socialism) as praxis of Ubuntu reciprocity.

In Nyerere's own words, Ujamaa "is an attitude of mind." It is that "attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other's welfare."⁴⁷ Ujamaa is about care and reciprocity. Nyerere, while trying to show that Ujamaa is socialism, ended up demonstrating that it really is not. Contrasting socialism and capitalism to justify Ujamaa as socialism Nyerere writes: "Destitute people can be potential capitalists—exploiters of their fellow human beings. A millionaire can equally well be a socialist; he may value his wealth only because it can be used in the service of his fellow men." This statement of Nyerere not only contradicts the meaning of socialism, it affirms Ujamaa as Ubuntu ethic. While socialism is imposed on the people, Ubuntu is a cultural ethic, not a political ideology. Nyerere describes such ethic. He paradoxically further describes it even as he contrasts socialism from capitalism. Nyerere writes, "The man who uses wealth for the purpose of dominating any of his fellows is a capitalist. So is the man who would if he could. ... a millionaire can be a good socialist."⁴⁸ Nyerere argued that Ujamaa "is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man."⁴⁹ What Nyerere neither defines nor explains in detail is the meaning of Ujamaa. By his own statements with regards to Socialism and Capitalism, Nyerere shows that Ujamaa is an attitude of mind and a moral mindset. It is not a socio-political and economic theory. Ujamaa is an ethic. As an ethic, Ujamaa transcends political and economic theories and systems. Ujamaa is simply praxis of Ubuntu. It is essentially an ethic.

In the traditional society, everybody who was able to work had to work hard for personal needs and the needs of the sick, the old and children. Provision for those who could not provide for themselves was imperative. The traditional society didn't force its constituents to distribute their produce. It did not emphasize equality of possession but of personhood. Recognition of human dignity and personhood in all humans, including those with disabilities, and safeguarding that dignity is the ethical ideal of both Ujamaa and Ubuntu. Thus, individual ownership of major means production such as land was discouraged but without the use of force or

⁴⁶ See Washington (1973). Senghor uses the concept of Negritude in poetry to explore African culture, the basis of which is Ubuntu. Some of his main concepts include human and cosmic unity, rhythm, importance of human emotion and the power of art to communicate what cannot be easily verbalized.

⁴⁷ Nyerere (1968, p. 1).

⁴⁸ Nyerere (1968, p. 1).

⁴⁹ Nyerere (1968, p. 12).

political ideology.⁵⁰ People were allowed to participate in the process of production of wealth according to their ability. Consequently, there was naturally a division of labor and subsidiary.

Traditional Ujamaa gave members of its respective society, specifically people with physical disabilities, the less fortunate, the old, children and the sick the security they needed to live a meaningful and dignified life in spite of their limiting conditions. Nyerere argues that such security which was common in, almost all traditional societies must be preserved and extended beyond tribal, national and continental boundaries because all people are equal.⁵¹

The Arusha Declaration was founded on the traditional African way of life. The declaration recognizes human equality, human right to life, dignity and respect; equal rights as citizens, equal right of expression, movement, religious belief, right of association, right to be protected by the society, right to just reward for human labor, equal right of access to national natural resources and major means of production.⁵²

In sum, Ujamaa is systematized Ubuntu in praxis. Ujamaa is based on the need to recognize human equality and the ethical imperative of investing in the community based on each individual's need for the community and the community's need for its constituents. It is ultimately about giving back to the community, for the good of all, without denying personal rights and entitlements.

2.1.3.3 Importance of Marriage and Procreation

Most traditional African societies hold marriage as the focus of both individual and societal existence. Mbiti observes that in marriage all members of the society, the living, the dead and the yet to be born meet. Whoever does not participate in it "is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under-human'. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected the society and the society rejects him in return."⁵³

From the individual's perspective, the importance of marriage is based on the belief that parents are reproduced in their progeny, which means parents with children will be immortal as long as their children don't break the chain by not making children.⁵⁴ Having descendants is also crucial because one's immortality (in the world of the living-dead) is acquired by having descendants who will keep the deceased in memory. "To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and

⁵⁰ Nyerere (1968, pp. 2–12).

⁵¹ Nyerere (1968, p. 12).

⁵² Nyerere (1968, p. 14). The Arusha declaration was passed on February 5, 1967. Being derived from the traditional society way of life, the Arusha declaration proves not only the inherent ethics in the traditional society but also its authenticity and validity as compared to modern ethics.

⁵³ Mbiti (1969, p. 130).

⁵⁴ Mbiti (1969, p. 130).



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