

UBUNTU AND MORAL VALUE

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I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

Submitted on this _____ day of _____ 2013 in _____

Abstract

This thesis argues for a perfectionist account of the African communitarian philosophy *ubuntu* as the best account of *ubuntu qua* theory of moral value. Surveying extant work on *ubuntu*, it finds that most such work reproduces the ambiguities and difficulties of the fraught public discourse on *ubuntu*, or falls to fallacies characteristic of many African philosophical projects. It argues that the approach which most successfully avoids these difficulties, thus reflecting the concerns and critical methodologies developed over the recent history of African philosophy more broadly, is the Analytic approach exemplified by Thaddeus Metz' work. Metz makes explicit the constellation of value claims generally glossed as *ubuntu*, and proposes an attractive positive account, but does not account for the aretaic (or virtue-ethical) features integral to and attractive in most accounts of *ubuntu*. Seeking an account capable of incorporating the advantages of Metz' account and these aretaic features, the thesis proposes two possible bases for such an aretaic account: an autocentric account, reducing moral value to the agents' prudential value; and a perfectionist account, entailing moral normativity from the fullest development of some essential feature of human nature. The third chapter proposes the best formulation of an autocentric *ubuntu* in response to Metz' objections to such accounts. In light of further objections, even this proves insufficient to support an intuitively attractive account of *ubuntu*. The fourth chapter develops and defends a perfectionist account of *ubuntu*, according to Thomas Hurka's methodology, on which the relevant essential feature of human nature is our disposition toward relationships of communion with one another. This feature takes what is relevantly essential to be an emergent property of features already plausibly essential to human nature – rationality and language-use – and is congruent with the account of human nature proposed by advocates of *ubuntu* and African communitarianism. Since this perfectionist account is coherent and intuitively attractive, and offers novel, plausible responses to challenges facing aretaic accounts of *ubuntu* and *ubuntu* generally, this dissertation concludes that it is the most attractive account of *ubuntu qua* theory of moral value.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I seek to outline the best account of the African communitarian philosophy glossed as “*ubuntu*”, as a theory of moral value. The term *ubuntu* is generally invoked to capture a constellation of traditional African value claims with a purportedly deep oral tradition, though theoretical discussion of the term as such, and *a fortiori* of the term as a coherent moral theory, has been uneven. As such this thesis proceeds from a critical examination of accounts of *ubuntu* extant in the philosophical literature, defending what I take to be the best extant account, produced by Thaddeus Metz. Metz’ account, however, achieves robust coherence and theoretical focus while sacrificing the aretaic (or virtue-ethical) aspects which are among *ubuntu*’s most attractive features. As the thesis progresses, therefore, I argue for an account of *ubuntu* capable of incorporating the advantages of Metz’ account into a plausible *aretaic* framework. I conclude by arguing for the advantages such an account has over alternatives, providing a promising basis from which to resolve challenges to *ubuntu qua* moral theory in the most intuitively appealing manner and producing a novel focus of moral concern consistent with African tradition.

In the first chapter, I introduce the concept of *ubuntu* as currently articulated, and contextualise it in three ways: noting how and why the term is politicised, contentious, and under-determined in South African public discourse; outlining methodological precedents in developing African philosophical concepts from the broader history of recent African philosophy; and categorising the four methodologies which characterise extant work on *ubuntu*. Concluding these lines of enquiry, I argue respectively: that *ubuntu*’s congruence with cognate terms in African philosophy is best explained by a coherent concept in need of greater development; that methodologies developed to avoid fallacies particular to African philosophy should be applied to developing *ubuntu*; and that these concerns applied to extant methodologies for developing *ubuntu* suggest that the Analytic approach is best suited to the task.

In the second chapter I rehearse what is currently the only Analytic account of *ubuntu qua* moral theory – Thaddeus Metz’ account – and argue that it does not account for the aretaic features which are among the most theoretically compelling aspects of *ubuntu*. In the first part of the chapter, I rehearse Metz’ position to distinguish two projects in his seminal work

Toward an African Moral Theory: isolating a constellation of characteristically African moral claims which, taken together, pick out what is meant by *ubuntu*; and arguing for one specific account as the best explanation for this constellation. I argue that the constellation ought to serve as a touchstone for any account of *ubuntu*, and concede the explanatory efficacy of Metz' preferred account against all but the position he labels "U4" (a defence of which I defer to the following chapter). In the second part of the chapter, I present three arguments for *ubuntu*-as-aretaic: that *ubuntu* is commonly articulated in aretaic language; that *ubuntu* fits "Plato's Requirement on the Virtues;" and that the relationships Metz finds morally attractive in *ubuntu* are better understood as partially constituted by dispositions of character than by acts. I argue that either a viable autocentric or perfectionist theory of *ubuntu* is necessary to account for these aretaic aspects.

In the third chapter, I propose an autocentric account of *ubuntu*, on which an agent's prudential good reliably coincides with the moral good, such that moral actions map onto prudentially beneficial ones, glossed by Metz as "U4". Attractively, it promises a direct response to the Immoralist, justifying morality in non-moral terms. The third chapter reproduces and expands upon a previously published interaction in which I propose a revised autocentric account of *ubuntu* in light of Metz' objections to U4, and he replies to this revised view. In light of Metz' and my own further criticisms, even this strongest account of autocentric *ubuntu* proves not to be viable. I conclude the chapter by suggesting that the popularity of autocentric accounts of *ubuntu* may stem from an overemphasis on small-scale societies as exemplary of *ubuntu*, since altruism and prudence coincide in such societies with a frequency which does not scale up universally.

In the fourth chapter I develop a perfectionist account of *ubuntu*. After outlining Thomas Hurka's exhaustive methodology for developing a coherent perfectionist account, I apply this methodology to developing an account of what is essential to humans *qua* living beings congruent with claims about human nature attributed to *ubuntu*. The best such account, I argue, takes our capacity to commune with one another to be the relevantly essential feature of human nature, and developing this to its fullest extent to entail Metz' relationship of harmony, which itself entails the constellation of claims which pick out *ubuntu*. I argue that this account, which incorporates an aretaic approach and the advantages of Metz'

view, is able to attractively meet challenges Metz has argued face aretaic accounts of *ubuntu*.

I conclude the thesis by noting that the perfectionist account I have developed offers promising responses to challenges facing *ubuntu* – difficulty accounting for individual autonomy, and the problem case of heterosexism – and that it impinges positively on earlier work of mine on the moral status of gossip for African communitarian accounts.

A few qualifications should be noted at the outset of this project: offered as a contribution to work in African Philosophy, this thesis is methodologically a work of Analytic philosophy, drawing largely on work available in English and English translation; its author, while geographically African, cannot authentically claim to belong to a culture whose traditions include *ubuntu* as such; and as new work on the topic continues to be promulgated, this thesis cannot claim to be an exhaustive or final analysis of *ubuntu qua* moral theory. None of these qualifications, I think, are damning to my project, and it is worth outlining why not.

“African Philosophy” is a broad church, and vaguely delineated, including work from Christian, Anglo-Analytic, and Continental philosophical traditions, while also incorporating novel concerns and novel methodologies for developing oral traditions and folk-belief. It is therefore a concern worth noting that Analytic philosophy does not exhaust African philosophy, and that an excessive reliance on extant Analytic theories or theorists might privilege perspectives common in literature most accessible to an Analytic author. A similar concern is that a significant proportion of African philosophical work is produced by Francophone Africans, and surveying philosophical literature in English may exclude distinctive contributions by these philosophers. In response, it is necessary to distinguish working-from- an-Analytic-methodology from drawing-exclusively-on-Analytic-sources. In this thesis I do the former, and incorporate relevant work wherever I am aware of it. While it could still be argued that my frame methodology might be antagonistic toward say, Marxist or Thomist ideological assumptions, I attempt to discuss such ideological differences explicitly, curtailing ideological hegemony to the extent a writer can. As to the worry that language of publication may render my sources insufficiently representative, I concede that this is a difficulty faced by much work in African philosophy, and I am not immune to it. However, a significant enough body of work exists in English and English translation for a

robust and substantive debate, and at least the most influential Francophone works – such as those by Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, and Paulin Hountondji – have been broadly influential and discussed even in Anglophone African philosophy. Moreover, while my discussion of *ubuntu* is, as I think it must be, contextualised within the frame of Pan-African discussions of African communitarianism, my primary focus is on *ubuntu per se*, the literature on which is almost exclusively Anglophone. In addition, an Analytic framing seems to me to offer an advantage, rather than simply being a potential handicap: in framing theoretical discussion of *ubuntu* in terms familiar to Analytic debate in moral theory, I hope to demonstrate its attractiveness as a moral theory *simpliciter*, not simply a resolution to parochial concerns.

Similar to the concern over linguistic representation is the question of whether I, as a white South African without authentic membership in a culture whose traditions espouse *ubuntu*, can accurately represent the perspectives glossed as *ubuntu*. Personal experience of the authentic cultural *milieu* theorists draw on in articulating *ubuntu* is, undeniably, an asset in producing formal accounts thereof. Philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, and Dismas Masolo do admirable work developing philosophical discussions rooted in articulations of their respective cultural traditions, and even problematic attempts by Tempels, Kagame, and John Mbiti to generalise from specific cultural traditions to African essences start from culturally authentic and philosophically novel grounds. While such authentic understanding strikes me as advantageous, it does not appear to be necessary to philosophical work of the sort I engage in. This is so precisely because a number of African philosophers have already undertaken the project of formalising the relevant African traditional beliefs. The purpose of my project is not to undertake a novel ethnological investigation, or to critically engage with such works *qua* authentic ethnographies. Rather, the work at this stage of philosophical discussion is to undertake conceptual crash-testing of contending accounts of *ubuntu qua* moral theory. That is, while it would undoubtedly aid my deep comprehension of phrases such as “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” to speak fluent isiXhosa and fully understand the cultural *milieu* which informs the phrase’s interpretation, critically examining contending claims (published in English, by those who do) about the phrase’s entailments and theoretical justification demands no such knowledge. Similarly, given a broad consensus in the literature of the moral claims under discussion, my capacity

to propose viable explanations or refinements of these claims does not seem to be invalidated by my lack of authentic experience of the folk-beliefs or praxes from which such claims derive. This is not to dismiss the need for deference to *ubuntu's* attendant claims and concepts as articulated by traditional informants; but provided that I am sufficiently considerate, I don't take this concern to torpedo my thesis's capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the philosophical literature on *ubuntu qua* moral theory.

My last qualification, that this thesis cannot claim to be an exhaustive or final analysis, may seem sufficiently true of all such work that it hardly bears mentioning. I raise it, however, in order to outline more carefully what I take the project of this thesis to be. While I engage with a number of accounts, a significant proportion of this thesis constitutes an engagement with the work of Thaddeus Metz. This is so both because Metz effectively laid out the terms for a theoretical debate over contending accounts of *ubuntu qua* moral theory, and because his prodigious output and evolving views constitute an unavoidably large percentage of recent philosophical work on the topic. What response to Metz has thus far emerged has largely taken the form either of relatively ineffectual querying of specific claims he makes or wholesale rejection of his methodology, neither of which constitute the robust engagement his claims merit (or, indeed, invite). In this thesis I aim to map a path to the most plausible account of *ubuntu qua* moral theory, as an *aretaic* moral theory. In so doing, I outline a more programmatic engagement with Metz' account of *ubuntu* than is extant in the literature. In many places the path I map coincides with Metz, though I break with him in a number of places as well. In outlining this path, I aim to note places where a fellow-traveller might choose another fork, and to justify my preference for the route I take. By doing so, I hope not just to present my own objections to Metz, but to map the debate's contentious aspects, inviting further work by others.

Chapter 1: Introducing *ubuntu* and the context of investigation

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘*Yu, u nobuntu*’; ‘Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*.’ This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘a person is a person through other people.’ It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong.’ I participate, I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has the proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.¹

Introduction

“*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language,”² Desmond Tutu has said, yet the term is ubiquitous in South African public discourse. “*Ubuntu*,” as it is usually used, refers to a constellation of value claims and morally normative requirements taken to be entailed by them, ostensibly drawn from traditional (South) African folk-psychology. Such a resource seems both novel and apt for philosophical investigation, but much extant work on *ubuntu* has reproduced the difficulties of public discussion on the topic, citing the ubiquity and reach of *ubuntu*’s influence, while generally failing to clearly outline the scope and specific details of the theoretical structure underpinning it. By contrast, Thaddeus Metz has outlined the specific project of developing a philosophically substantiated general principle informed by the values of *ubuntu* “that could be compared to Western theories such as Hobbesian egoism or Kantian respect for persons.”³

My project in this thesis is to argue for an aretaic (broadly, virtue-ethical) account of *ubuntu* as the best such account of *ubuntu qua* theory of moral value, and to develop such an aretaic account. To do so, I outline the methods a theory of *ubuntu* ought to avoid, and the claims it ought to account for; I argue that Metz’ candidate principle fails to account for attractive aretaic features of *ubuntu*, and outline the sorts of account which can; and I test these accounts, discarding one and developing the other into a claim sufficient to account for *ubuntu*’s aretaic features.

¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 31-32.

² Ibid.

³ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 321)

In this introductory chapter, I have three aims. First, I argue that extant difficulty in explicating *ubuntu* is not intrinsic to the concept itself, but rather the function of a stalled language-game, which need not apply to philosophical investigations. This is supported by *ubuntu*'s congruence with cognate terms and parallel discussions in African philosophy more generally; and in fact many of the challenges associated with explicating *ubuntu* are also defining challenges of African Philosophy. As such, work on *ubuntu* as a moral theory ought to take account of precedents in African philosophy more broadly. My second aim, therefore, is to survey the history and methodology of African philosophy, with an eye to the characteristic concerns and challenges which have shaped African philosophy and are pertinent to developing *ubuntu*. My third aim is to apply the relevant lessons of African philosophy to extant philosophical literature on *ubuntu*. I outline this extant literature, dividing it into four categories, and find that the last, an Analytic approach, best avoids the fallacies its competitors fall to.

Ubuntu in Public Discourse

I have described *ubuntu* as a term used to pick out a constellation of value claims and morally normative requirements taken to be entailed by them. This characterisation is intended to preclude the question-begging terms "worldview"⁴ or "philosophy"⁵ which pepper discussions of *ubuntu*, and to accurately account for public discourse of the term. I preface my discussion of the philosophical literature on *ubuntu* by addressing public discourse on it in order to note the term's politicised usage and controversial provenance as the context against which further investigation must take place. Here it may be asked why a philosophical discussion of a term need pay such close attention to its popular usage at all? After all, Utilitarians do not characteristically feel constrained by popular notions of "happiness", and virtue ethicists are not bound by popular opinions about the content of particular virtues. In such cases, however, the relevant terms are commonly referenced, if rarely defined in detail. That is, the concepts are already broadly accepted as viable. In the case of *ubuntu*, however, uncertainty runs somewhat deeper: its ambiguous usage and politicised promulgation across cultures which do not share all of the same assumptions

⁴ (Broodryk, *Ubuntuism as a Worldview to Order Society* 1997)

⁵ Mluleki Mnyaka calls *ubuntu* "an old philosophy of life" (M. Mnyaka, *Xenophobia as a Response to Foreigners in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Exilic Israel: A Comparative Critique in the light of the Gospel* and 2003, 215), and Ngeire Blankenberg a "philosophy and an ideal" (Blankenberg 1999, 43).

entail skepticism about its coherence or applicability, even in public discourse. Since it is common practice in philosophical discussions of *ubuntu* (and, indeed, in much African philosophy) to infer conceptual coherence from folk-use, some account must be given of the ambiguity in public discourse, and some explanation of why it need not apply to a philosophical investigation.

By “public discourse” on *ubuntu*, I mean something including, but not limited to folk-psychological accounts of the term extant in traditional cultural contexts. While the Nguni⁶ word “*ubuntu*,” and its SeSotho correlate “*motho*” are demonstrably part of traditional Southern African cultures, the rich set of connotations associated with it came to particular prominence in the post-apartheid moment⁷. In this context *ubuntu* emerged as an increasingly common politicised term associated with the multiracial “nation-building” project in South Africa, gaining both attention and (to some extent) elaboration in a multicultural context beyond its cultural origins. As a result, the term came to be formally entrenched in South Africa’s political and legal infrastructure: mention of *ubuntu* in the epilogue to the 1993 Interim Constitution⁸ enabled the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and formed the kernel around which a body of *ubuntu* jurisprudence cohered. Then-Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the TRC, credited *ubuntu* as its guiding principle⁹, associating the term in the public imagination with that commission’s emphasis on restorative justice; forgiveness; and amnesty for wrongdoers on condition that they account for their actions to their victims. Add to this the twenty-five case body of legal precedents comprising extant *ubuntu* jurisprudence, and it becomes apparent that *ubuntu* has featured prominently and significantly in South African public life since the end of apartheid. When I refer to “public discourse” on *ubuntu*, I therefore aim to pick out this body of discussion, incorporating traditional folk-psychology, public political discussion, and formalisation in the political and legal spheres, as distinct from formal

⁶ The Nguni language-group includes the Xhosa, Zulu, and Ndebele cultures, and the word is common to all of these.

⁷ Christian Gade has noted that before this political moment it was used almost exclusively in its literal sense – the abstract noun for “humanity” – or to describe an admirable character (Gade, *The Historical Development of the Written Discourses on Ubuntu*, 2011, 307).

⁸ Michael Eze notes that it had first been mentioned in the preamble to the 1975 Inkatha Constitution, and that its inclusion in the 1993 national constitution likely modelled this, either at the suggestion of Inkatha Freedom Party members, or as a political sop to them (M. O. Eze 2010, 103).

⁹ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999), a position endorsed in (Krog 2008). For Tutu’s discussions of Ubuntu from the 1980s onward, see (Battle 1997).

philosophical investigations into, or invoking, *ubuntu*. While I certainly include work on the TRC and *ubuntu* jurisprudence¹⁰ in the latter category, it seems reasonable to me to consider the TRC and *ubuntu* jurisprudence *as such* to be a part of the larger public discourse, particularly given that they conform to the pattern I note in the following pages.

Michael Eze notes that “Usually without justification, many Africanist scholars have given the equivalent translation of *ubuntu* as simply ‘humanism’ and then proceed to defer its definition and meaning by virtue of its association, appearance, and usage in African proverbs as its point of validation.”¹¹ This pattern is a reproduction of much public discourse on *ubuntu* and, while I agree with Eze’s basic outline, I want to present a slightly different account. Public discourse on *ubuntu* tends to trace the following pattern: one of a number of broad, evocative slogans is put forward as encapsulating *ubuntu*, and explained with reference to a set of paradigm examples. These paradigm examples, in turn, are explained as various instances of the same broad phenomenon (or multiply-realizable value) by referring back to the broad slogans. By far the most common slogan proposed as encapsulating *ubuntu* is the Nguni phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,”¹² and its SeSotho correlate, “*motho ke motho ka batho*,”¹³ both generally translated¹⁴ as “a person is a person through other people.”¹⁵ Another slogan is John Mbiti’s “I am because we are.”¹⁶ Although more common in East and West African discussions, it is sometimes cited with reference to *ubuntu*¹⁷. In addition, it is frequently noted that the word “*ubuntu*” (and its SeSotho

¹⁰ For a definitive anthology of which, see (Cornell and Muvangua, *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* 2011)

¹¹ (M. O. Eze 2010, 91)

¹² (Kasenene 1994, 141), (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 35).

¹³ (Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* 1999, 120)

¹⁴ A more accurate translation of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* may be that “being a person depends on being a person-among-people,” but this refinement alone adds little enough explanation in the current context.

¹⁵ Gade claims that the association of this slogan with *ubuntu* does not appear in written work before 1995 (Gade 2011, 313), and that since then the association has become so strong that the slogan and the word *ubuntu* are frequently (sloppily) treated as synonyms. [I think the pattern he describes is basically correct, though note that the slogan appeared in association with *ubuntu* in (Shutte 1993) and (Kasenene 1994).] Given the ubiquity of the association in public discourse since 1995, its recent provenance in written work is noteworthy, though it is also worth noting that Gade is agnostic about what this means. He does not, as I think one ought not, draw the skeptical conclusion that the association between the slogan and *ubuntu* is a wholly recent construction, unrelated to traditional association and foreign to oral tradition (see van Binsbergen 2001). I will address skeptical positions later. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that current public discourse on *ubuntu* regularly invokes the slogan and *ubuntu* together.

¹⁶ (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd edn. 1990, 106)

¹⁷ It is worth noting that, while Mbiti’s slogan is explicitly his own coinage (intentionally modelled on Descartes’ *cogito*) and gained currency through reference to his work, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is (so it is

cognate, *motho*) is simply the abstract word for humanity or being human. Thus, it is sometimes claimed, *ubuntu* is an African humanism¹⁸. As they stand, these slogans fall short of explicitly grounding or outlining normative morality, as they are frequently taken to¹⁹.

Here examples are pointed to as demonstrations of the slogans in application.

Characteristics of generosity, hospitality, and friendliness are said to be demonstrated by the exemplary traditional practices of accommodating strangers and visitors, or the tradition of the “loan cow,” offered to struggling neighbours²⁰. Characteristics of care and compassion are pointed to as the motivation for both assistance and corrective actions in communities. An emphasis on forgiveness and the pursuit of reconciliation is illustrated with reference to traditional punitive practices which sought to reconcile aggrieved parties, rather than simply to punish wrongdoers. And dispositions to avoid conflict, cooperate in seeking consensus, and generally pursue a strong group identity are said to be demonstrated by exemplary traditional participatory democracy practices of the *indaba/lekgoa*, traditions of self-effacement and consideration of the group, and conformity to shared traditions.

This pattern, in which broad slogans are explained with reference to exemplary traditional practices, and the practices are explained as expressions of the same value with reference to the slogans, functions as a language-game sufficient to provide a rough grasp of what “*ubuntu*” picks out. On this rough understanding, *ubuntu* picks out the idea that human beings are radically interdependent, and that this interdependence entails a morally normative pressure toward generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, consensus, and positive group-identification. As it stands, however, the grasp thus obtained resists further clarification or description, remaining frustratingly vague.

One persistent ambiguity, for example, pertains to how normative claims are to be entailed from the fact of our mutual interdependence asserted by *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Is it best understood as a claim about obligations to family and clan, entailed by the support without which we would not exist, or as a metaphysically broader claim about our

claimed) an aphorism with a long tradition of use (this despite Gade’s observation, noted above, that its written debut was recent).

¹⁸ Gade notes that this characterisation first emerged in 1975 (Gade 2011, 307).

¹⁹ See (Ramose 1999), (Mkhize 2008), (Mnyaka and Motlhabi, *Ubuntu and its Socio-moral Significance* 2009).

²⁰ (Mtuzze 2004)

relationship to all human beings? Examples in support of either view exist in public discussion. Another ambiguity stems from the question of what scale of communal relations we are to privilege in situations where benefitting some communal relations harms others: are we to prefer extant communities to new ones; should we enrich family ahead of greater society, or sacrifice benefits to family on behalf of society; if persecuting a few would generate solidarity among the many, are we obliged to endorse such persecution or to promote friendlier actions at the risk of creating discord? Again, *ubuntu* is invoked in support of either position in public discussion. Finally, there are ambiguities raised specifically by questions philosophers might ask: is the value of community final or defeasible; does the value of communal relationships inhere in states of the world, dispositions of character, or relationships whose value must be honoured; what kind of moral harm or wrongdoing is failing to embody *ubuntu*, and what responses to such failure are proper; is *ubuntu* best cashed out, theoretically, as a domain of moral concerns to be addressed by all normative moral theories, or as a competing normative theory in its own right? Answering any of these questions demands greater detail and specificity in value claims than the ambiguous account afforded by the extant public language-game provides.

Here it is worth asking why the language-game admits no further clarification. If *ubuntu* is already a fully developed theory of value, as some claim²¹, then answers to the questions above should be furnished easily. That they are not invites doubt that *ubuntu* describes an extant theory at all, and such skepticism is certainly a feature of public discourse on *ubuntu*²². Given the range of work *ubuntu* is invoked to do in South African public life, it seems that further theoretical development or clarification would be desirable, and persistent doubts about the concept undesirable, driving further response or resolution. Yet for over a decade public discussion and invocation of *ubuntu* has contented itself with the basic explanatory pattern noted above: not only does the language-game fail to clarify ambiguities, but it has stalled at this ambiguous stage. Why should this be?

Any answer to this question here could only be an abductive inference, and my context-setting discussion of public discourse on *ubuntu* may not exhaust the relevant sociological

²¹ (M. Mnyaka, *Xenophobia as a Response to Foreigners in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Exilic Israel: A Comparative Critique in the light of the Gospel* and 2003, 215), (M. F. Murove 2009).

²² (M. O. Eze 2010, 95), (Rolls 2005). A somewhat more theoretically developed version of skepticism is proposed in (van Binsbergen 2001).

factors²³. Given that qualification however, it is certainly possible to propose and examine candidate best explanations for the stalled language-game. Two such explanations present themselves immediately, though both appear to me to leave too much unexplained, and I propose a third which addresses these shortfalls.

The first possible explanation for the stalled language-game is the skeptical position: perhaps *ubuntu* is not a coherent theory or worldview (extant or nascent) so much as an agglomeration of traditional words and concepts pressed into use beyond their natural roles. It may be, on this account, that the stalled language-game simply exhausts what there is to say about *ubuntu* as such. As I have noted, skepticism is certainly part of the public discourse on *ubuntu*, and it would be premature to dismiss all skeptical concerns. That said, it seems to me that skepticism is not the best explanation of the stalled state of *ubuntu's* language-game, for two reasons. The first of these is that, while skepticism would appear to be a natural explanation of a lack of cohesion between *ubuntu's* putative constituent concepts, that is not the problem which demands explanation. The problem I have noted with the stalled language-game is not that no further elaboration of *ubuntu* seems possible or forthcoming, but that ambiguities about which plausible elaboration is the proper one remain unresolved. A second difficulty is that, to borrow from Voltaire, if *ubuntu* did not exist, we would have to invent it. That is, *ubuntu* is invoked in support of projects which aim to redefine South African public discourse after apartheid. A skeptical position would assert that these projects promoted a reinterpretation of traditional cultural concepts to produce a novel artefact. But such an account would then need to explain why the same projects have not continued the elaboration of this novel cultural construct. It seems to me that the stalling of *ubuntu's* elaboration, despite projects served by promoting it, demands more explanatory entities on a skeptical account than on a non-skeptical one. For both of these reasons, a non-skeptical explanation seems preferable.

A more charitable account then, and one which seems to require positing fewer explanatory entities, would say that public discourse on *ubuntu* has not “stalled” as I suggest, but has simply reached the threshold beyond which further refinement demands professional academic work, which has yet to feed back into public discussion. It is certainly the case that

²³ Though I think my reading here is congruent with Michael Eze's thoroughly historicised account (M. O. Eze 2010), discussed in more detail in part three of this chapter.

written work on *ubuntu* has proliferated since the early 1990s, one indication of which is a diagram Gade generated tracking the word's appearance in publications by year, reproduced below.

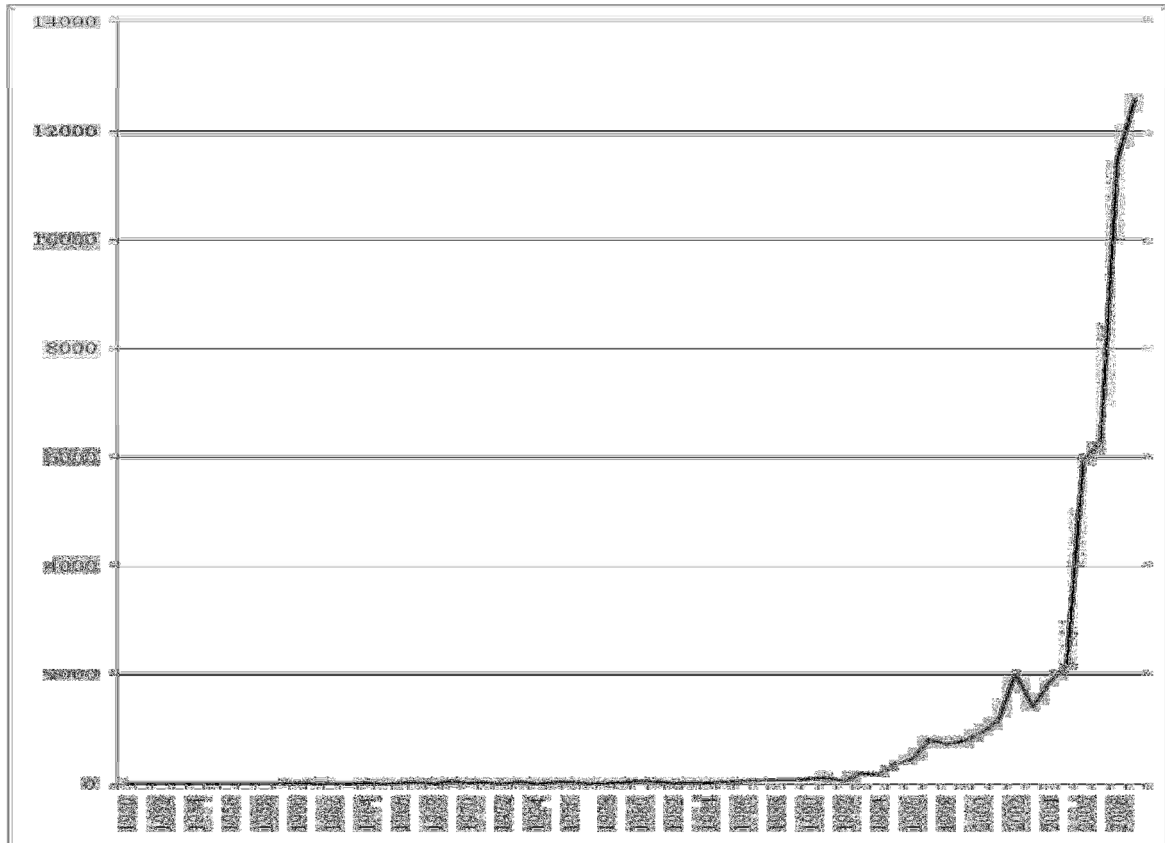


Diagram data: 1950: 6; 1951: 2; 1952: 4; 1953: 6; 1954: 7; 1955: 5; 1956: 7; 1957: 7; 1958: 7; 1959: 5; 1960: 10; 1961: 4; 1962: 8; 1963: 9; 1964: 19; 1965: 7; 1966: 15; 1967: 30; 1968: 9; 1969: 55; 1970: 10; 1971: 36; 1972: 6; 1973: 37; 1974: 9; 1975: 29; 1976: 39; 1977: 9; 1978: 21; 1979: 24; 1980: 57; 1981: 49; 1982: 21; 1983: 28; 1984: 22; 1985: 40; 1986: 58; 1987: 70; 1988: 69; 1989: 71; 1990: 96; 1991: 114; 1992: 57; 1993: 194; 1994: 167; 1995: 358; 1996: 487; 1997: 832; 1998: 746; 1999: 807; 2000: 947; 2001: 1170; 2002: 2010; 2003: 1420; 2004: 1840; 2005: 2190; 2006: 5920; 2007: 6300; 2008: 11500; 2009: 12600.²⁴

While it is true that there has been a significant increase in references to *ubuntu*, the vast majority of these have not presented anything like an attempt to elaborate on the stalled language-game. Most, in fact, merely reproduce the public discourse's language-game and its ambiguities²⁵. Certainly there are some philosophical works which do seek to develop

²⁴ Note that references don't exceed 100 per year before 1991; after 1995 they don't drop below 300 per year; after 1998, when the TRC report was in circulation and Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness* was published, it keeps growing from 807, and spikes in 2002; but 1840 mentions in 2004 should probably be regarded as the peak for *ubuntu* as such, since the huge growth after that (12600 in 2009) coincided with the emergence and growth of the Ubuntu operating system, which is the more likely subject of other references.

²⁵ See (Broodryk 2002), (Mkhize 2008), (Mnyaka and Motlhabi, *Ubuntu and its Socio-moral Significance* 2009), (Dandala 2009).

and elaborate *ubuntu*'s theoretical structure – and these will be the object of my literature survey – but these debates are not reflected in the public discourse. In addition, it is worth noting again that in the case of many ambiguities – such as whether extant communal relationships should outweigh potential ones, or friendly actions to a few outweigh unfriendly actions benefitting a large community – it is not the absence of possible answers, but the absence of consensus which trips up elaboration. Thus, appealing to the body of written work on *ubuntu* does not resolve the stalled language-game so much as reproduce it, pushing the question of elaboration further back without explaining it. The question remains, why is the stalled language game so persistent both in public and scholarly discourse on *ubuntu*?

I suggest that the stalled language-game is an equilibrium which serves the two public projects *ubuntu* is most often invoked to support: Cultural Specificity and Nation-Building Generalisation. By Cultural Specificity, I mean the project of claiming *ubuntu* as the unique and authentic product of an indigenously African cultural tradition²⁶. The primary motivation for asserting such a claim is rehabilitating pride in traditional African cultures, denigrated for years by colonialism and apartheid²⁷. Given the prominence afforded to *ubuntu* in post-apartheid South Africa, it is a matter of significant self-worth for members of the Xhosa, Zulu, or Sotho cultures (or a broadly construed traditional African culture including these and others) to lay claim to *ubuntu*²⁸. It is relevant to note that doing so involves claiming that *ubuntu* be *authentic to a given culture*, in the sense that it originated there, and is not imported or adapted from the colonial culture; and that it be *unique to this culture*, such that it count as an innovation (affirming both its value and its distinction from colonial culture). Thus, while forgiveness, generosity, and communal solidarity in themselves are recognised across all cultures, Cultural Specificity requires the particular conception of these and other practices as expressions of a single, more fundamental concept be unique to an African cultural context.

²⁶ This may mean a very culturally-specific claim, such as that *ubuntu* is an isiXhosa word, and therefore the term can only properly pick out Xhosa traditional perspectives; or, as is more common, Nguni and SeSotho cognate terms are used to treat traditional African societies [in Southern Africa, or across Africa more broadly] as a single cultural context, broadly construed.

²⁷ I will discuss the provenance this denigration traces to the Enlightenment in part 2 of this chapter.

²⁸ This motivation is relevant to my discussions of the “Narrative of Return” and Postcolonial Dignity later in this chapter.

Distinct from this is the generalising strategy deployed in service of the project of “Nation-Building”²⁹. Here *ubuntu* is construed less as a culturally specific heritage, and more as a common civic resource, offered up as a paradigmatically post-apartheid *attitude*³⁰. Bent to the end of cross-cultural and multi-racial national solidarity, *ubuntu* is here best interpreted as glossing familiar concepts such as forgiveness, generosity, and communal solidarity, while cultural specificity and interpretive challenges are de-emphasised to increase the sense of a shared and accessible project.

Both the Nation-Building and Cultural Specificity projects feature prominently in post-apartheid public discourse³¹. As both projects are responses to apartheid, it is natural that they be closely aligned, sharing common conceptual resources and frequently complimenting one another. There is, however, a tension between the two projects’ use of *ubuntu*.

The Cultural Specificity project is best served by construing *ubuntu* as a set of unique claims arising from an indigenous African cultural context and significantly distinct from universal or merely Western parallel concepts. The Nation-Building project, by contrast, is expedited by casting *ubuntu* either as variant of universal concepts, or as a cross-culturally shared post-apartheid attitude. *Ubuntu*’s cachet as the unique cultural heritage of specific African cultures risks deflation if further elaboration reveals it to be simply a cognate of familiar Western concepts. If, on the other hand, fuller investigation of the term were to suggest that it cannot properly be understood outside of its traditional linguistic or anthropological context, *ubuntu* would lose much of its currency as a guiding principle for contemporary jurisprudence and a medium for cross-cultural solidarity. Further elaboration of the concept thus presents a zero-sum game for either of the projects it is commonly invoked to support: to the extent that either project is strengthened by elaborating the theory, the other is undermined. Either project, however, is served at least adequately by the common account of *ubuntu* presented by the stalled language-game, ambiguities notwithstanding. Since, in post-apartheid South Africa, the rehabilitation of cultural resources denigrated by apartheid

²⁹ See (M. O. Eze 2010, 109-121)

³⁰ Ramose criticises such a strategy, as he perceives it in (Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* 2001), as the product of an inauthentic and “bloodless historiography” (Ramose, *The Ethics of Ubuntu* 2002, 329).

³¹ Never more so than in the decade immediately following apartheid, when broad public discussion of *ubuntu* emerged. See (M. O. Eze 2010, 109-129)

is generally advocated by the same persons and institutions advocating Nation-Building, an equilibrium supporting both ends is preferable to one undermining either. Thus, the projects best served by invoking *ubuntu* in public discourse are collectively best served by promoting the language-game in its stalled state, rather than by advancing it.

This account explains, where skepticism does not, why the projects served by invoking *ubuntu* “defer its definition and meaning”³² rather than promoting its further elaboration. It also explains why written work on *ubuntu* so frequently reproduces the stalled language-game, if we assume that much written work on *ubuntu* engages with the same post-apartheid projects public discourse does (which certainly seems a safe assumption). Importantly, it also accounts for the stalled language-game with reference to the ends for which *ubuntu* is invoked, rather than suggesting some inherent difficulty with the concept itself. Here it is useful to note that a philosophical investigation of *ubuntu* and the projects which generally invoke it can come apart, leaving open the possibility that further investigation and elaboration of the concept might prove fruitful.

I take this to be an advantage not simply for the project of developing *ubuntu* theoretically, but for anyone who wishes to invoke *ubuntu* as it is commonly used in public discourse, since the stalled language-game, as it stands, is insufficient to rule out two positions, either of which would undermine *ubuntu* in public-discourse. These positions are the strongest interpretations of Cultural Specificity and Nation-Building Generalisation, which I call Irreducible Specificity and Deflationary Reduction.

Irreducible Specificity asserts that *ubuntu* is not only authentic and unique to a specific cultural context, but that its meaning does not extend beyond its original cultural idiom. This position may be associated in public discourse with the Xhosa slogan “*isiXhosa asitolikwa*” (“Xhosa does not translate”), a response by Xhosa speakers to perceived misinterpretations of their traditional cultural practices, concepts, or idioms. On such an account, “*ubuntu*” picks out a set of norms encoded in traditional cultural practices, the scope of which is only proper to the scale and specific structure of that culture³³. A parallel

³² (M. O. Eze 2010, 91)

³³ Here it is particularly interesting to note Michael Eze’s discussion (M. O. Eze 2010, 95-99) of Shona, Tswana, Ndebele and Xhosa phrases which seem to suggest “What makes one human among the Shona may in certain contexts differ from that which makes one human among the Tsonga” (Ibid, 97). See also (Saule 1996, 85).

here may be the Xhosa tradition of initiation, including ritual circumcision, which defines what it is to be a man. While traditional Xhosa men might colloquially use the term “man” to refer only to Xhosas who had undergone initiation, excluding Xhosa women, uninitiated Xhosa men and all male non-Xhosa adults, doing so is not intended to establish a universalisable standard for being a man. For many Xhosa speakers, “*ubuntu*” is understood as picking out a collection of normative behaviours connected to properly being Xhosa, not to universal moral requirements applicable at the broad scale suggested by those proposing *ubuntu* as an exhaustive theory or “worldview” on which to ground legal or political constructions developed for a large-scale, modern multicultural society. On such an account: *ubuntu* is not elaborated any further because further descriptions outside of traditional idioms would effectively pick out something metaphorically similar to *ubuntu*, but distinct from what traditional examples address; many of the ambiguities I note arise only from misinterpreting *ubuntu* as a universal norm; and many other ambiguities would be resolved by appealing to other etiquette-shaping traditional norms. If this account is a true description of *ubuntu*, then much of the way it was invoked during the work of the TRC is simply a stretched metaphor, most legal references to it as a morally normative concept or *grundnorm* are category errors, and it is simply incoherent to say of a non-Xhosa “Yu, u nobuntu!”

Deflationary Reduction, at the opposite end of the spectrum, asserts that *ubuntu* picks out no concept that cannot be reduced to familiar cognates. Unlike skepticism *simpliciter*, this account does not construe *ubuntu* as a contemporary construction of traditional words and proverbs. Rather, it acknowledges a robust provenance of the term in traditional cultures and languages, but claims that this tradition picks out nothing unique, or any more complex or nuanced than cognate terms such as forgiveness, generosity, or communal solidarity. This position may be associated with former Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro’s claim that *ubuntu*, while absent from South Africa’s 1996 Constitution, is nonetheless expressed through an emphasis on “human dignity, respect, inclusivity, compassion, concern for others, and conformity”³⁴. Similarly, Joe Teffo says “This philosophy is

³⁴ (Mokgoro 2011, 367).

encapsulated in all the philosophies of the world, though it might be articulated and actualised differently.”³⁵

On this account, the language of *ubuntu* has some currency in picking out concepts relevant to a particular historical moment in South Africa, but its utility as shorthand does not suggest that any unique claims about otherwise accessible concepts could be unearthed by further elaboration. And, while there may well be interesting connections between these concepts, we lose nothing of their content by omitting the language of *ubuntu*, or exploring these connections through extant theoretical articulations via the ethics of care, communitarianism, or non-retributive theories of justice.

If either Irreducible Specificity or Deflationary Reduction is the case, then invocations of *ubuntu* which rest on the implication that the stalled language-game points to a more substantive theory or concept would be undermined. It may be that some limited account of *ubuntu* – qualifying its use in legal and political concepts as either the metaphorical extension of culturally-specific terms or as a convenient gloss of a number of other concepts – could be accepted as compatible with public discourse on *ubuntu*, but I suspect this sacrifices much of the concept’s putative impact. And if conceding either position would undermine public discourse on *ubuntu*, then further theoretical investigation into *ubuntu* (certainly into *ubuntu qua* moral theory) would be unwarranted *a fortiori*. Thus, for the sake of further investigation, it would be helpful to have some reason to dismiss Irreducible Specificity and Deflationary Reduction as unlikely.

Luckily for the current investigation, such a reason presents itself. The best reasons to dismiss Irreducible Specificity or Deflationary Reduction emerge from examining cognates of *ubuntu* terms where they appear in other African contexts. Much of the South African public discourse on *ubuntu* has, understandably, limited its frame of reference to South Africa. While *ubuntu* is frequently referred to as “African,” illustrations of this African heritage tend to be limited to the South African traditional cultures cited thus far, or to be articulated as little more than gesturing toward an ambiguous pan-African commonality. But a look at extant work on concepts parallel to *ubuntu* generates a picture incompatible with either Irreducible Specificity or Deflationary Reduction. Irreducible Specificity is shaken first by the

³⁵ (Teffo 1998, 4) Nkonko Kanwangamalu (Kangwangamalu 2008) also reports Prinsloo proposing a version of this claim (E. Prinsloo 1996, 120).

prevalence of cognates for “humanity,” understood as both denoting an interdependent condition and entailing equivalent normative claims, across many African cultures. Here Nkonko Kanwangamalu notes that

This concept has phonological variants in a number of African languages: umundu in Kikuyu and umuntu in Kimeru, both languages spoken in Kenya; bumuntu in kiSukuma and kiHaya, both spoken in Tanzania; vumuntu in shiTsonga and shiTswa of Mozambique; bomoto in Bobangi, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo; gimuntu in kiKongo and giKwese, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, respectively.³⁶

In addition, much discussion of *ubuntu* finds a parallel in West African discussions of the Yoruba concepts of *Eniyan*³⁷ and *Omoluwabi*³⁸, or the Akan *Onipa*³⁹, and while there is no single equivalent term in East Africa, much of the same subject matter seems to be glossed in political discussions of the kiSwahili words *Ujamaa*⁴⁰ (“familyhood”) and *Harambee*⁴¹ (“pulling together”). For each of these terms, the similarity includes, but does not end with their picking out some conception of human beings as interdependent, and entailing normative or value claims from this interdependence⁴²: they also appeal to similar bodies of proverbs⁴³. *Ujamaa*, the novel coinage *Bisoite*⁴⁴, and the various positions glossed as “African Communitarian,”⁴⁵ each represent formal attempts to theorise normative moral claims arising from traditional African conceptions of persons as interdependent and normative claims taken to be entailed by them.

In light of the cultural and linguistic range of these concepts, construing *ubuntu* as irreducibly specific to a single culture, or merely to a set of closely related cultures, seems implausible. If the cultural idiom from which *ubuntu* arises is so widespread, insistence that this idiom cannot be properly translated or understood seems difficult to defend. It may well be that the cultures in question have a great many similarities, and their commonalities

³⁶ (Kangwangamalu 2008, 114)

³⁷ (Gbadegesin, *Eniyan: the Yoruba concept of a person* 2001)

³⁸ (Oduwale 2007)

³⁹ (Wiredu 2001)

⁴⁰ (Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* 1968). For critical discussion, see (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 167-174)

⁴¹ (Kenyatta 1953)

⁴² (Kangwangamalu 2008, 115-118)

⁴³ (Kangwangamalu 2008, 116-118)

⁴⁴ This term, derived from the Lingala word for “we” or “us”, “*biso*”, was coined by Congolese philosopher Tshiamalenga Ntumba (*Langage et Socialite: Primat de la 'Bisoite' sur L'intersubjectivite* 1985). For discussion in English, see (Nyasani 1989).

⁴⁵ (Wiredu 2008)

distinguish them from Western or non-African cultures, such that concepts may more easily be communicated between them than with outsiders. But in the majority of cases, the concepts appealed to are treated as commonplace and comprehensible, in much the same manner as *ubuntu* in the language-game in South African public discourse. That is, the bulk of cognates are taken to be widely comprehensible, not insurmountably culture-specific. And the possibility that each of the cognate terms cited is merely a norm of culturally specific etiquette, not a general value claim, is undermined by the wide range of cultures ascribing to meaningfully parallel conceptions of morally good lives. Even if each culture in question posited their account merely as a culturally-specific requirement imposed upon its own members (which is not the case), the range of cultures subscribing to similar views across sub-Saharan Africa is sufficient to count as support for a characteristically African moral perspective.

If the number of relatively coherent cognate terms in other African contexts seems to undermine Irreducible Specificity, should they be interpreted as supporting Deflationary Reduction? It would appear not. What is picked out by the various African cognate terms is not simply an aggregation of positive descriptions of universally recognised concepts like forgiveness, generosity, and communal solidarity. Rather, what is reproduced across these instances is the suggestion that human being is a radically interdependent condition, and that properly recognising this entails that generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, consensus, and positive group-identification be taken as not merely admirable, but as the cardinal moral values⁴⁶. This claim is distinct from accounts of moral normativity common to the West, but maps the claims made of *ubuntu* in South Africa.

In light of the arguments above, it seems reasonable to proceed on the assumption that the term "*ubuntu*" picks out claims worth investigating in the light of value theory. While the stalled language-game has prevented further elaboration of the theory in public discourse, it seems plausible to read this as a consequence of the public political projects which most frequently invoke *ubuntu*, and not as a limitation of the concept itself. Further reason to doubt that the concept itself is inaccessible to theoretical elaboration or simply reduces to familiar concepts explicable via extant investigations comes from the term's cognates in

⁴⁶ (Wiredu, *A Companion to African Philosophy* 2004, 18)

other African cultural contexts, a resource accessible to philosophical investigation, but not regularly invoked in public discourse. As such, the public discourse on *ubuntu* will now be left behind in this examination. It has served its purpose: providing an initial outline of the concept under investigation; demonstrating some initial ambiguities and skeptical accounts to be overcome in developing an account of *ubuntu*; and illustrating that the concept is both widely referenced and invoked in a number of politicised projects. These and similar political projects recur in African discussions, but it is worth noting that a philosophical investigation has the goal of developing a clearer account of the value claims in question, and need not be swayed by these projects. Rather, the investigation will proceed by making reference to claims and discussions of them prevalent in African philosophical discussions from South Africa and other African sources.

An important consequence of invoking African philosophical resources is that researching *ubuntu* becomes implicated in the broader academic undertaking of African Philosophy as a whole. It is worth noting that very little reference to the broader context of African Philosophy and its characteristic methodological debates is found in much of the extant South African work on *ubuntu*. This seems odd, given that many of the concerns which have emerged as characteristic of African Philosophy seem to be applicable to work on *ubuntu*. As such, I turn in the second part of this chapter to an outline of the relevant recent history of African Philosophy, to be used as a lens through which to examine extant philosophical literature on *ubuntu* in the third part.

African Philosophy

African Philosophy is not simply a resource to be drawn upon in developing an account of *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value, but a set of methodologies which has evolved in response to the challenges of developing traditional conceptual resources philosophically. As such, I am concerned in this section to outline a brief history of African Philosophy understood as a response to these challenges. While the history I trace is not intended to be exhaustive, I sketch the evolution of thought on what African philosophy is and how it should be undertaken, how it relates to philosophy *simpliciter*, and which description of its ends best accords with my project.

Any contemporary⁴⁷ African philosophy is, at the offset, a response to the legacy of colonial and post-colonial denigration of Africans and their cultural and intellectual resources. The growth and professionalisation of philosophy and other academic disciplines during the European Enlightenment did not simply coincide with or reproduce the racism which emerged with colonial expansion at that time: leading Enlightenment thinkers justified and legitimised it. On this, Emmanuel Eze notes

The earliest recorded encounters between Europeans and African kingdoms at the beginning of the fifteenth century reveal remarkable accounts of relationships between equals – the exchange of diplomatic counsels was routine – and glowing European accounts of the thriving and vibrant nations of Bini, Dahomey, Ashanti etc., whose organisational powers and influence we constantly favourably compared by Europeans to that of the Roman Papacy. However, as the plantations in the Americas developed and Afro-European trade demands shifted from raw material to human labour, there was also a shift in the European literary, artistic, and philosophical characterisations of Africans. Specifically within philosophy, Africans became identified as a subhuman “race,” and speculations about the “savage” and “inferior” nature of “the African” and “the African mind” became widespread and intertextually entrenched within the *univers du discours* of the French, British, and German Enlightenment thinkers.⁴⁸

As D.A. Masolo notes

This Western attitude had started as a mere cultural bias, supported loosely by a racist orthodox biblical ideology. But it gradually grew into a formidable two-pronged historical reality: slavery and slave trade on one the one hand, and academic expressions on the other.⁴⁹

Many debates and even disciplines as they exist in academia today trace their roots to the Enlightenment, where figures including Hume, Kant, and Hegel valorised and entrenched

⁴⁷ This is not to say that there could be no African philosophy predating colonialism. Henry Odera Oruka’s work on Sage Philosophy posits traditional African sages as equivalent to the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Historians of African philosophy point to Ethiopian Christian philosopher Zera Yacob (1599-1692) and Descartes’ Ghanaian-born interlocutor Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703-1758) as Africans who were philosophers independent of a postcolonial project. And Samuel Oluoch Imbo, in his examiner’s report on this thesis, argues for the philosophical status of the West African epic poems, such as the Epic of Sundiata and the Epic of Askia Mohammed. Any or all of these resources may constitute pre-colonial African philosophy. But they cannot be asserted or pursued in contemporary philosophical scholarship outside of the scope of the contemporary African philosophy I outline, and more often than not are raised explicitly to contribute toward the projects of one or another strand of this philosophical tradition.

⁴⁸ (E. C. Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy* 1997, 6). Eze cites (Davidson, *Africa: History of a Continent* 1966) and (Davidson, *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Cultural and Social History* 1969) as informing his summary. See also (E. C. Eze 1997, 18, n10)

⁴⁹ (Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* 1994, 3)

narrowly Eurocentric accounts of human nature⁵⁰, effectively inventing the theoretical grounds for racism. Moreover, work by Lucien Levy-Bruhl, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and other inheritors of these conceptions made such assessments hegemonic in academic engagement with Africa until relatively late into the twentieth century. While contemporary philosophers in the West are anecdotally aware, if at all, of the racism legitimised by European philosophers of the Enlightenment, African philosophers are unable to ignore the active antipathy heroes of the Enlightenment directed toward Africans. As such, I feel it is worth quoting a number of the relevant assertions, to better illustrate the foundational claims African philosophers respond to. A natural starting point here is David Hume's argument in *On National Character*:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen... if nature had not made original distinctions betwixt these breeds of men⁵¹.

This argument is then picked up by Kant⁵² in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*,

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any praise-worthy quality⁵³, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ That is, hierarchical classifications of humanity which privileged phenotypic Europeans.

⁵¹ (E. C. Eze 1997, 7). Eze notes that "What is philosophically significant here, I think, is Hume's casting of the 'difference' between Europeans and Africans, 'whites' and 'Negroes'... as a 'constant' (read: permanent) and 'original distinction' established by 'nature.' It is this form of 'natural' philosophical casting of racial differences that framed the African outside of the 'proper' (read: European) humanity."

⁵² For detailed discussions of Kant's racist claims, see (E. C. Eze, *The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's Anthropology* 1997) and (Serequeberhan 1997), both collected in (E. C. Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy* 1997).

⁵³ Among the many obviously contestable points here, this claim in particular ignores Anton Wilhelm Amo, born in Axim (in what is now Ghana), "transported elsewhere" to Germany, where he contributed to the culture of letters, most notably as a correspondent of Descartes. See (Abraham 2004) and (Wiredu, *Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind* 2004).

⁵⁴ (Kant, *Observations concerning the Beautiful and the Sublime* 1960, 110-111).

Later, in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant says of “the race of the Negroes”

...they are full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain. They can be educated, but only as servants (slaves), that is they allow themselves to be trained. They have many motivating forces, are also sensitive, are afraid of blows, and do much out of a sense of honour.⁵⁵

In contrast to this limited set of motivations, Kant considers that “the white race possesses *all* motivating forces and talents *in itself*”⁵⁶. Without doubt, Kant is repeating perspectives common enough among European thinkers of his day, but Emmanuel Eze argues that “it would be a mistake to believe that Kant contributed nothing new or of original consequence to the study of ‘race’ or to the problem of European ethnocentrism in general”⁵⁷. Kant’s *Anthropology* is one of the earliest texts of that discipline as such and, according to Walter Sheidt, provided “the first *theory* of race which really merits the name”⁵⁸. That is, “Kant’s anthropology and geography offer the strongest, if not the only, sufficiently articulated philosophical justification of the superior/inferior classification of ‘races of men’ of any European writer up to his time”⁵⁹. In doing so, he legitimises what Tsenay Serequeberhan calls “the *singular* and grounding metaphysical belief that European humanity is properly speaking isomorphic with the humanity of the human *as such*”⁶⁰.

This belief is exemplified in Hegel, who not only denigrates Africans, but relegates them to an ahistorical category where Africa and Africans are considered simply as resources for appropriation by the European project of History⁶¹. In Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*⁶², Emmanuel Eze says, “Africans are depicted as incapable of rational thought or ethical conduct. They therefore have no laws, religion, and political order.”⁶³ Eze goes on to note that

⁵⁵ (Starke 1831, 353). The translation is Eze’s (E. C. Eze 1997, 116, n135)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ (E. C. Eze 1997, 129)

⁵⁸ (Sheidt 1950, 372)

⁵⁹ (E. C. Eze 1997, 129)

⁶⁰ (Serequeberhan 1991, 7)

⁶¹ I draw on (E. C. Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy* 1997, 7-10) here. For further analyses of Hegel’s discussion of Africans, see also (Bernasconi, *African Philosophy’s Challenge to Continental Philosophy* 1997) and (Bernasconi, *Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti* 1998)

⁶² (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* 1993)

⁶³ (E. C. Eze 1997, 8).

In the first few pages of *Philosophy of History*, Hegel has used the following terms to describe African peoples: “barbarism and savagery,” “barbarous ferocity,” “terrible hordes,” “barbarity,” “animal man,” “savagery and lawlessness,” “primitive,” “animality,” “the most terrible manifestation of human nature,” “wild confusion,” and “Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit.”⁶⁴

This stark account of Africans becomes integral to his later argument, in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*, that “the imperial and colonial expansion of Europe is the necessary and *logical* outlet for resolving the problem of poverty inherent to capitalism.”⁶⁵ It is justified that this entails appropriating African resources and, indeed, peoples, because “the civilised nation is conscious that the rights of the barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy only as a formality.”⁶⁶ While obviously contrived to support colonialism and the expansion of Europe, the lingering effect of this argument and its forebears was to entrench the conception of Africans as incapable of rational thought or ethical conduct, without laws, religion, or political order. Then, as Eze has it

With the authorities of Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Marx behind them, and with the enduring image of “the African” as “black,” “savage,” “primitive,” and so forth... nineteenth- and twentieth-century European anthropologists descended upon Africa. And *quelle surprise!*: the Levy Bruhls and the Evans-Pritchards report that the “African mind” is “prelogical,” “mystical,” and “irrational;” or, when it is recognised as “logical (such as by Evans-Pritchard, it is still compared and considered inferior to the “Western” scientific mind – as if all Westerners’ minds are scientific, or as if all Africans must have the scientist’s mind in order to be rationally human.”⁶⁷

Levy-Bruhl’s resulting emphasis on Africans characterised as “the primitive mind”⁶⁸, influenced such Continental philosophers as Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Derrida⁶⁹, extending the hegemony of these assumptions well into the twentieth century. While these claims are now repudiated by philosophers, their reign has impacted the development of African Philosophy in two key ways. First, when Levy-Bruhl’s influential conception of “the primitive mentality” still dominated perceptions of Africa, simply asserting that African cultures are capable of producing sophisticated metaphysical, moral, and epistemic frameworks independent of those imported through colonialism was an important break from orthodoxy. Doing so, via one strategy or another, is the element

⁶⁴ (E. C. Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy* 1997, 18, 14n)

⁶⁵ (E. C. Eze 1997, 8)

⁶⁶ (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* 1967, 219)

⁶⁷ (E. C. Eze 1997, 10)

⁶⁸ See, for example (Levy-Bruhl, *The 'soul' of the primitive* 1965) and (Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* 1966).

⁶⁹ (Bernasconi, *Levy-Bruhl among the Phenomenologists: Exoticisation and the Logic of 'the Primitive'* 2005)

common to all contemporary African Philosophy. Second, the exclusion of African perspectives from formal philosophy at the time when the modern academic discipline was coalescing has framed this formal discipline as philosophy *simpliciter*, the prior form relative to which alternative contributions are novel. This historical contingency, that is, casts the body of professional, academic philosophy as the benchmark against which alternative contributions are evaluated as philosophical, demanding a sufficiently philosophical case be made for considering such alternative work at all. This is a burden of proof African philosophers have taken up, in various ways.

The racism of Enlightenment thinkers and the lingering effects of its assertions are, then, the point of departure for African philosophy. Importantly, this is not the first term in just one dialectic, but in several related dialectics, in much the same way that “Analytic” and “Continental” philosophers have developed parallel but distinct bodies of work in response to classical philosophical sources.⁷⁰ As regards these two approaches’ presence in African philosophy: Appiah notes that philosophers in Africa have “inherited the two warring traditions”⁷¹ and these certainly impact the practice of philosophy in Africa, with philosophers in Francophone countries tending toward a Continental style, while those in Anglophone countries tend toward the Analytic. That said, the difference is arguably less important than those I discuss in the next paragraph, amounting in practice more to an inflection on the more dominant theoretical debates than anything like a schism. There is perhaps more emphasis on dialecticism, historically-informed genealogy, and Marxian interpretations among Continental philosophers, and the need for translation slows the dissemination of ideas. But Analytic African philosophers must also attend to history, and major works do permeate through translation.

While some works may straddle one or more categories, it is possible to identify at least the following distinct African theoretical responses to Enlightenment racism: Egyptianist/“Black Athena” theories;⁷² Africana philosophy;⁷³ Negritude⁷⁴ and the post-independence political

⁷⁰ On which, see (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 88-90).

⁷¹ (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 90)

⁷² These are defined by the argument that contemporary Western philosophy depends from Greek mathematics and philosophy, which in turn depend from Egyptian forebears, that the Egyptian heritage is meaningfully understood as African, and thus that Western philosophy is effectively built on a foundation of African philosophy. Key texts include (Diop 1974), (Bernal 1987), (Obenga, *A Lost Tradition: African Philosophy in World History* 1995) and (Obenga, *Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy* 2004). For critical discussion

communalist theories which followed it;⁷⁵ and Ethnophilosophy and the dialectical responses to it. While each of these picks out a body of literature built around distinct theoretical strategies, all are responses to the original denigration of Africans, and all are bounded by the sorts of responses they are: positive assertions, intended to respond to the dismissal of African philosophical competence by establishing some corpus or other which can uncontroversially be admired as African Philosophy.

Importantly, this need not be the case. In order simply to respond to the epistemic failings of the Enlightenment tradition of racist denigration, all that need be said is the following: the concept of “race” as a marker of anything more than phenotype seems to be epiphenomenal and inaccurate, and there is thus no reason to expect any innate distinction between Africans and any other group of persons; a mature, non-jingoistic anthropology reveals African cultures to be as nuanced and intellectually rigorous as any others; and Africans are apt and welcome to contribute toward and engage with philosophy *simpliciter*. These views, almost certainly held by the vast majority of contemporary philosophers, respond to the Enlightenment’s racism without committing to the project of developing a distinct body of African Philosophy under any description, because such a move is not necessitated by the need to correct Hume *et al.* What these views do not do, but the

of this position, see (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 100-102), (E. C. Eze 1997, 20, n25) and (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 10-13).

⁷³ This project, championed by Lucius Outlaw, starts by recognising that the “African” denigrated by Enlightenment racism was not defined only by culture or geography, but was the picked out by race. As such, Africana philosophy treats African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean theorising as a set. Key texts include (Outlaw, *African Philosophy: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges* 1990), (Outlaw, *African, African-American, Africana Philosophy* 1992), and (Outlaw, *Africana Philosophy: Origins and Prospects* 2004). For critical discussion of this position, see (E. C. Eze 1997, 2-4) and (Wiredu 2004, 23).

⁷⁴ Initially, and perhaps essentially, an aesthetic movement, Negritude was premised on accepting racist claims about African ways of being as essentially different to those of the West, while reconceptualising these differences as positive and complementary to the Western approaches, rather than inferior to them. Initially borrowing from the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance, it was developed even more robustly in Leopold Senghor’s political thought. Key texts are (Senghor, *Liberte I. Negritude et humanisme* 1964) and (Senghor, *Negritude and African Socialism* 1998). For critical discussion, see (E. C. Eze 1997, 11) and (R. H. Bell 2002, 22-26)

⁷⁵ Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere, who Wiredu calls “Africa’s Philosopher-Kings” (Wiredu 2004, 18) were immediate post-independence leaders of their various countries (Senegal, Ghana, and Tanzania respectively), all of whom outlined “communalist” or “communitarian” political philosophies. They aimed to distinguish these from both capitalism and socialism by grounding them in ostensive reconstructions of traditional African values. Key texts (other than Senghor) include (Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation*, 2nd revised edition 1970), (Nkrumah, *African Socialism Revisited* 1966), and (Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* 1968). For critical discussion, see (Taiwo 2004) and (Wiredu, *Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism* 2008).

emergence or discovery of a distinctively African contribution to philosophy would, is resuscitate some of the dignity which centuries of racist theory precluded.

The value of such a resuscitative project derives from its capacity to benefit Africans, to provide a resource for those whose sense of identity is still diminished by the effects of racism to gain a sense of dignity. It is a response not to falsehoods, but to harm; undertaken not to pursue truth, but to redress hurt⁷⁶. It is, to use Pedro Tabensky's term, a "non-Epistemic"⁷⁷ motivation to engage in philosophical investigation. As such, it is no surprise that the project of resuscitating Africans' dignity in their philosophical resources is not shared by philosophers generally, or that it should be a common project of African philosophers: those who wish to address the ongoing indignity are those who cannot avoid it.

To understand the relationship between this non-epistemic constraint and the various strands of thought which constitute what we might call epistemic strategies for responding to the legacy of Enlightenment racism, it seems useful to me to indulge in an illustrative metaphor. Here we might imagine Egyptianism, Negritude, Ethnophilosophy and all of the other strategies responding to Enlightenment racism as parallel strands extending along roughly the same axis. However far their dialectical development takes them from the original claims, these epistemic strategies are constrained from diverging too far off course by the non-epistemic demand that they affirm some value in Africa and Africans' engagement with philosophy, which spirals, caduceus-like, around them as they extend. This, then, is the unifying feature of the various epistemic strategies (and associated bodies of literature) grouped under the heading "African Philosophy," which I refer to as the Postcolonial Dignity project. Given that the personal is political, this is not simply a project specific African philosophers undertake for their own sakes, but on behalf of all Africans who have felt the indignity of their heritage and *lebenswelt* constantly denigrated or made peripheral to their own lives simply by being in a world premised on the hegemonic assumptions about Africa legitimised by Hume *et al.* Other axes exist for repudiating the

⁷⁶ Tabensky develops the idea of African Philosophies as a response to the indignity of the racist ordering imposed by colonialism and apartheid in (The Postcolonial Heart of African Philosophy 2008), working from Fanon's accounts of the pathology of the individual subjects of colonial racism in (Black Skin, White Masks. 1967) and (The Wretched of the Earth 2000).

⁷⁷ (Tabensky, Non-Epistemic Reasons for Believing: the case of African Philosophy [2012])

Enlightenment history of racism (such as the universalist approach I outlined above), but they would not yield results which could satisfy the desire to find some redeeming philosophical value in African culture.

Importantly, Tabensky's account is not simply descriptive. Following Fanon, he is moved (as one ought to be) by the pernicious persistence of a racist ordering of the world, and the damaging false consciousness engendered when Africans internalise such an ordering. As such, Tabensky finds merit in responsiveness to colonial denigration as a motivation for engaging in an African Philosophy. A natural concern arises here: philosophy is generally understood, in Tabensky's terms, as a purely epistemic undertaking. Its goal is truth, wisdom, or some reasonable approximation thereof, and many philosophers may balk at the suggestion of non-epistemic goals constraining philosophy. Importantly, they may do so out of more than a habit of abstraction or an investment in abstractedness. If philosophy is to respond to two values, then it seems that the epistemic project may be trumped by the non-epistemic: if true accounts of African folk values or history may well fail to salve the existential wounds of colonialism, romanticised accounts may do a better job. This is not unheard of in African philosophy. What Gade and Leonhard Praeg call the "narrative of return"⁷⁸ seems precisely to be the prizing of a reassuring narrative at the expense of truth. Gade outlines such narratives;

African postcolonial narratives of return have typically contained the idea that in order to create a good future, society needs to *return to something African* which does not stem from the previous period of colonial oppression but which is rather rooted in pre-colonial times. Broadly speaking, the postcolonial African narratives of return thus tend to divide history into three phases: *first*, the pre-colonial phase which, often but not always, is perceived as a 'golden age' characterized by harmony; *second*, a period of decline, which is understood to have been brought about by intruders who attempted to deprive the Africans of their resources, dignity, and culture; and *third*, a phase of recovery, where Africans, after having gained sufficient political power, attempt to restore their dignity and culture by returning to (what are claimed to be) traditional, humanist, or socialist values. It should be noted that in recent years, the attempt to recover African dignity has often been connected with the idea of an African Renaissance.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Gade attributes the term to (Praeg, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation* 2000), though his own description (Gade 2011, 304-305) adds specificity.

⁷⁹ (Gade 2011, 304-305)

This narrative seems easily discernible in Egyptianism, Negritude, Nkrumah and Nyerere's search for a reconstructed African Communalism, the "Afrocentrism"⁸⁰ which informs and interpenetrates with Africana philosophy, or the Ethnophilosophy I will discuss next. This is a problem for those theories, precisely because these are *narratives*. Rather than questions or open-ended investigations, narratives follow a script, tracing a pre-ordained arc, and presupposing – rather than investigating – the existence of a romanticised golden age, or a novel and internally consistent set of value claims embedded within folk belief. While discovering novel and self-consistent value claims, histories apt to inspire a renaissance, or other philosophically significant outcomes is certainly not impossible, postcolonial narratives of return seem to be begging the question, and thus undermining their epistemic project. Certainly, it is true that advocacy for a preferred view is nothing new to philosophical debate, but disputes over contested perspectives are taken to be resolved (or at least, resolvable in principle) by appealing to their epistemic success. Taking non-epistemic projects or motivations as *proper* goals of philosophy seems to allow that the epistemic demand could be defeasible. And if the epistemic goals of these African philosophies are defeasible, then it is not clear that they should properly be called philosophy.

However much narratives of return have been a feature of African philosophy though, Tabensky's position need not be read as endorsing the epistemic project as *defeasible* by the non-epistemic project. To be responsive to the Postcolonial Dignity project need not be read as allowing the pursuit of some philosophical source of African dignity to trump the pursuit of truth. Rather, African Philosophers can be understood as having taken up two projects, the epistemic project of philosophy *simpliciter*, and the non-epistemic Postcolonial Dignity project. Precisely because these are framed as distinct epistemic and non-epistemic concerns we see that they are discrete demands, *both* of which must be met, rather than commensurable and therefore fungible values. Here we may return to the caduceus metaphor by imagining strategies which trade epistemic for non-epistemic success as veering into the spiralling constraint, rather than staying true, as it were, but within the confines of the dignity project. It may be that there is ultimately no overlap between the two projects, but there is no obvious reason to assume that is the case, any more than to

⁸⁰ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 13-20)

beg the question in assuming that any such investigation will uncover a wealth of novel breakthroughs. As such, it seems that fears about the dangers of non-epistemic conditions on African philosophy can be allayed by recognising the seductive allure of narratives of return, and working stay true to the epistemic project.

With this in mind, I turn now to the dialectic I take to have done the best job of meeting both the epistemic and non-epistemic demands of African philosophy, in order to outline the methods it develops to do so. This dialectic begins with the response to Enlightenment racism glossed as “Ethnophilosophy,” commonly taken to have begun with the work of Belgian Catholic missionary Placide Tempels. In his *La Philosophie Bantoue*⁸¹, Tempels formally outlined an account of the metaphysical and ontological perspectives of the Baluba, the culture in which he worked as a missionary in what was then the Belgian Congo. Tempels claimed that the reason “*evolués*” – Africans converted to Western perspectives – frequently reverted to their traditional beliefs was precisely that their beliefs were, in fact, coherent ontological accounts. Until such beliefs could be properly understood, he argued, reliable conversion would be unlikely, hence the publication of his study. While not intentionally a friend to traditional beliefs therefore, Tempels’ assertion that African traditions included coherent and *prima facie* plausible ontological and metaphysical accounts served as a rejection of the received denial of African thought on philosophical topics. The content of Tempels’ work is, for the moment, less significant than his methodology and heterodox assertions, but *Bantu Philosophy*, in outline, argues that the concept of “vital force” underpins the ontology of the Bantu⁸². On Tempels’ account, Bantu ontology sees individuals not as discrete and monadic entities, but rather as nodes in interconnected fields of force, where force itself is the underlying nature of reality. On this view: individuals are concentrations of vital force, who seek to become greater concentrations of force, and ought to; wisdom – as distinct from mere practical knowledge – is properly understood as knowledge of the disposition of vital forces, such that epistemology is primarily concerned with vital force; and a Great Chain of Being is

⁸¹ 1945 in the original French, where it circulated among Francophone African academics. Published in English translation as (Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* 1969). All references are to this English version. For discussion of Tempels’ work, see (Ochieng’-Odhiambo 2010, 26-39), (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 92), and (R. H. Bell 2002, 22-23).

⁸² The term “Bantu” picks out one of three large groups of related African languages and cultures. While the Luba are only one of many cultures in the Bantu language-group, Tempels takes his observations of their beliefs to stand for “Bantu,” and indeed African, cultures generally.

determined by hierarchically ranking beings' possession of vital force, with God's omniscience and omnipotence deriving from being the maximum [possible] concentration of vital force.

Following on from Tempels' work, Rwandan priest Alexis Kagame sought to provide an account of the ontological beliefs of Kinyarwanda⁸³ speakers in his *La Philosophie bantuoerwandaise de l'être*.⁸⁴ Kagame argues that shared language constitutes a shared conceptual architecture, such that providing an account of a culture's conceptual schema must depend on thorough linguistic analysis. As such, he proposes the concept "ntu" (being) as basic to metaphysics in Kinyarwanda, outlining "categories" of being as the four basic metaphysical categories, in a project parallel to Aristotle's categories in *The Metaphysics*. Kagame's emphasis on the concept of *ntu* supplements Tempels' "vital force," as with the first category of being, "*umuntu*"⁸⁵, or human being, understood as "force with intelligence," distinguished from "*ikintu*," being without agency/force without intelligence.

In a similar vein to Tempels and Kagame, Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti developed a formalised account of what he took to be the African ontological picture in his *African Religions and Philosophy*⁸⁶. Like Tempels and Kagame, Mbiti was responding to Western assumptions of a lack of African philosophy emanating primarily from the major surface of Western philosophical interface with Africa: the church. Core to Mbiti's argument is the claim that what missionaries initially mistook for a lack of religious/philosophical systems in Africa was in fact an organic understanding of religion in which every aspect of life is suffused with religious significance. With regard to the theme of communal connection running through the works described thus far, this is relevant in that it manifests in the following argument;

⁸³ Kinyarwanda, like Ciluba, is a language in the Bantu group.

⁸⁴ (Kagame 1956). No English translation of the whole text exists, but Kagame's arguments are discussed (critically, though in favourable comparison to Tempels) in (Hountondji 1996, particularly 40-47), and has since been discussed extensively by a number of authors in English. In addition to Hountondji, see (Kagabo 2004), (Appiah, In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture 1992, 105), and (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 64-65).

⁸⁵ This is also the term for human being in Nguni languages such as isiXhosa and isiZulu in South Africa, Nguni languages being another sub-group of the Bantu group. Foregrounding the concept of being (*ntu*), and bearing in mind that the prefix "nga" is imperative, it is thus possible to understand "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" as claiming that "being human *cannot but be* being a human being among other human beings."

⁸⁶ Originally published in 1969, my references are to the second edition (Mbiti 1990)

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.⁸⁷

It is relevant here that Mbiti's argument for the necessity of religion to being human takes the necessity of deep engagement with communal society as a premise. Mbiti does not defend this claim in any absolute terms, but rather holds it up as an essentially African belief. An additional difficulty is that Mbiti leaves the precise meaning of "religious" ambiguous, such that it is difficult to fully parse the meaning of the claim that Africans are essentially religious. Given that Mbiti's purpose is to respond to Western skepticism about African philosophical sophistication as embodied by Western religious authorities, his choice of terminology is strategic but his expansive use of the term leaves much unclear. As Frederick Ochieng-Odhiambo puts it, "all that he says is that for Africans, religion is necessarily an ontological phenomenon. For each and every African, religion has to do with the question of existence, the question of one's being."⁸⁸ Though working from a slightly different starting point, Mbiti, like Tempels and Kagame, thus outlines a formalised account of African ontological beliefs (arguing that this outline properly represents beliefs core to *all* African ontology). The most well-known – and controversial – claim Mbiti asserts in this context is that Africans in the traditional context do not properly have a concept of the future, understanding time instead as composed of the past and the dynamic present⁸⁹. Mbiti justifies this position with reference both to mythology and language. That is, Mbiti draws on African oral tradition, finding that "there are no myths about future, as far as I have been able to gather from all available sources, that record African myths and stories,"⁹⁰ and (following Kagame), on language, arguing that African languages without words for the future cannot provide a concept of the future.

⁸⁷ (Mbiti 1990, 2)

⁸⁸ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 41)

⁸⁹ An argument he advances across both (Mbiti 1990) and (Mbiti 1971). For an overview of the argument as developed across both sources, see (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 45-53).

⁹⁰ (Mbiti 1971, 28)

Taken together, the work of Tempels, Kagame, and Mbiti forms the canonical body of what has been retro-actively labelled “ethnophilosophy.” While the ethnophilosophers are significant in advancing the thesis that some specifically African contribution to philosophy exists, the label was used by Paulin Hountondji⁹¹ to label what he considered a problematic approach to African philosophy. A number of African philosophers have objected to ethnophilosophy, on a number of grounds. Hountondji criticised the motivation behind the ethnophilosophical project, claiming that it was produced “for a European public.”⁹² Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba argues that it is apt to be appropriated in the name of worrying political programs.⁹³ Marcien Towa has likewise argued that ethnophilosophy is frequently deployed to distract from more relevant political issues.⁹⁴

Distinct from these concerns with the aim of or motivation behind ethnophilosophy however, my concern here is for what is problematic in the ethnophilosophical methodology, such that we can avoid reproducing it in work on *ubuntu*. The most significant *methodological* difficulties with ethnophilosophers’ work can be distilled into three approaches, best understood as the characteristic fallacies of Ethnophilosophy:⁹⁵ Unanimism; treating philosophy as a feature of cultures, rather than philosophers; and Spiritism.

“Unanimism,” as coined by Paulin Hountondji, is “the illusion that all men and women in [African] societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues.”⁹⁶ The term captures the tendency of ethnophilosophers to infer that their analysis of *a specific African culture’s* beliefs captured beliefs essential to *all African cultures*⁹⁷. This can plainly be seen in Tempels’ induction from a study of the Luba specifically to conclusions

⁹¹ (Hountondji 1996). In his examiner’s report on this thesis, Kwame Gyekye notes that, while Hountondji promulgated the term, it was coined by Kwame Nkrumah in the early 1940s in an uncompleted formulation of his doctoral thesis at the University of Pennsylvania.

⁹² (Hountondji 1996, 45)

⁹³ (Wamba-dia-Wamba, *Philosophy and African Intellectuals: Mimesis of Western Classicism, Ethnophilosophical Romanticism or African Self-Mastery?* 1991)

⁹⁴ (Towa 1971)

⁹⁵ Appiah argues that “Most existing ethnophilosophy is predicated on two major assumptions... unanimism [and] “the evaluative assumption that the recovery of this tradition is worthwhile” (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 95). I take the latter to be part of the romantic project of the narrative of return, and thus set it aside for the moment. My second fallacy hews closer to Hountondji’s discussion, while my third borrows from Wiredu.

⁹⁶ (Hountondji 1996, xviii)

⁹⁷ Discussed at greater length in (Hountondji 1996, 170-183)

about the Bantu generally; in Kagame's similar move from Kinyarwanda to all languages in the Bantu group; and in Mbiti's unqualified claims about African perspectives on the grounds of a sample limited to the Kamba and Kikuyu cultures. The claim that any of these sources represent a unanimous set of "African" beliefs has been attacked in specific instances, as when Kwame Gyekye disputed Mbiti's claims about the absent concept of the future by pointing to African languages which do incorporate the future, and subsequently arguing that the presence or absence of a word does not definitively exclude the existence of a parallel concept in a given culture.⁹⁸ More generally, the claim that a single, essential African perspective exists to be expressed has been disputed, and quite rightly, given the cultural diversity of Africa. While assertions of an African essence were *prima facie* attractive to those seeking a distinction between African perspectives and "Western" ones (whichever they sought to support), such essentialism is largely discredited, and would anyway seem difficult to defend without resorting to question-begging. In addition to the difficulties associated with asserting an essentially African perspective however, such accounts tend to fail in the face of outlier cultures. The richer the ontological picture generated, the greater the likelihood that it will fall afoul of cultures which, while authentically African, do not for example believe in the supernatural, venerate ancestors, or take force to be the basis of reality. While the Ethnophilosophers were certainly pointing to concepts shared across many African cultures, some more nuanced account than the assertion of unanimous agreement across African cultures must be provided to explain the relationship linking these concepts as African.

The second fallacy of Ethnophilosophy, also noted by Hountondji, is treating philosophical theories as features of cultures, rather than the work of specific philosophers. A charitable reading may note that it is understandable that shared cultural beliefs about philosophical subjects such as ontology and values would be attractive: in the absence of an extensive written culture, individual authorship and attribution was not a significant or even practicable aspect of precolonial African theorising. The claims and theories Ethnophilosophers presented were therefore distilled from the substrate of folk philosophy and oral tradition present in society which, as noted from Tempels onward, yielded a fairly complex ontological framework. But Ethnophilosophers did not simply *derive* their

⁹⁸ (Gyekye, *Person and Community in African Thought* 2002)

conceptions from traditional beliefs. Rather, they treated the existence of traditional ontological, metaphysical, or axiological beliefs as sufficient for the existence of philosophy⁹⁹. By taking the collective body of claims about these subjects to *be* philosophy, the Ethnophilosophers treated philosophy as simply a collection of claims. But this is not how the term philosophy is commonly understood. Rather, it is characteristically understood by academic philosophers as a discipline whose aim is substantiating, contesting, and refining such claims. While it is undoubtedly the case that the views glossed by the Ethnophilosophers were taken up in their respective cultures after some process of critical enquiry and debate, their account leaves this aspect of African philosophising invisible, and suggests that critical engagement in refining philosophical conceptions is not functionally a part of African philosophy. But if critically developing and refining ideas were alien to African philosophy then it would be a poor competitor with philosophy *simpliciter*. In fact, Hountondji argued, such an account of philosophy would be mere anthropology.¹⁰⁰ To avoid this fallacy it seems that we must be alert to conflating folk-beliefs with critical philosophy, and ought to treat African philosophy as a critical undertaking to develop concepts, rather than the cultural excavation and restoration of pristine truths.

I use the term Spiritism, or the “spiritistic” assumption, as Wiredu labels it,¹⁰¹ to pick out the third fallacy of Ethnophilosophy:¹⁰² the assumption that an authentically African philosophical perspective necessarily involves reference to spirits, gods, the living dead, or other metaphysical entities normally classed as ‘supernatural.’ The appeal of using Wiredu’s term, rather than “supernaturalism” here, is twofold. First, there are arguments that many African metaphysical claims invoke something like the supernatural (metaphysically speaking) while denying a strict Cartesian dualism between the natural and the supernatural.¹⁰³ While it may be that denying such a distinction while insisting on phenomena beyond the physical is conceptually incoherent, but I am neither committed to

⁹⁹ See also Wiredu’s argument that accepting this straw man of African philosophy depends on ignoring what Western philosophy would look like if Western folk-philosophy were taken to be equivalent to it (Wiredu, *How not to compare African thought with Western thought* 1984).

¹⁰⁰ (Hountondji 1996, 52-60)

¹⁰¹ (Wiredu 1984, 149)

¹⁰² Wiredu in fact lists “three complaints which can afflict a society. They are anachronism, authoritarianism, and supernaturalism” (Wiredu 1980, 1). I include only the last of these as a fallacy of ethnophilosophy because the first two are essentially afflictions *of society*, while the last is also relevant to philosophical methodology, and continues to be treated as such in Wiredu’s later work (see Wiredu 2004, 18).

¹⁰³ (Setiloane 1986), (Shutte 1993, 89-96), (Battle 1997).

pursuing that argument here, nor interested in begging the question by translating that debate into the terms it contests. Secondly, while “supernaturalism” picks out theories which invoke the supernatural (rather than simply the natural), this doesn’t quite capture the claim that *African* theories *must* be grounded in the supernatural, so an additional term is helpful¹⁰⁴. Suffice it to say that all of the ethnophilosophers discussed presented ontological/metaphysical accounts in which God and spirit were central features, and asserted through their essentialising that all African thought must do the same. Wiredu argues that this hobbles African philosophy by insisting that, while Western philosophy has the freedom to engage in purely naturalistic or metaphysically agnostic theorising, African philosophy cannot do so authentically.¹⁰⁵ This fails to account for African cultures which do not believe in gods or spirits, or for the number of African philosophers who do not believe that theories invoking these best explain the claims they examine. To the contrary, Wiredu notes that “traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalistic”¹⁰⁶ and that “a number of contemporary studies of traditional African philosophies of morals converge on this point.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, not only does the spiritistic assumption fail to account for outlier African views, it asserts that what an African philosophy can be, propose, and examine, is arbitrarily circumscribed relative to philosophy as practiced in the West. It is thus, Wiredu argues, not an undertaking equivalent to the practice of philosophy *simpliciter*.

As a response to the shortcomings of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji proposed a “Professional” African Philosophy, which becomes the next term in this dialectic.¹⁰⁸ Hountondji develops positive prescriptions for this Professional Philosophy from his

¹⁰⁴ These reasons are mine, not Wiredu’s. He uses both “spiritism” (How not to compare African thought with Western thought 1984) and “supernaturalism” (Philosophy and an African Culture 1980), but it is not clear that he changes to spiritism. The reasonably widely available 1984 third edition of Richard A. Wright’s anthology *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, in which the former essay appears, uses “spiritism,” but this may be a holdover from the (rare) 1977 first edition. In the interim, the essay was developed into a chapter of Wiredu’s 1980 book, using “supernaturalism.” For my current purpose, “spiritism” is a useful term of art.

¹⁰⁵ (Wiredu 1984).

¹⁰⁶ (Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* 1980, 6)

¹⁰⁷ (Wiredu 2004, 18). The contemporary studies he cites as converging on this point are (Gbadegesin 1991, 67-68), (Gyekye 1987, ch 8), (Kudadjie 1976), (Bewaji, *Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture* 2004), and (Wiredu 1991).

¹⁰⁸ My analysis of Hountondji draws particularly on (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 94-106), (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 77-94), (R. H. Bell 2002, 26-32), and (Wiredu 2004, 3-5).

definition of African philosophy as “a set of texts... written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors.”¹⁰⁹

Richard Bell¹¹⁰ anatomises Hountondji’s positive prescription as calling for four conditions¹¹¹ for African philosophy: that it be written; dialectical; “scientific”; and produced by African philosophers, or philosophers of African origin. The first two criteria are responses to the failings of ethnophilosophy, intended to ensure that African philosophy can properly be called philosophical. The latter two criteria, I argue, distinguish Professional African philosophy from professional philosophy as practiced anywhere else. That is, they outline why such philosophy should properly be called African.

In requiring that African philosophy be “a set of texts,”¹¹² Hountondji aims to bypass what he describes as the “essentially conservative” nature of oral culture. When the aim is to preserve details unrecorded by other means, he argues, those who recount oral tradition cannot at the same time interrogate what they describe, or record discussions or interpretations of it. As such, Hountondji argues that a culture of rigorously critical investigation of concepts cannot have existed prior to or absent from literacy. Properly accounting for and responding to claims demands writing as the medium of engagement, he argues, and as such African philosophy can only be developed through written work. This is the first sense in which Hountondji’s prescription calls for a “professional philosophy:” he insists that philosophy is produced by professional academics, through the medium of published works and responses to them.

The ethnophilosophers, noting the absence of a written tradition but the presence of concepts they felt were sufficient to be called philosophical, had taken oral culture as sufficient for philosophy. This entailed that the culture of critical engagement with written work by distinct authors was simply a contingent elaboration developed in the West, and

¹⁰⁹ (Hountondji 1996, 33)

¹¹⁰ (R. H. Bell 2002, 28-32)

¹¹¹ Hountondji’s prescriptions have been sliced in other ways. Ochieng-Odhiambo takes Hountondji’s initial slogan as the basis of his three-part anatomisation (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 84-85). It seems to me that this elides Hountondji’s emphasis on the value of dialectical engagement and “scientific” disciplines, which Bell makes explicit conditions. In addition, the rider “described as philosophical by its authors” may admit some ethnophilosophy, as a result of which Hountondji argued in the preface to his second edition that it was not intended as necessary to defining African philosophy. While aware of Ochieng-Odhiambo’s reading of Hountondji’s prescription directly from his slogan, I have thus omitted it from my discussion for clarity.

¹¹² (Hountondji 1996, 33)

not necessary to the practice of philosophy. Arguing that an African philosophy could not be properly philosophical without such a culture of critical engagement with written works, Hountondji explicitly denies that folk-beliefs represented an extant African philosophy. But a written debate on African claims can be brought into existence, he argues, and with it a properly critical philosophical culture;

Admit, then, that our philosophy is yet to come. Take the word 'philosophy' in the active, not the passive sense. We do not need a closed system to which all of us can adhere and which we can exhibit to the outside world. No, we want the restless questioning, the untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them toward the horizon of fresh truths. African philosophy, like any other philosophy, cannot possibly be a collective world-view. It can exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate.¹¹³

This "untiring dialectic" is the second sense in which Hountondji's positive account is "professional." Influenced by Derrida and Althusser, Hountondji considers philosophy to be a necessarily dialectical undertaking, engaging theoretically and critically with a claim or body of claims. One observation which follows from this is that African philosophy must be a dialectical engagement with African claims, and the ethnophilosophers fall short of this requirement by simply presenting traditional claims uncritically. This, however, is trivially true, and does not capture the full import of Hountondji's dialecticism. His more thoroughgoing position is that proper dialectical engagement demands that philosophy be a professional undertaking, not simply a recounting of folk-belief;

Whatever scope is assigned to philosophy to distinguish it from other disciplines, one thing is certain: philosophy is a theoretical discipline and therefore belongs to the same genus as algebra, geometry, mechanics, linguistics etc. Now, if we pose that it is absurd to speak of *unconscious* algebra, geometry, linguistics etc., and if we accept that no science can exist historically without an explicit discourse, then by the same token we must regard the very idea of an unconscious philosophy as absurd. Conversely, if we believe that it is of the essence of any science to be constituted by free discussion, by the confrontation of hypotheses and theories created by the thought of individuals (or at least assumed by them) and reaching total convergence through reciprocal amendment, then we must also find absurd the idea of a collective, immutable, and definitive 'philosophy,' abstracted from history and progress.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ (Hountondji 1996, 53)

¹¹⁴ (Hountondji 1996, 47)

Once more in response to the lack of recorded debate in oral traditions, he suggests that philosophy is concerned with developing and refining ideas, as distinct from the merely ethnographic project of recording them. As such, the emphasis on written work is justified by its capacity to encourage critical, dialectical engagement with claims.

So, while African philosophers may draw on traditional claims as source material, what makes such claims philosophical is the activity of refining them through a dialectical engagement between philosophers. Whereas traditions may be discussed in broad terms, as the inherited views of ancestors, dialectical critique functions at its best between discrete individuals invested in specific claims. Hence, precisely because African philosophy will naturally make reference to authorless traditional claims, Hountondji argued that it is crucial to focus the activity of African philosophy on specific claims by individual philosophers.

Having laid out requirements for a properly philosophical African philosophy, Hountondji's other stipulations can be seen as serving to distinguish professional African philosophy from professional philosophy *simpliciter*, or the extant practice of professional philosophy (primarily in the West).¹¹⁵ This had not been a problem for the ethnophilosophers, since they took cultural beliefs with uncontroversially African provenance to be identical to philosophy. But Hountondji's programme for properly critical philosophy, taken from the first two prescriptions alone, need not relate to Africa at all. As such, his further positive criteria are specific to African philosophy and philosophers. That is, Hountondji answers the question of what is African in his Professional philosophy by making Professional African philosophy a subset of Professional philosophy, delineated by commitment to an African science and production by Africans.

Following from the need for dialectical engagement, Hountondji argues for the startling claim that "we shall never have, in Africa, a philosophy in the strict sense, until we have produced a history of science."¹¹⁶ This claim demands both clarification and justification. As to clarification, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that "'Science,' here, means systematic knowledge, and is used in the French sense; we Anglophones need to know at least this

¹¹⁵ One might ask why, in fact, he had to do that. Here it is important to remember that the search for a theory of African philosophy was spurred by the very real mis-fit between the largely Western ideas prevalent in philosophy *simpliciter* and the perspectives of African philosophers like Hountondji.

¹¹⁶ (Hountondji 1996, 98)

much about 'Continental' philosophy if we aren't to misunderstand our Francophone brethren."¹¹⁷ Hountondji, then, uses "a history of science" as a term of art, picking out a systematic body of theoretical knowledge which can be contextualised historically. That is, African philosophy will not develop simply through professional philosophers' engagement with folk-beliefs, but through their engagement with a body of academic theory in other fields similarly developed by professionals. Here he is drawing on Althusser's claim that philosophy "has been observed only in places where there is also what is called a science or sciences – in the strict sense of theoretical discipline, i.e. ideating and demonstrative, not an aggregate of empirical results."¹¹⁸ Hountondji takes this claim as the first term of a conditional: if philosophy depends for its emergence on the existence or development of systematic, demonstrative, "ideating" theoretical disciplines, then Africa must develop such disciplines from which its philosophy can emerge.

Here one might wonder whether this is not simply a particularly Althusserian repackaging of Hountondji's broader requirement for dialectical engagement by professionals. Since each chapter of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* is a reprinted paper, it is plausible to think that the chapter in which he elaborates on this need for science is simply a particular theoretical outlaying of one of his broader themes. So why read it, as Bell does, as the separate positive requirement that "the literature or discourse be scientific?"¹¹⁹ It seems to me that what is distinctive here is the requirement that Africa develop *its own* body of systematic, theoretical, historically contextualised disciplines, distinct from the extant disciplines centred in Western professional academic institutions whose agendas and methodology were shaped by the same hegemonic exclusion of African perspectives which applied to philosophy. Recall Hountondji's criticism that ethnophilosophy "has been built up essentially for a European public."¹²⁰ Hountondji's call for an African "history of science" is, by contrast, the call for academic disciplines which exist "first and foremost for an African public," concerned not with re-presenting decontextualised folk belief, but with applying critical theoretical practice to African concerns. Here he requires of African philosophers that,

¹¹⁷ (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, n203)

¹¹⁸ (Althusser 1968, 44)

¹¹⁹ (R. H. Bell 2002, 30)

¹²⁰ (Hountondji 1996, 45)

...instead of merely sharing that heritage with their European counterparts, instead of drowning their own discourse in the tumultuous streams of European debate, they decide to subject that heritage first and foremost to the appreciation and criticism of their fellow countrymen. The real problem is not to talk about Africa but to talk among Africans... As for the African public, what it wants most is to be widely informed about what is going on elsewhere, about current scientific problems in other countries and continents, out of curiosity in the first place (a legitimate curiosity), but also in order to confront those problems with its own preoccupations, to reformulate them freely in its own terms and thus to steep them in the melting-pot of African science.¹²¹

It may be that work toward developing “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”¹²² in South Africa aims to produce such a discipline. Perhaps less extreme examples would be bodies of scholarship particular to Africa, even if situated within formal disciplines with broader scope. While it would seem, *prima facie*, that Hountondji may find these methodologically compromised, note that his call for discussion to be among Africans “first and foremost” does not necessarily exclude the dissemination of that discussion to an extra-African discipline. At any rate, this requirement can be seen as suggesting that part of what makes a professional philosophy *African* is that it emerges from a body of African theoretical disciplines. Importantly, the requirement that the professional academic debate take place primarily or entirely in isolation from extant professional disciplines based in the West distinguishes Hountondji from other advocates of Professional philosophy, as we will see.

Hountondji’s final positive requirement picks out what is African about African philosophy fairly straightforwardly:

The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in its themes, but will depend above all on the geographical origin of those who produce it and their intellectual coming together. The best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu “philosophy,” whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are producing authentic African work.¹²³

It is worth noting that this commitment to a geographical and (more or less) cultural restriction on the philosophers who are to produce African philosophy seems to run up against the same difficulties Lucius Outlaw faces in delineating the ambiguous boundaries of

¹²¹ (Hountondji 1996, 54)

¹²² (Horsthemke and Green 2008)

¹²³ (Hountondji 1996, 53-54)

“Africana.”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, Hountondji invokes the constraint for a reason. He is concerned with excluding the “agenda”¹²⁵ of non-Africans seeking to frame African perspectives. He devotes some time to distinguishing between Tempels and Kagame, despite ultimately dismissing both. He describes Kagame as “more rigorous” but less sweeping in his claims than Tempels;¹²⁶ sensitive to “the contingency of language and the inevitable rooting of... thought in a world of pre-existing meanings,”¹²⁷ and “peculiarly sensitive to those transformations of Bantu ‘philosophy’ which result from its contacts with European culture,”¹²⁸ which Tempels discounts. Hountondji’s insistence that the authors of African philosophy be of African geographic origin and “intellectual coming together” is, therefore, designed to promote a sensitivity to context and capacity to individuate relevant concerns appropriate to the subject matter.

Hountondji’s positive prescriptions have generated a number of responses which, despite some overlap, can usefully be divided into two categories: Sage Philosophers, and other advocates of Professional Philosophy. Sage Philosophers¹²⁹ argue that Hountondji’s prescription that philosophy consist of written texts would exclude pre-Socratic philosophers, among others; that non-literate “sages” equivalent to these pre-Socratic philosophers exist in Africa, and their critical insights are accessible to professional philosophers; and therefore that *some* non-written African philosophy exists to be drawn upon. Alternate accounts of Professional Philosophy,¹³⁰ mostly from Anglophone philosophers, converge on something like Hountondji’s position on Ethnophilosophy, absent some of his particular methodological demands. I take these together to represent qualifications to Hountondji’s positive criteria, and the revised Professional Philosophy which emerges from taking their qualifications seriously as the synthesis at the current

¹²⁴ See (E. C. Eze 1997, 3)

¹²⁵ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 92)

¹²⁶ (Hountondji 1996, 40)

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ (Hountondji 1996, 40-41)

¹²⁹ Key texts in this tradition are (Griaule 1965), (Hallen and Sodipo 1997), and (Odera Oruka 1990). For additional critical discussion, see (Kalumba, Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance and Future 2004), (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 115-150), and (Oluwole 1997).

¹³⁰ Key texts here include (Wiredu 1980), (Bodunrin 1981), (Appiah, In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture 1992), and (Masolo 1994). For additional critical discussion, see (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 77-108) and (Bello 2004).

moment in this dialectic. Here it is worth examining their responses to each of Hountondji's four positive prescriptions

Advocates of Sage Philosophy, as one would expect from my description above, take issue with Hountondji's requirement that philosophy be a set of texts. In doing so, they depart from both the Ethnophilosophers and Hountondji. They depart from the Ethnophilosophers by denying that folk belief is sufficient for philosophy, vesting traditional philosophy instead in individuals who engage critically with that knowledge in a traditional context, teaching dialectically in the manner of Socrates or the Buddha. They depart from Hountondji in insisting that it matters that philosophers can exist in the absence of a written philosophical tradition. Here Henry Odera Orika, perhaps the strongest voice advocating for Sage Philosophy, says:

To exist as a philosopher it is not necessary that one's thoughts must progress or be available to the future generation. Sufficient for the existence of the philosopher is that one's contemporaries recognise one's philosophical ability and practice. How many of the contemporary African philosophers will have their ideas known beyond their death? Many of us shall have our works buried unrecognised within the myriad of the many kinds of literature that are being produced in the field. Yet this fact would not in itself deny the point that the authors of such works existed as philosophers. Lack of knowledge about one's or a people's philosophy is not a proof of the non-existence of such a philosophy.¹³¹

Given the possibility of unrecorded philosophers, advocates of Sage Philosophy set out to record them. Kalumba tells us that "Every work of sage philosophy involves a professional philosopher interviewing some person whom he or she regards as a sage," determined according to what he calls a "threefold methodological checklist"¹³²: a sage is traditional (such that they aren't simply reproducing views introduced from another culture); demonstrates wisdom (determined both by their reputation for wisdom in their community, and the professional philosopher's estimation); and is "consistently concerned with the ethical and empirical problems arising in his or her community with the intention of finding insightful solutions to them."¹³³ This checklist, common to and, more or less consensually agreed upon by major works of Sage Philosophy, seems a reasonable way to catch a contemporary Socrates.

¹³¹ (Odera Orika, *Sagacity in African Philosophy* 1983, 391)

¹³² (Kalumba, *Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance and Future* 2004, 274)

¹³³ *Ibid*

Crucially, however much advocates of Sage Philosophy argue that Sages (under the proper description) are philosophers; they do not assert that the existence of scattered sages is sufficient to constitute a critical tradition of African philosophy. Here Peter Bodunrin says

Surely, writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy but I do doubt whether philosophy can progress adequately without writing. Had others not written down the sayings of Socrates, the pre-Socratics, and Buddha, we would not regard them as philosophers for their thoughts would have been lost in the mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings.¹³⁴

The project of Sage Philosophy, then, is to bring philosophical sages into the dialectic of Professional African Philosophy. This is made clear by Hallen and Sodipo who, having interviewed Yoruba *onisegun* (medicine men), “characterise their overall method as ‘conceptual analysis,’ and regard the *onisegun* as ‘colleagues’ in a ‘collaborative Analysis’ of the Yoruba terms.”¹³⁵ This conceptual analysis, itself a critical philosophical undertaking, is intended to provide a body of traditional African philosophical thought in relation to which Professional African Philosophy can develop in much the same way Hountondji imagined “African science” might. Where Hountondji argued that African Philosophy had yet to exist, and must be developed largely in response to intellectual traditions situated in Africa and invented anew, advocates of Sage Philosophy argue for a methodology by which traditional resources which should properly be called philosophical might be recovered and made accessible as a *contribution to* (though not all of) Professional Philosophy. Interestingly, Hallen and Sodipo break from Hountondji’s project yet again in that they argue that Sage Philosophy might be useful not only in informing an African dialectic, but also in “supplementing Western philosophy,”¹³⁶ by critiquing concepts or categories supposed in the West to be universal and universally applicable.

Because it has developed in relative independence of the rest of the world, Western philosophy has tended to absolutise many untested presuppositions. Sagacity research has the potential to validate, invalidate, or modify some of these presuppositions.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ (Bodunrin 1981, 177)

¹³⁵ (Kalumba, Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance and Future 2004, 276)

¹³⁶ (Kalumba, Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance and Future 2004, 280)

¹³⁷ Ibid. Hallen and Sodipo (1997, 84) are particularly concerned with propositional attitudes, as a result of their engagement with *onisegun* who, they claim, coherently use terms whose meanings are not properly understood as equivalent to “know” and “believe.”

While Sage Philosophy is not without its own difficulties and detractors¹³⁸, Hountondji himself has accepted its broad point, conceding in the second edition of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* that “we Africans can probably today recover philosophical fragments from our oral literature.”¹³⁹ Other philosophers identified with the Professional approach, including Wiredu, Appiah, Gyekye and Masolo, could be described as more accepting (though not uncritically) of Sage Philosophy and the recovery of traditional thought generally. Masolo, for example, is described by Ochieng-Odhiambo as accepting “in principle” the “basic tenets of philosophic sagacity”, but questioning most purported examples thereof.¹⁴⁰ Wiredu, for his part, says “I have no objection, in principle, to attributing a philosophy to a whole people, at certain levels of generality.”¹⁴¹ Rather, he objects to the uncritical evaluation Ethnophilosophers applied to traditional resources, taking folk philosophy to be sufficient for philosophy, rather than a useful starting point, in need of critical evaluation.¹⁴² Moreover, however beneficial the additional resource may be,

Traditionalists have tended... to restrict the concerns of modern African philosophy to issues having some connection with traditional African thought and culture. But the modern world presents intellectual challenges which may not all admit of such a derivation, and to abstain from involvement with them on the grounds of a non-African origination is unlikely to prove a blessing to Africa in the modern world. Should it occur to anyone to liberalize the restriction by requiring, not that everything in modern African philosophy must have a connection with traditional Africa but only that it should bear some relevance to Africa, it can be shown that the new restriction is vacuous, for what makes Africa modern must include her ability to domesticate any useful modern resources of knowledge and reflection not already to hand. This is, of course, without prejudice to the need for a proper sense of African priorities. On any judicious reckoning, such priorities will include a careful study of African traditional thought.¹⁴³

This represents something like the consensus view of contemporary Professional Philosophy with regard to traditional resources: that folk philosophy and the philosophical work of sages can be resources for professional philosophy, though they are contributory toward, not sufficient for it.

¹³⁸ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 115-150)

¹³⁹ (Hountondji 1996, 106)

¹⁴⁰ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 135)

¹⁴¹ (Wiredu 2004, 4)

¹⁴² See *Ibid*, (Wiredu 1984), (Wiredu 1980).

¹⁴³ (Wiredu 2004, 4)

Other Professional Philosophers tend not to emphasise dialectic to the same extent that Hountondji does, which, Appiah argues, “reflects the distinction between Francophone and Anglophone traditions,” since Wiredu is “concerned above all to challenge the hegemony of Marxists in African political philosophy.”¹⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this distinction in which literatures they appeal to, Appiah takes Hountondji to be developing “in Althusserian language a version of Wiredu’s insistence on the development of that critical tradition, which literacy for the first time makes possible.”¹⁴⁵ It seems relatively safe to say that accepting the utility of the word “dialectic”¹⁴⁶ need not entail a slippery slope to problematic Marxism. This is all to the good, since Hountondji’s use of the term emphasises the extent to which philosophy is the collective undertaking of conceptual analysis, undertaken through engaged contestation of positions – philosophy in “the active, not the passive sense”¹⁴⁷ – somewhat more effectively than Appiah’s more staid “critical tradition.” By 2004, even Wiredu is comfortable saying “the dialectic, for sure, is at work in our midst, and we can anticipate a synthesis.”¹⁴⁸

Anglophone Professional Philosophers have been less receptive to Hountondji’s call for an African Science, however. Bell notes Hountondji’s claims that an advantage of foregrounding science would be that philosophers could “get away from ‘metaphysical problems,’ ‘the meaning of life,’ and problems of ‘human destiny’ and ‘the existence of God.’”¹⁴⁹ Bell follows up by dryly noting that

Few “African” philosophers, not to mention philosophers of any other “geographic” designation, have given up on metaphysical, moral, and religious questions as legitimate subjects for critical reflection. It would seem to many philosophers in and out of Africa that if such problems cannot be included as philosophy, then we have made a radical shift in the meaning of the term “philosophy” altogether. Few feel constrained by Hountondji’s narrow conception of philosophy as science.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 105-106). Pace Appiah, Francophone philosophers have shared Wiredu’s concern over Marxism. See (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1983).

¹⁴⁵ (Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* 1992, 105). Appiah is aware that Hountondji published first, and his reference to Hountondji making an Althusserian version of Wiredu’s claim follows only from his having discussed Wiredu first in that chapter. I include the comment, however, to indicate the congruency which leads Appiah to take their views as versions of the same claim.

¹⁴⁶ As I have done throughout this chapter, since any literature survey is essentially reading extant literature through whatever theoretical lens has proven most useful.

¹⁴⁷ (Hountondji 1996, 53)

¹⁴⁸ (Wiredu 2004, 17)

¹⁴⁹ (R. H. Bell 2002, 30). He cites (Hountondji 1996, 98, 168).

¹⁵⁰ (R. H. Bell 2002, 30)

Wiredu confirms as much: “although I am all for a scientific orientation in philosophy,” he says, he does not “define philosophy in such close intimacy with science as Hountondji does.”¹⁵¹ Responses to what may be characterised as Hountondji’s doctrinaire overreach notwithstanding, there is another reason for this break from Hountondji. Recall that I argued that what is distinctive in Hountondji’s call for an African science is that it be distinctively African, insulated from the impact of hegemonic Western perspectives, in order that it address itself properly to an African public. For Hountondji, having dismissed ethnophilosophical resources as a viable African interlocutor for philosophy, the only remaining option is a *sui generis* African Science. But, as noted in the preceding pages, other Professional Philosophers do not dismiss traditional African resources as thoroughly, and so plausibly consider these (as per Hallen and Sodipo’s suggestion) to provide a sufficiently African source for dialectical engagement. Since it does not seem that an African Science has been forthcoming in the decades since Hountondji mooted it, it is somewhat reassuring that the consensus among Professional Philosophers is that it is not necessary. Note, however, that on my account, this conclusion is justified because *some* sufficiently African resources are taken to be available to inform the Professional Philosophers’ work. If Hountondji’s demand for a *sui generis* African Science has not survived the dialectical engagement, I nonetheless take it that the pressure which drove him to demand it ought still to require that we ask whether the texts and disciplines engaged with are *for* an African public.

Hountondji’s final prescription – that the African-ness of African philosophy be defined not by subject matter but by the geographic origin and “intellectual coming together” of the philosophers who produce it – has been contested, by a number of Professional Philosophers. While Bodunrin supports the position,¹⁵² Ochieng-Odhiambo notes that “some professional philosophers do not find Hountondji’s view palatable.”¹⁵³ Here Didier Kaphagawani argues that “The works of some non-African philosophers working or who have worked at some point in time in Africa should... qualify as African professional philosophy.”¹⁵⁴ And Emmanuel Eze asks, somewhat rhetorically, “How [then] does one

¹⁵¹ (Wiredu 2004, 4)

¹⁵² (Bodunrin 1981, 162)

¹⁵³ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 89)

¹⁵⁴ (Kaphagawani 1987, 141)

characterise the works of so many non-African nationals that have enormously influenced, enriched, and, in many cases, transformed both substantive issues and orientations in the field and practice of African philosophy?"¹⁵⁵ Ochieng-Odhiambo, who later in the same chapter comes to support (at least the purpose of) Hountondji's prescription, rehearses these views when he writes

There cannot be any solid justification to the position that African Philosophy is or can be a product of indigenous Africans only. A foreigner, who has lived in Africa for quite some time, may develop some interest in problems that arise from his African experience and milieu, and consequently may write a philosophical treatise that can rightly be termed African. The determination of whether a piece of philosophical literature is African (or Western), cannot, therefore, be made solely on the basis of the geographical origins of its author. So, for example, the analyses of Julius Nyerere's thoughts by Masolo [written and published in Rome] and Gerard A. Bennaars [a non-African who wrote a PhD thesis at Kenyatta University in Nairobi] are both works of African philosophy. It seems erroneous to grant that Masolo's work belongs to African philosophy but disqualify Bennaars' on the grounds that Bennaars is not of African descent whereas Masolo is. On the same note it would be misguided to un-African Barry Hallen's numerous works in African philosophy on the basis of his ancestry.¹⁵⁶

In response to these mounting difficulties with applying a constraint like Hountondji's, Odera Oruka suggests

There is no substantial ground to think that African philosophy needs to be unique to the Africans. Neither is Western philosophy unique to the West. African philosophy should be defined in a simple sense, a sense in which it does not mean that only Africans are and can be capable of a philosophy of this kind.¹⁵⁷

Here Ochieng-Odhiambo glosses Odera Oruka as arguing that while Hountondji's requirement for an African geographic origin and "intellectual coming together" may effectively pick out African philosophers, we need not take them to be the only possible producers of African philosophy.¹⁵⁸ Together, Kaphagawani, Eze, and Odera Oruka's positions demonstrate definitional challenges and counter-intuitive entailments which amount to a significant case against Hountondji's prescription.

¹⁵⁵ (E. C. Eze 1997, 2). Eze mentions Tempels, Robin Horton, and Barry Hallen. One might add to the list Richard Bell, Bruce Janz, Thaddeus Metz, and (depending on how the categories are applied) white South African philosopher Augustine Shutte.

¹⁵⁶ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 89)

¹⁵⁷ (Odera Oruka 1987, 69)

¹⁵⁸ (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 91)

But Hountondji was not concerned simply to police the borders of two distinct approaches to philosophy, to be kept separate for their own sake. Recall my claim that Hountondji's constraint is designed to promote a sensitivity to context and capacity to individuate relevant concerns appropriate to African philosophy. If Hountondji's critics are right that his prescription raises a number of difficulties, they must nonetheless acknowledge the pressure behind it, to be wary of allowing non-African philosophers to subtly set the agenda through their hegemonic conceptions.

By and large, this question has been treated with somewhat less urgency than the others, because the status of non-Africans is (reasonably) construed as a peripheral issue, with few enough non-African philosophers demanding any particular status. But the situation becomes particularly relevant in the South African context, where an asserted African geographic origin may come apart from "intellectual coming together" in the person of white South African philosophers,¹⁵⁹ many of whom have engaged with African philosophy in discussions of *ubuntu*.¹⁶⁰ While these philosophers may aspire to or achieve an appropriate sensitivity to the context of African philosophy, they also may not. Mabogo More¹⁶¹ and Ochieng-Odhiambo¹⁶² cite F.J. Engelbrecht¹⁶³ and Bennie van der Walt¹⁶⁴ respectively as white South African philosophers whose uncritical (or intentional) entrenching of Ethnophilosophical stereotypes likely did active harm in much the same way Tempels' did, and due (at least in part) to the same lack of familiarity with and sensitivity to nuances of the African situation that Hountondji criticised in Tempels. How, then, is African philosophy to maintain the emphasis on sensitivity to context and individuating relevant concerns appropriate to its subject matter while admitting work from philosophers whose

¹⁵⁹ More points to white South Africans who, from a legitimately ambiguous position, have used the ambiguity of "geographic origin" to assert that they are unequivocally African (More 2004, 154-155). I suspect More is a bit too quick to claim that "By their own admission, whether Afrikaner or English, they certainly do not regard either themselves or their philosophy as African" (More 2004, 155), but I think that white South African identity is sufficiently problematic that any such positive assertion of identity should be qualified and somewhat equivocal. For my own part, it seems to me that even on a (defensibly) inclusive account of my "geographic origin" and entailed commitments as African, my "intellectual coming together," as Hountondji seems to intend the term to be used, is undeniably functionally non-African.

¹⁶⁰ See (Shutte 1993) and (2001), (Coetzee and Roux 2001), (Broodryk 1997), (E. Prinsloo 1996), (van Binsbergen 2001), (Krog 1998) and (2008), (Praeg 2000) and (2008), and myself.

¹⁶¹ (More 2004, 155)

¹⁶² (Ochieng'-Odhiambo 2010, 66-67)

¹⁶³ (Engelbrecht 1972)

¹⁶⁴ (van der Walt 1997)

geographic context may well be African, but whose “intellectual coming together” arguably is not?

Note that the candidate non-African African philosophers Kahphagawani, Eze, Odera Oruka and Ochieng Odhiambo put forward on the previous page “enormously influenced, enriched, and, in many cases, transformed”¹⁶⁵ African philosophy. That is, a good case can be made for their sensitivity to the context of African philosophy: the non-epistemic Postcolonial Dignity project. There seems to be a parallel with the relationship between Professional Philosophy and Sage Philosophy here. Professional Philosophers now concede that Philosophical Sages *can* exist and contribute significantly to the philosophical dialectic, but not all *prima facie* sages are properly sagacious, and accepting a specific source as a sage depends, for example, on the threefold checklist Kalumba noted.¹⁶⁶

Similarly, if it must be possible (to avoid absurdities) that *relevantly African* non-African (or white South African) philosophers *can* exist, it does not follow that all such candidates are practicing African Philosophy or are African Philosophers in the relevant sense. And as with sages, determining whether they should be categorised as such should depend on specifics of their performance. I am not concerned here to argue for a precise correlation with the Sage Philosophers’ threefold checklist, but one aspect worth borrowing is communal evaluation as determining whether the candidate is wise/relevantly African. In the context of Sage Philosophy, a philosopher “typically plunges him or herself into a rural African village and solicits from a cross-section of the villagers names of community members they believe to excel in wisdom.”¹⁶⁷ The equivalent for professional non-African or white South African philosophers involves somewhat less leg-work, since it would require evaluating their body of work, noting how they regard and are regarded by other African philosophers. Note that I stipulated *how* they regard and are regarded by others, not simply *that* they do so. Assuming they are taken by African philosophers as addressing and producing African philosophy (that is, that they are treated as interlocutors in African philosophical debates), and that they demonstrate attentiveness to the non-epistemic Postcolonial Dignity project, it seems reasonable to consider such philosophers African Philosophers in the relevant

¹⁶⁵ (E. C. Eze 1997, 2)

¹⁶⁶ (Kalumba, Sage Philosophy: Its Methodology, Results, Significance and Future 2004)

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 275

sense. It may be that much of this could not be determined easily or quickly, but that is not a particularly significant difficulty. The dialectic is best served by broad engagement anyway, suggesting an inclusive attitude to probational African Philosophers.

All of the above notwithstanding: in the face of hegemonic attitudes, cognisance of and demonstrated commitment to the Postcolonial Dignity project may demonstrate appropriate sensitivity to context, but what of the capacity to individuate relevant concerns, which Kagame demonstrated and Tempels lacked? Here, it seems, the dialectical nature of philosophy becomes relevant once again. Uncontroversially African philosophers have produced disputed interpretations of their subject matter, and many (notably including Hountondji himself) have responded by conceding some point or other in response to argument from others. There is nothing uniquely African in this: philosophers progress through critical engagement with one another's work, after all. If non-African or white South African philosophers engaged in African philosophical debates show the same responsiveness in the face of interlocutors disputing the relevant concerns from an African perspective, it seems that the potential for hegemony can be addressed, and no further condition should be required to consider them, in the relevant sense, African Philosophers.¹⁶⁸

This concludes my survey of what I take to be the key methodological debates in African philosophy. They trace a methodology evolved to develop African concepts – in response to the non-epistemic African dignity project – in light of the risk of warping by narratives of return; the characteristic fallacies of ethnophilosophy; and the question of how to properly balance philosophical rigour and inclusive debate with hegemonic undermining of African conceptual resources. All of these debates and their outcomes seem clearly relevant to work on developing *ubuntu* as theory of moral value. As I have mentioned however, much South African work on *ubuntu* has either responded only to some of the concerns raised, or come about without any reference to or apparent cognisance of the various difficulties involved in the African Philosophy. Given the seriousness of these framing concerns, compliance with the goals and concerns outlined in this history seems desirable in an account of *ubuntu*. Failing to account for these concerns both seems problematic in itself and, I will now argue, coincides with significant theoretical failings in extant work on *ubuntu*. With this in mind, I

¹⁶⁸ It strikes me that the exemplar here is Bruce Janz. See (Janz 2009).

turn now to the final part of this chapter, examining the various philosophical discussions of *ubuntu* in South African philosophical literature against these and further concerns.

Extant Philosophical Work on *Ubuntu*

Extant philosophical work on *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value can be grouped into four methodological approaches: Ethnophilosophical, Supernaturalist, Constructivist, and Analytic. Most of these categories are populated by a number of works, and each features one exemplar, explicitly working to provide an account of *ubuntu* as an action-guiding moral theory. These are, respectively: Mogobe Ramose's *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*;¹⁶⁹ Augustine Shutte's *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*;¹⁷⁰ Drucilla Cornell and Nyoko Muvangua's *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence*;¹⁷¹ and Thaddeus Metz' *Toward an African Moral Theory*.¹⁷² I will now outline the features of each approach, noting those works which populate it before examining the exemplary text in more detail. My goal in doing so is to illustrate why I take the final example to be the best account on which to elaborate.

The Ethnophilosophical Approach

I define the ethnophilosophical approach with reference to two of the three fallacies of ethnophilosophy I noted in the previous part of this chapter.¹⁷³ The first two Ethnophilosophical fallacies, recall, are Unanimism and conflating folk philosophy with philosophy in the conventionally understood sense. The pattern of such works is therefore to assert (generally without significant research into specific claims from the rest of Africa) that there is a philosophy/worldview/value system called *ubuntu*, common in its outline to all Africans, and that it can be understood simply by making reference to slogans, proverbs, and aphorisms traditional to (South) African culture.

The connective tissue frequently found holding these together is the narrative of return. When I introduced narratives of return in the previous section, I noted that they exist to salve the indignity of denigrated African cultures and individuals by offering a romanticised

¹⁶⁹ (Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* 1999)

¹⁷⁰ (Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* 2001)

¹⁷¹ (Cornell and Muvangua, *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* 2011)

¹⁷² (Metz 2007)

¹⁷³ The third is folded into my discussion of the following approach, Supernaturalism.

account of a pristine African past. In addition, Michael Eze notes that the remoteness of such a narrative provides security through obscurity: African value systems located in the pre-colonial past or in an obfuscated cultural context are immune from criticism by those who would denigrate them. “The dogmatic assent to historical appeal” as Eze puts it, “closes the door for possible verification; it constructs a primitive unanimity which can neither be verified nor interrogated with regard to its habitual usage or substantive essence.”¹⁷⁴ While inaccessibility to scrutiny may be comforting to people or cultures emerging from a long history of racial denigration, it does little to facilitate dialectical engagement.¹⁷⁵ While the earliest post-apartheid work on *ubuntu*¹⁷⁶ generally made reference only to fairly general value claims connected to the constellation noted at the start of this chapter, conceptions tied to a pronounced narrative of return soon emerged, construing *ubuntu* more broadly as the collective term for all of a romanticised tradition accessible through folk practice.

Here Mnyaka defines *ubuntu* as “an old philosophy of life that has for many centuries sustained the African communities in South Africa in particular and Africa as a whole,”¹⁷⁷ and Johan Broodryk as a

Comprehensive ancient African world view based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion, and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in a spirit of family. *Ubuntu* determines and influences everything a person thinks, says, and does.¹⁷⁸

In a similarly totalising fashion, Ncedile Saule says “*Ubuntu* could be viewed as a sum total of human behaviours inculcated in the individual by society through established traditional institutions.”¹⁷⁹ As Eze notes, this amounts to the claim that “*ubuntu* is in fact *essentially* what it means to be an African.”¹⁸⁰ On display in these examples are the unanimist appeal to an archetypal African folk philosophy sufficient to function as a theory of moral value, the

¹⁷⁴ (M. O. Eze 2010, 142) Eze’s arguments in this sub-chapter “From History to Polemics” (M. O. Eze 2010, 139-143) trace what may be a more vigorous version of my claim about a stalled language-game in the first part of this chapter.

¹⁷⁵ This is particularly relevant with regards to the exemplar case I will discuss.

¹⁷⁶ A number of conference and workshop papers on *ubuntu* were given between 1991 and 1994, which have never been republished. They are, however summarised in (E. D. Prinsloo, *Ubuntu Culture and Participatory Management* 1998). Further examples are cited in (Louw, *Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other* 1998).

¹⁷⁷ (M. Mnyaka, *Xenophobia as a Response to Foreigners in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Exilic Israel: A Comparative Critique in the light of the Gospel* and 2003, 215)

¹⁷⁸ (Broodryk 2002, 13-14)

¹⁷⁹ (Saule 1996, 85)

¹⁸⁰ (M. O. Eze 2010, 92). I’m indebted to Eze for most of the examples from this moment discussion of *ubuntu*.

details of which are obfuscated and sequestered in the idyllic past of a narrative of return, which are sufficient reason to be wary of such claims, independent of their lack of substantiation.

A more sophisticated case is put forward by Ramose in his *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*.¹⁸¹ Influenced to some extent by Stanlake Samkange's¹⁸² earlier work in the context of post-liberation Zimbabwe, Ramose argues for a robust theory of *ubuntu* extant in folk philosophy, sufficient to ground *all* African philosophy. As he describes the project

Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy. The be-ing of an African in the Universe is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu*. Similarly, the African tree of knowledge stems from *ubuntu* with which it is connected indivisibly. *Ubuntu* then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology. If these latter are the bases of philosophy, then African philosophy has long been established through *ubuntu*. Our point of departure is that *ubuntu* may be seen as the basis of African philosophy. Apart from a linguistic analysis of *ubuntu*, a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a "family atmosphere," that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa. No doubt there will be variations within this broad philosophical "family atmosphere." But the blood circulating through the "Family" members is the same in its basics. In this sense, *ubuntu* is the basis of African philosophy.¹⁸³

The "linguistic analysis" Ramose invokes is his argument from the utility of a "rheomodic"¹⁸⁴ logic: that is, a formal logical language built on gerunds. His argument bolstering the appeal to traditional proverbs and aphorisms as sufficient for a fully developed philosophy can be summarised as follows: "Rheomodic" formal logical languages are capable of expressing statements most formal logical languages cannot, by virtue of incorporating gerunds; Most natural languages in Africa are gerundive, and therefore similarly capable of deftly expressing gerundive claims; therefore, gerundive claims expressed in African natural languages (including those related to "be-ing" or "-ntu", and all words derived from that stem) are particularly reliable, and should be taken as authoritative representations of such relations.¹⁸⁵ As is apparent from this summary, some objections present themselves. The connection between the efficacy of formal rheomodic languages and parallel natural

¹⁸¹ (Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* 1999)

¹⁸² (Samkange 1980)

¹⁸³ (Ramose 1999, 49)

¹⁸⁴ Ramose presents this argument in a number of papers, the most readily accessible of which is the reprint of his key chapter in Coetzee and Roux's *Philosophy from Africa*, (*African Philosophy through Ubuntu* 1999).

¹⁸⁵ (Ramose 1999, 232-234)

languages is not addressed, for example. Nor is the parallel argument that such languages may have *lacunae* relative to non-gerundive noun-predicate languages, such that they may describe some relevant aspects of reality *less* authoritatively. And, of course, simply because a language is well-suited to expressions of a particular sort, it does not follow that all or any claims expressed in such a natural language are any more convincing than alternatives.

Ramose's appeal to the ostensive rheomodic structure of African languages is a novel form of the redoubt against criticism,¹⁸⁶ but it rests on the assumption that traditional African ontological conceptions are particularly apt, rather than demonstrating as much. In this sense, it is rehearsing the Ethnophilosophical strategy, taking a demonstration of the coherence of African perspectives to be sufficient demonstration of their philosophical value. It is also the case that his argument that traditional proverbs and aphorisms, couched in rheomodic language, are sufficient for a philosophy makes his position uniquely sensitive to variations in concepts and their expression across languages, yet he argues that variations across the "family atmosphere" of African cultures would be minor. This position is unlikely to convince Gyekye or Appiah, both of whom have propounded significant arguments turning on shifts in conceptual interpretation of terms between African languages.¹⁸⁷ Despite being and order of magnitude more sophisticated than most ethnophilosophical accounts of *ubuntu*, Ramose's defence of unanimism and explicit situating of philosophy in folk philosophy are not ultimately convincing.

The Supernaturalist Approach

By the Supernaturalist approach, I mean to pick out both Spiritism, in the sense noted in my discussion of the Ethnophilosophical fallacies, and the widespread tendency to interpret *ubuntu* value claims through a Christian supernaturalist framework, both of which I find reason to eschew.

In the South African philosophical literature, traditional metaphysical entities or categories often invoked as necessary to an account of *ubuntu* include: God (as part of a great chain of

¹⁸⁶ This may seem a harsh assessment, but a cursory look at Ramose's responses to interlocutors bears out some preference for obscurantism. See (Bewaji and Ramose, "The Bewaji, Van Binsbergen and Ramose debate on Ubuntu 2003), and (Ramose, But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz 2007).

¹⁸⁷ See (Gyekye 2002), (Appiah, In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture 1992, 94).

being);¹⁸⁸ ancestors;¹⁸⁹ and “fields of force” or “seriti.”¹⁹⁰ Importantly, “a recurrent theme emphasised by these authors is that *ubuntu* is an African humanism,”¹⁹¹ of exactly the sort Wiredu has in mind when he argues that “the African ethic might be called humanistic, as opposed to supernaturalistic,”¹⁹² the point that he noted “a number contemporary studies of African philosophies of morals converge on.”¹⁹³ To require that supernatural metaphysical entities be included in a theory in which value claims do the heavy lifting independent of them smacks of identifying *ubuntu* with *all of* traditional culture, characteristic of Ethnophilosophical conflation. At least, this seems to be the case with regard to God and Ancestors. Should such entities exist, it is certainly plausible that *ubuntu* would extend to them, but taking them as necessary for the value claims in *ubuntu* to function seems to rehearse the less successful parts of the *Euthyphro*.

That said, there are novel and interesting arguments to be made for the relevance of *seriti*. This term, translated as “field of force”¹⁹⁴ is introduced by Setiloane,¹⁹⁵ carrying over from Tempels¹⁹⁶ account of force as the fundamental ontological category. Augustine Shutte takes up Setiloane’s conception of intermingling fields of force, first in *Philosophy for Africa* (1993) and then in a revised form in *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (2001). Here Shutte argues that intermingling fields of life-force between persons would make *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* literally true, in that these invisible energy fields would map human interactions, literally *reifying* our various relationships.¹⁹⁷ This perspective leads to the evocative distinction

European culture has taught us to see the self as something private, hidden *within* our bodies... The African image is different: the self is *outside* the body, present and open to all. This is because the self is the result of the expression of all the forces acting upon us. It is not a thing, but the sum total of all the interacting forces. So we

¹⁸⁸ See for example (Mkhize 2008, 36).

¹⁸⁹ See for example Ramose’s “onto-triadic account of being” (Bewaji and Ramose 2003, 393-394)

¹⁹⁰ (Setiloane 1986, 13), (Shutte 1993, 46-58).

¹⁹¹ (M. O. Eze 2010, 93)

¹⁹² (Wiredu 2004, 18)

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ (Shutte 1993, 52)

¹⁹⁵ (Setiloane 1986, 13)

¹⁹⁶ (Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* 1969, 51)

¹⁹⁷ See (Shutte 1993, 46-58) and (Shutte 2001, 16-33). While Tutu is himself agnostic on grounding of *ubuntu* in a supernatural context, (Battle 1997) situates him entirely within Shutte and Setiloane’s account of *seriti*.

must learn to see ourselves as *outside*, in our appearance, in our acts and relationships, and in the environment around us.¹⁹⁸

“This manner of understanding human personality” Setiloane writes,

...explains the interplay which takes place when people come into contact or live together. The essence of being is “participation” in which humans are always interlocked with one another. The human being is not only “vital force”, but more: vital force in participation.¹⁹⁹

On this picture, as in Tempels’ original account, “growth” in vital force is predicated on beneficial relationships with others, while conflict “can only diminish... vital energy”²⁰⁰ such that there is clearly a natural explanatory role for the appeal to a rich metaphysics. I use the term “rich metaphysics” here, rather than “the supernatural” because Shutte argues that the account of vital forces offered by Tempels and Setiloane eschews easy classification according to the Cartesian natural/supernatural binary, offering a third alternative.²⁰¹ Here it is worth noting that there is reason to doubt that the account really does escape the relevant binary, if only because the metaphor of “fields of force” appeals to our conventional understanding of physics, in which electromagnetic, gravitational, and strong or weak bonding fields, while invisible, are taken to be entirely natural phenomena.

Shutte seems therefore either to be proposing a novel, previously undetected field like electromagnetism (and thus, straightforwardly natural) or a “field”-analogous supernatural entity which interacts mysteriously with the physical, but adds no explanatory efficiency to the traditional concept of the soul. Even if my criticism of Shutte’s third metaphysical category is wide of the mark however, what we might call his extra-naturalist metaphysical account functions as a black box performing the same explanatory role as an appeal to the unequivocally supernatural might in grounding his theory. And, as with supernaturalism, the appeal to an extra-natural physical account is a source of difficulty for the theory. While the aesthetic of the self as the product of fields of force is refreshing and evocative as a regulative ideal, committing to its metaphysical truth adds a significant burden of proof to its proponents’ case. This is especially problematic given that Metz has recently argued that

¹⁹⁸ (Shutte 2001, 22-23)

¹⁹⁹ (Setiloane 1986, 14)

²⁰⁰ (Shutte 2001, 23)

²⁰¹ See especially (Shutte 1993, 89-96)

the efficacy of the “vitalist” position can be expressed in value terms alone, without appeal to metaphysical arguments.²⁰²

Leaving aside empirical burdens which may attach themselves to Shutte’s account in particular, the difficulties one might have with any supernaturalist account present themselves: following from the *Euthyphro* and its variants, requiring that value categories depend on as the supernatural does not seem to yield an explanatory advantage over naturalist accounts; supernaturalists posit more explanatory entities than do naturalists, increasing their burden of proof by requiring ethicists also to support rich metaphysical accounts; and following from Wiredu and Metz’ observations, alternatives to these approaches exist, and appear at least as capable of explaining the relevant value claims. These seem reason enough to want to avoid a supernaturalist theory of *ubuntu*, but there is one more objection to this position.

Shutte joins a number of philosophers²⁰³ and theologians who aim to develop a theory of *ubuntu* within an explicitly Christian context. While the appeal of such a project within Christian Hermeneutics is clear, demoting *ubuntu* to a mere variation on an extant position seems to be pursuing a far less interesting philosophical project. Surely a more interesting philosophical undertaking, and more closely aligned with the various claims of *ubuntu*’s theoretical potential, would be to examine *ubuntu*’s aptness to generate a novel theory of moral value, and examine that? After all, it is always possible to fall back to the more derivative approach should such an articulation prove impractical. For all of these reasons, I will eschew the supernaturalist methodology in seeking to develop an account of *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value.

The Constructivist Approach

I use the term Constructivist loosely,²⁰⁴ to pick out a number of works which interpret the project of *ubuntu* not as an examination of extant value claims as a system, but the use of

²⁰² (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

²⁰³ See for example (Battle 1997), (Broodryk 1997), (Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* 1997), (Dandala 2009), (Kasenene 1994), (Mbiti 1971), (M. Mnyaka, *Xenophobia as a Response to Foreigners in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Exilic Israel: A Comparative Critique in the light of the Gospel* and 2003), and (Nkesiga 2005).

²⁰⁴ I am aware that moral Constructivism comes with not-insubstantial theoretical attachments and ambiguities, but so too does my initial category, Post-Structuralism. Precisely because Constructivism is a

the language of *ubuntu* to provide a forum for negotiating a new, socially-constructed value system. Such a project would be largely immune to debates about the provenance or authenticity of specific terms of art or the falsity of narratives of return, because it starts from the position, either charitably or cynically, that all shared normative systems are constructed through negotiation, and such narratives may conduce toward that negotiation. This approach therefore floats free of much of the foregoing methodological critiques, possibly emerging as such for the first time in South African work on *ubuntu*. This group is populated, as far as I can discern by the work of three philosophers: Leonhard Praeg,²⁰⁵ Michael Eze,²⁰⁶ and Drucilla Cornell.²⁰⁷

The starting point in constructivist discussions must be the initial, critical, response by anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen to what he perceived as the manufacturing and imposition of a historically false hegemonic narrative of the new South Africa.²⁰⁸ Confronted with the narratives of return prevalent in South Africa in the 1990's, he balked at their uncritical romanticism, while antagonistically asserting that, for example, even the word "*ubuntu*" was a recent coinage.²⁰⁹ While van Binsbergen was not a particularly charitable or philosophically adept interlocutor, his cause was taken up by Praeg,²¹⁰ who integrated van Binsbergen's observations into his own, Post-Structurally-informed observations of the narratives of return from his earlier work.²¹¹ While sympathetic with van Binsbergen's concerns, Praeg ultimately accommodates the possibility that the narrative of *ubuntu* under construction could have a positive function. Similarly, Michael Eze is critical, but ultimately accommodating of *ubuntu* as a beneficial national narrative for post-apartheid South Africa in his exhaustive catalogue of the development of discourse around *ubuntu*, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*.²¹² This work is so exhaustive, in fact, that it might well have been the exemplary text in this category, were it not for the fact that Eze's primary interest is in a descriptive account.

broader church, it is easier to make a case that most of the theorists I group here fall under some description of it (though they do not all fit the same description).

²⁰⁵ See (Praeg 2000) and (Praeg 2008).

²⁰⁶ (M. O. Eze 2010).

²⁰⁷ See (Cornell 2009), (Cornell 2011), (Cornell and Muvangua 2011).

²⁰⁸ (van Binsbergen 2001)

²⁰⁹ (van Binsbergen 2001, 54). In light of (Gade 2011), if nothing else, we can dismiss this claim as false.

²¹⁰ (Praeg 2008)

²¹¹ (Praeg 2000)

²¹² (M. O. Eze 2010).

Philosopher and legal scholar Drucilla Cornell, by contrast, has a distinct positive project:

to connect *ubuntu* and dignity, and thus traditional systems of South African Law with contemporary systems of constitutional law [through] a sustained archaeological and etymological effort to create a system of symbols capable of translation and a system of symbols that does not privilege – uncritically – one system of law above another.²¹³

Having outlined this project, and contributed her own critical assessments in earlier work,²¹⁴ Cornell's exemplary text in this Constructivist category is the anthology *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence*,²¹⁵ collecting the whole extant body of *ubuntu* case law and a number of critical and interpretive articles from South African legal scholars.

The Constructivist project is a fascinating one, and particularly appropriate in the legal context Cornell situates it within, but it is not the sort of project I am interested in undertaking. In part, this is because I do not share in the theoretical commitments or approaches informing this strongly Constructivist project. More to the point though, addressing the constructivist question is not answering what strikes me as the more interesting value questions, which relate to whether the constellation of value claims glossed as *ubuntu already* pick out non-constructed value claims, and are formalisable as a distinct moral theory. Since this project is basically incompatible with the foundational assumptions of Constructivism, I part ways from this methodological approach as well.

The Analytic Approach

At present, only one philosopher's work on *ubuntu* populates the Analytic category: Thaddeus Metz' *Toward an African Moral Theory*.²¹⁶ I call his approach Analytic not simply because he is an analytic philosopher,²¹⁷ but because the methodology in this work is essentially analytic, anatomising theoretical options, ascertaining their logical distinctions, and evaluating them though clearly outlined arguments. More to the point, however, Metz avoids the difficulties which have dogged many of the accounts I have discussed thus far. He avoids the unanimist fallacies by seeking, and finding, moral claims which are *characteristic*

²¹³ (Woolman 2008, 459-460)

²¹⁴ (Cornell 2009)

²¹⁵ (Cornell and Muvangua, *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* 2011)

²¹⁶ (Metz 2007)

²¹⁷ He is, but taking that alone to be a virtue would be question-begging.

of sub-Saharan Africa, neatly side-stepping the ambiguity of Ramose's "family atmosphere" or more explicitly unanimist claims about essentially African perspectives. He derives these characteristically African moral claims from the written work of professional African philosophers from across the continent, thus avoiding the conflation of folk philosophy with philosophy as such. He avoids spiritist or supernaturalist complications by focusing on moral claims independent of metaphysical ones. Having done all of this: he seeks explicitly to derive an underlying moral principle capable of explaining familiar moral claims as well as the characteristically African claims he furnishes; distinguishes or proposes a number of others in what amounts to a survey on the state of the art in theorising African moral normativity; and critically evaluates the options until he produces a theory he takes to be best. In doing so, Metz engages dialectically with African philosophers, invites a dialectical response, and arrives at promising action-guiding moral rules which seem plausibly to have the potential to provide a robust and moral alternative to theories extant in the West (thus, potentially, contributing honestly toward the non-epistemic Postcolonial Dignity project as well). This compliance with the concerns of African philosophy is not itself an explicit project of Metz', but the analytic approach, in respectful dialogue with extant African philosophy, achieves it successfully enough that there is nothing particularly procrustean about my employing his approach in this way.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that *ubuntu's* congruence with cognate terms in African philosophy is best explained by a coherent concept in need of greater development. I having outlined the characteristic concerns and difficulties of African philosophy, I therefore argue that philosophical work developing *ubuntu qua* moral theory ought to take account of these concerns, and that the methodologies developed to avoid fallacies particular to African philosophy should be applied. And in my survey of extant work on ubuntu in South Africa, I argued that the first two approaches fail to do so, while the third does not have the same, philosophically interesting aim as my project. The Analytic methodology as Metz has applied it to African philosophy, evades these concerns, and strikes me as worth emulating. The substantive theories he produces, informed by the value claims in the literature I have examined in this chapter (absent the methodological difficulties), strike me as the correct jumping-off point for investigating *ubuntu* as a viable theory of moral value. As such, in the

next chapter I will turn to a close reading of Metz' claims, and note where I depart from them.

Chapter 2: Ubuntu as an Aretaic Theory of Moral Value

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced *ubuntu* as a constellation of value-claims inviting the development of an underlying theory of moral value, and ultimately argued that Thaddeus Metz' Analytic methodology seemed best suited to developing such a theory. I begin this chapter by outlining the constituent claims of this constellation as Metz maps them, and rehearsing his arguments for the African Moral Theory he proposes to explain them, as developed initially in his *Toward an African Moral Theory*²¹⁸ and further elaborated in later work.²¹⁹ Significantly, among the alternate accounts Metz dismisses is "probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature,"²²⁰ on which *ubuntu* is understood in aretaic (virtue-ethical) terms. In the second part of the chapter, I present three arguments for ubuntu-as-aretaic: that ubuntu is commonly articulated in aretaic language; that ubuntu fits "Plato's Requirement on the Virtues;" and that the relationships Metz finds morally attractive in ubuntu are better understood as partially constituted by dispositions of character than by acts. I argue that either a viable autocentric or perfectionist theory of ubuntu is necessary to account for these aretaic aspects.

Metz' Account of Ubuntu

Metz' approach in *Toward an African Moral Theory* enacts a mechanism of reflective equilibrium,²²¹ detailing a constellation of moral intuitions, and then proposing five principles suggested by the literature as justifying them. As the paper progresses, he dismisses principles which fail to account for all of the relevant intuitions (or are otherwise

²¹⁸ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007)

²¹⁹ In particular, see (Metz, *The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics* 2007), (Metz, *African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality* 2009), (Metz and Gaie, *The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: implications for research on morality* 2010), (Metz, *Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory: toward a new philosophy of human rights* 2010), (Metz, *The Reach of Amnesty for Political Crimes: which burdens on the guilty does national reconciliation permit?* 2010), (Metz and Bell, *Confucianism and Ubuntu: reflections on a dialogue between Chinese and African traditions* 2011), and (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming)).

²²⁰ (Metz 2007, 331)

²²¹ Metz characterises this as "the method of positing of a general principle, posing a particular counterexample, reformulating the general principle so as to avoid the counterexample, posing a new counterexample to the reformulated principle, revising the principle yet again, and so on." (Metz, *The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics* 2007, 378).

problematic), developing a sixth principle to account for all of the relevant intuitions. A principle emerging from this process could be seen as glossing a (characteristically African) “comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones.”²²² This exercise serves to justify the account of an “African moral theory” he develops and elaborates on in subsequent work, and is therefore the proper point of departure for discussing his account as a whole. Moreover, Metz’ account of the constellation of African moral claims seems to me to provide the most clearly and usefully articulated description of what is meant by *ubuntu* in the context of normative ethics, and ought reasonably to be the point of departure for any work on *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value.. As such, I take it as my point of departure.

Ubuntu’s Constellation of Claims

Any account of *ubuntu* as a theory of value will, necessarily, appeal to a set of claims held fairly broadly across a number of African cultures. Here the difficulty lies in how to characterise this broad spread: as noted in the previous chapter, casting such values as *essentially* African, as Ramose seems to, is problematic. By contrast, Metz’ approach is to seek out *characteristically* African claims. As Metz goes to pains to put it,

I do not mean to suggest that all sub-Saharan societies, let alone all individuals in them, hold them. What I claim are moral judgments more common among Africans than Westerners are values that are more widespread in the sub-Saharan part of the continent than in Europe, North America or Australasia. They are values that are more often found across not only a certain wide array of space, from Ghana to South Africa, but also a long span of time in that space, from traditional societies to contemporary African intellectuals. 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*.²²³

Where Metz uses the language of “tendencies” and “[claims] Africans hold more often than Westerners,”²²⁴ I characterise his survey as picking out *dispositions*: claims *characteristically* held or espoused in Africa. The familiarity of this language from discussions of personality

²²² (Metz 2007, 321). While noting that little extant work constitutes a systematic pursuit of this project, Metz is correct that some such underlying account is presupposed by those who argue for a distinctive African moral theory, which invocations of *ubuntu* frequently amount to. His phrasing is that such literature “construes *ubuntu* as grounding a normative ethical theory of right action (or at least brings to mind such a construal)” (Metz 2007, 323).

²²³ (Metz 2007, 324). My italics.

²²⁴ Ibid.

allows us to understand the convergence of claims from various African cultures without presupposing the unanimity of an *essentially* African perspective: we can share with others a disposition toward some behaviour, without unanimity in all that we do; and such dispositions can be characteristic of us as a result of convergent circumstance, without appeal to some immutable essence.²²⁵ Similarly, characteristic dispositions, unlike essential features, admit of deviation without negating the definition: to say that clusters of claims are characteristically asserted by Africans is not negated if some exceptions exist. This seems to allow for the commonality of Ramose's "family atmosphere"²²⁶ without the essentialism implicit in his metaphor of consanguinity. "Furthermore," Metz notes elsewhere, this perspective leaves open the possibility that "what counts as 'African' can also be found elsewhere in the world... intuitively, something can be characteristically African without being 'unique' to Africa in the sense of not being found anywhere else at al."²²⁷

Now I turn to this constellation of ostensibly characteristically African value claims (Metz goes on to refer to them as "intuitions"²²⁸). As with identifying any constellation, one begins by picking out the most familiar components. Here Metz begins by noting six "moral judgments that are commonly accepted by both adherents of *ubuntu* and Western people in modern, industrialized, constitutional democracies."²²⁹ Both groups, he argues, tend to hold that it is *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, break a promise, for marginal personal gain.

²²⁵ (Goldie 2004, 8-9)

²²⁶ (Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* 1999)

²²⁷ (Metz, *The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics* 2007, 376). He makes this clarifying statement in response to Ramose's argument that he fails to explicitly outline the relationship between "distinctive" and "African" positions, leaving the content of "African" ambiguous (Ramose, *But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz* 2007, 352-353). There is a certain irony in this, given my claim that Ramose does not adequately clarify this in his own work.

²²⁸ (Metz 2007, 328)

²²⁹ (Metz 2007, 324). I take Metz' use of the term "Western" to pick out what is common across "modern, industrialized, constitutional democracies" in "Europe, North America or Australasia" from this point on.

F. to discriminate on a racial basis when allocating opportunities.²³⁰

It is important to note that a theory of characteristically African moral value (a theory of *ubuntu*) must justify all of these claims, in addition to claims less familiar to Western interlocutors. Having picked out these claims held in common with the West, Metz then outlines a complimentary set of six claims characteristically disposed to be asserted together in Africa. These claims, which Metz posits Africans characteristically hold to be as plausible as the initial list, are that it is *pro tanto* immoral:

G. to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus.²³¹

H. to make retribution a fundamental and central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to seeking reconciliation.²³²

I. to *create* wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one.²³³

J. to distribute wealth largely on the basis of individual rights, as opposed to need.²³⁴

K. to ignore others and violate communal norms, as opposed to acknowledging others, upholding tradition and partaking in rituals.²³⁵

L. to fail to marry and procreate, as opposed to creating a family.²³⁶

Taken together, these claims constitute the constellation of characteristically African value claims Metz argues can best be accounted for by appealing to a shared underlying account

²³⁰ (Metz 2007, 324). For critical discussion of this list's formulation as *pro tanto* moral claims, see (Farland 2007) and (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 379-382).

²³¹ (Metz 2007, 324-325). In support, he cites (Wiredu, Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective 1996, Pt 4) and (Ramosé, African Philosophy through Ubuntu 1999, 135-153).

²³² (Metz 2007, 325). In support, he cites (Driberg 1934, 231), (Wiredu, Moral Foundations of an African Culture 1992, 204), and (Miller 1992, 21-28) as providing broadly African examples; (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999) and (The State vs T Makwanyane and M Mchunu Case 1995) [also collected in (Cornell and Muvangua 2011, 76-108)] as providing specifically South African examples.

²³³ (Metz 2007, 325-326). Emphasis mine. In support, he cites (Marquard and Standing 1939, 20-32), (Samkange 1980, 80-87), (Gbadegesin, Yoruba philosophy: individuality, community, and moral order 1998, 132-133), (Broodryk, Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa 2002, 66-67), (Wiredu, Moral Foundations of an African Culture 1992, 202), (Dzobo 1992, 226), and (Tangwa, The HIV/AIDS pandemic, African traditional values and the search for a vaccine in Africa 1995, 181).

²³⁴ (Metz 2007, 326-327). My italics. In support, he cites (Wiredu 1992, 198-202), (Gyekye, Person and community in Akan thought 1992), (Ramosé, African Philosophy through Ubuntu 1999, 150-151), (Masolo, Western and African communitarianism: a comparison 2004, 488-496), (Broodryk 2002, vii, 1, 36-39), and (Tangwa, The HIV/AIDS pandemic, African traditional values and the search for a vaccine in Africa 1995, 180).

²³⁵ (Metz 2007, 327). In support, he cites (Shutte, Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa 2001, 27-28), (Dzobo 1992, 229), and (Louw, Ubuntu and the challenges of multiculturalism in post-apartheid South Africa 2001, 19-26).

²³⁶ (Metz 2007, 327-328). In support, he cites (Dzobo 1992, 227, 233), (Wiredu 1992, 205), (Tangwa, Bioethics: an African perspective 1996, 194-195), (Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality 2001, 6-7, 34-35), and (Ramosé 1999, 329).

of moral value. This approach seems to pick out what is conventionally understood by *ubuntu* in sufficiently precise terms to be philosophically useful, as distinct from much public and theoretical discussion noted in the previous chapter. Having outlined the claims in Metz' constellation, I will discuss each in some more detail.

"It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to make policy decisions in the face of dissent, as opposed to seeking consensus."

Metz cashes this claim out as "in the political realm, unanimity is prized and majoritarianism is typically seen as a morally inadequate way to resolve conflicts of interests or to determine law."²³⁷ While the paradigm demonstration of this claim is that "in many small-scale African communities, discussion continues until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome", it is also the case that "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 [familiar in the West]."²³⁸ Notable examples here are Kwasi Wiredu's arguments for a "non-party polity"²³⁹ and Ajume Wingo's argument for distributing many of the functions of the state among traditional "fellowship-associations."²⁴⁰ In the former, Wiredu argues for the viability and desirability of a democratic system in which elected representatives represent their constituencies in pursuing functional political compromises, rather than representing sets of interests embodied in parties, competing with other such bodies to set political agendas. Wiredu can thus be understood as proposing a mechanism by which the pursuit of consensus familiar to small-scale meetings can be scaled up to modern democracies. Wingo, by contrast, argues that a number of the functions of the state in Africa should be performed by traditional fellowship associations, in no small part on the grounds that such structures resolve disputes through the pursuit of consensus (and are small enough to do so efficiently), thus incorporating a mechanism for consensus-seeking into the civic culture of liberal democracies.²⁴¹

²³⁷ (Metz 2007, 324)

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ See (Wiredu, Democracy by Consensus: some conceptual considerations 2001).

²⁴⁰ (A. H. Wingo 2004)

²⁴¹ (A. H. Wingo 2004, 456)

These examples suggest that the value of consensus and unanimity is not simply an artefact of small-scale societies where unanimity and consultation are the norm. Rather, theorists like Wiredu and Wingo are sufficiently convinced of the moral appeal of consensus (and harm of dissent) as to pursue mechanisms systematically promoting it in the large-scale context of modern life. It is also worth noting that that such mechanisms indicate that the prizing of consensus is not identical to justifying the authoritarian imposition of such a consensus (a recurrent concern of Wiredu's²⁴²). Rather, what is prized is the opportunity to mediate conflicting views such that a consensus is reached through engaged discussion.

"It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to make retribution a fundamental and central aim of criminal justice, as opposed to seeking reconciliation."

Half of this claim is that a backward-looking, retributive account of criminal justice, such as that credited to Kant, among others, is uncharacteristic of African claims about moral value. As Metz frames it, "by 'retribution' I mean any consideration that could be invoked to justify punishing a law-breaker fundamentally for, and in proportion to, wrongdoing."²⁴³ The second half of the claim asserts that, in the place of a backward-looking retributive account, African accounts of the aim of criminal justice are characteristically forward-looking, aiming "to mend a broken relationship between the offender, his victim, and the community."²⁴⁴ While it is certainly not the case that retributivist intuitions are never affirmed by Africans, Metz is right to note that the forward-looking appeal to communal reconciliation is characteristically proposed by African theorists and jurists, and that "the South African Constitutional Court have uniformly judged *ubuntu* to be incompatible with the death penalty or any retributive reasoning that could underwrite it."²⁴⁵

²⁴² (Wiredu 1980, 1)

²⁴³ (Metz 2007, 325)

²⁴⁴ While the South African TRC is the most familiar example of this preference for reconciliation (see Tutu 1999), Metz also cites (Wiredu 1992, 204), and (Miller 1992, 21-28) who reference the same approach among the Akan in Ghana and Tiv in Nigeria respectively. Metz also notes the traditional goal of appeasing angry ancestors (Driberg 1934, 231) as an example of a forward-looking, non-retributive account of justice prevalent in Africa, but this is not his focus, and such a supernaturalist account is unattractive for the same reason as other supernaturalist accounts.

²⁴⁵ (Metz 2007, 325). See also (The State vs T Makwanyane and M Mchunu Case 1995), (Metz, Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory: toward a new philosophy of human rights 2010), and (Metz, The Reach of Amnesty for Political Crimes: which burdens on the guilty does national reconciliation permit? 2010).

“It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to *create* wealth largely on a competitive basis, as opposed to a cooperative one.”

The first half of this claim asserts that a characteristically African position finds some significant harm done even by “success through aggressive competitiveness”²⁴⁶ when generating wealth. The second half of the claim rests on a characteristically African claim that there is a positive requirement that “labour should be undertaken for the sake of the community.”²⁴⁷ Like the initial claim about the value of public consensus, it is important that this is not obviously simply an artefact of small communities, where such an emphasis has immediate pragmatic value and implementability. While Metz notes the context from which this communal emphasis emerges is that “in many traditional African societies land is ultimately owned in common,”²⁴⁸ African philosophers are apt, even in the context of contemporary, large-scale economies, to object to the “brash competitiveness,”²⁴⁹ “single-minded commercialism,”²⁵⁰ unbridled individualism²⁵¹ and “morally blind, purely economic logic”²⁵² they consider characteristic of free-market thinking. It is worth noting that Metz’ use of the term “largely” allows that there may be some scope for one’s own financial benefit, but that prioritising this above communal welfare is morally problematic.

“It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to *distribute* wealth largely on the basis of individual rights, as opposed to need.”

Here Metz distinguishes between logically distinct, but easily conflated, claims about wealth. Where the former characteristically African claim asserted a moral harm in *generating* wealth through excessive competition, this latter claim asserts a moral harm in *distributing* wealth primarily with reference to who has rights claims against it, in the face of significant need by those who may not have the same rights. As Metz puts it,

The requirements of an individual to help others are typically deemed heavier in African morality than in Western. People in the West tend to think that individual rights should largely determine the resources one may possess, for example, one has

²⁴⁶ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 32)

²⁴⁷ (Metz 2007, 325)

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ (Broodryk 2002, 54)

²⁵⁰ (Wiredu 1992, 202)

²⁵¹ (Dzobo 1992, 226)

²⁵² (Tangwa 1996, 181)

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.

To illustrate the force of this obligation, Metz quotes Walter Sisulu saying “if 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.”²⁵³ “Conversely,” Metz notes, “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.”²⁵⁴

One possible implication of a *duty* to share wealth with others regardless of their right to it or our right to retain it is that such claims are anti-supererogationist: that is, that asserting such claims denies the concept of a supererogatory good. This is a position Kwame Gyekye has argued for,²⁵⁵ claiming that on an African understanding,

the moral life, which essentially involves paying regard to the needs, interests, and wellbeing of *others*, already implies self-sacrifice and loss, that is loss of something; one’s time, money, strength and so on. There is, in my view, no need, therefore, to place limits on the form of self-sacrifice and, hence, the extent of our moral responsibilities.²⁵⁶

Importantly, this claim that “the field of our moral responsibilities should not be circumscribed”²⁵⁷ is quite radical, and most who advocate the claim Metz glosses do not join Gyekye in arguing against *any* scope for supererogation. While I do not find Gyekye’s arguments for an anti-supererogationist interpretation of the claims compelling, I will not address them in detail here, as it is sufficient to note that the claim *need not* entail anti-supererogationism. Rather, it can be understood as compatible with some scope for supererogatory actions as conventionally understood, while arguing that something about our communal relations entails a duty to assist others on the basis of their need. Without

²⁵³ In (Broodryk 2002, vii). See also (Broodryk 2002, 1, 36-39), (Mtuzze 2004, 103-106) and (Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* 2010).

²⁵⁴ (Metz 2007, 326-327). In support of this claim, he cites (Tangwa 1995, 180), and (Verhoef and Michel 1997, 399).

²⁵⁵ (Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* 1997, 35-76)

²⁵⁶ (Gyekye 1997, 73). Italics in original.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*

denying the coherence of some acts which cannot be demanded as duties, therefore, the characteristically African claim posits far greater pressure to help others as being within the threshold of duty than are conventionally asserted in the West.

“It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to ignore others and violate communal norms, as opposed to acknowledging others, upholding tradition and partaking in rituals.”

Where, in the previous two claims Metz treats logically distinct but easily conflated claims separately, this claim (rightly, I think) reads two *prima facie* distinct positions as entailed by a single characteristically African claim. The first of these is that “one has some moral obligation to engage with one’s fellows...”²⁵⁸ and the second that this entails a moral obligation “to support the community’s way of life.”²⁵⁹ These could exist as logically distinct claims: Shutte²⁶⁰ provides an illustrative anecdote in which African nuns interpreted their German counterparts’ commitment to extracurricular work as seeming “objectionably to care more about practical matters than people;”²⁶¹ and the normative pressure to support community traditions alone is captured by the authoritarianism Wiredu finds and rejects in African cultures generally.²⁶² Rather than either claim alone, Metz follows Mbiti²⁶³ in articulating a single claim, on which an obligation to support the community’s way of life is one instance of a more general obligation to engage with one’s fellows.

As with the previous claim, this need not be read as a wholesale rejection of supererogation as such. It seems accurate, however, to say that Westerners characteristically see the value of engaging with others or supporting a community’s traditions as supererogatory and fungible (such that it is interchangeable with other goods), rather than an essential, necessary good entailing a duty. By contrast, Metz’ claim asserts that a characteristically African perspective takes such engagement to be obligatory. Importantly, reading a significant normative pressure toward supporting traditions as entailed by this more general obligation to engage with community members allows a more flexible (and thus, more plausible) justification for a normative traditionalism than simply asserting that a

²⁵⁸ (Metz 2007, 327)

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ (Shutte 2001, 27-28)

²⁶¹ (Metz 2007, 327)

²⁶² (Wiredu 1980, 1)

²⁶³ Quoted in (Dzobo 1992, 229).

conservative or authoritarian bent is characteristically African. If valuing or maintaining traditions is valuable *qua* engagement with others, then some traditions – those which undermine engagement with one’s fellow community members – are not valuable by default, and can be amended. As such, this account of a normative pressure toward participating in and maintaining traditions need not entail worrying default commitments to automatically supporting *all* traditions.

Similarly, Metz notes that “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.”²⁶⁴ This is a response to what Dirk Louw has called “the dark side of *ubuntu*,”²⁶⁵ the tendency to invoke *ubuntu* in defence of restrictively anti-individualist actions²⁶⁶. Metz distinguishes between finding *some* moral value in conforming to communal demands and the stronger claim, that this value is necessarily the defeating value.

“It is *pro tanto* morally wrong to fail to marry and procreate, as opposed to creating a family.”

Here Metz notes that “many African people think there is some strong moral reason to *extend* familial relationships by finding a (heterosexual) spouse and having children”²⁶⁷ and cites Ramose as arguing that this underpins arguments for polygamy, since it generates more children than monogamy.²⁶⁸ As Metz puts it

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 that they are well cared for; these norms are of course quite widespread in Western societies. The

²⁶⁴ (Metz 2007, 327). My italics.

²⁶⁵ (Louw 2001, 19-26)

²⁶⁶ While Wiredu has taken pains to emphasise that African Communitarian claims and the more familiar debate in political philosophy between Liberal theorists and their Communitarian interlocutors are similar in name only (Wiredu, *Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism* 2008), this at least is an area in which there is significant overlap between the two. The Liberal/Communitarian debate devoted significant attention to balancing the contesting values of community and individual autonomy, and that literature could add nuance to similar discussions in the context of *ubuntu*.

²⁶⁷ (Metz 2007, 327). My italics. In support of this claim, he cites (Dzobo 1992, 227, 233), (Wiredu 1992, 205), (Tangwa 1996, 194-195), and (Bujo 2001, 6-7, 34-35).

²⁶⁸ (Ramose 2002, 329)

point is rather the stronger claim that one has some positive obligation to wed and procreate in the first place, a view that is much less common in the West.²⁶⁹

Where the project of creating and extending families is characteristically treated in the West as either morally neutral or a fungible moral good,²⁷⁰ this claim asserts that the characteristically African position is to take families to be morally valuable in a way that entails (*pro tanto*) obligations to bring them about. One context in which such a moral pressure is familiar in the West is in Christian religious prescriptions. Such prescriptions tend to invoke divinely-sanctioned appeals to Natural Law. While this is an influence on some African writers,²⁷¹ Wiredu and Metz argue that the claim can be supported without appeal to the supernatural. As such, this final claim is interesting in that asserts a strong moral obligation toward marriage and procreation, for reasons other than those cited in the West.

The Constellation in light of criticism

The principles Metz goes on to develop are all derived from taking the latter six claims in the constellation to be as plausible as the initial six ubiquitous claims. Particularly in light the last two claims however, a Western interlocutor²⁷² may well ask why the latter six intuitions ought to command an equivalent authority, perhaps swayed by the following abductive argument:

1. Some culturally-endorsed normative claims apply to persons under any description (these claims are ethically normative), while some culturally-endorsed normative claims simply pick out prudential strategies applicable in some contexts, but not others.
2. Normative claims applicable to persons under any description (ethically normative claims) are likely to be endorsed by disparate cultures.
3. Prudential strategies applicable in some contexts but not in others are likely to be endorsed by some cultures, but not others.
4. Metz' claims A-F are endorsed by disparate cultures.
5. Metz' claims G-L are endorsed by some cultures but not others.

Therefore, while claims A-F are likely to be ethically normative, claims G-L are likely to pick out prudential strategies applicable in some contexts, but not in others.

Granting the project (common to Metz, his sources, and his interlocutors) of pursuing an account of objective ethical value, I take premise (1) to be true, though not exhaustive.

²⁶⁹ (Metz 2007, 327-328)

²⁷⁰ (Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives* 1987, 307-317)

²⁷¹ (Bujo 2001) for example.

²⁷² Exemplified, in my experience of teaching Metz' paper, by students who have suggested something like this argument.

Other categories of culturally endorsed norm are possible, such as culturally endorsed normative claims without either intrinsic moral or prudential applicability (many specific instances of etiquette seem to fit this description). But I take it (for the sake of argument) that culturally-endorsed normative claims include at least the two categories listed in the premise. I take premise (2) to summarise Metz' own position, that a good explanation of converging judgements is the existence of mind-independent facts applicable to all minds,²⁷³ and that premises (3-5) require little additional explanation.

Certainly there is some significant truth to the claim that the normative claims G-L seem apt to promote prudential strategies applicable to traditional African societies, but far less applicable to the industrialised West. As Allen Wood notes, the African claims developed in small-scale, culturally homogeneous societies with little surplus of resources²⁷⁴ and, one might add, a relatively high mortality rate. Claims G-L would promote communal solidarity and concern for the harmony and wellbeing of the group, as well as procreation necessary for maintaining the population, while dissuading free-riding, all of which would be maximally prudent strategies for individuals and groups in that context. In the context of large-scale, culturally diverse societies in which "a person depended on many people whose acquaintance was never made"²⁷⁵ and a low mortality rate however, such strategies are not immediately applicable, and are apt to be supplanted by other prudential strategies. On this account, it is apparent why claims G-L would be promoted in societies under the former description and not under the latter, prompting a reductionist account on which they reduce simply to parochial prudential norms, rather than ethical norms.²⁷⁶

This reductionist argument is not compelling, however. Among the possibilities premise (1) does not exhaust are normative claims which are *both* prudential in some social circumstances but not others *and* morally normative for persons under any description.

²⁷³ (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 372). See also (Wood 2007, 340)

²⁷⁴ (Wood 2007, 340, 341-343). See also (Silberbauer 1991). Importantly, neither Wood nor Silberbauer argue that this "explanation sketch" necessarily entails the reductive argument I have outlined.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Note that this is not itself an argument for privileging normative claims characteristically endorsed by Western cultures over those characteristically endorsed by African cultures, but rather for relegating normative claims that are not shared to the status of prudential, rather than ethical claims. With regard to claims K and L in particular, and to some extent for the other claims, this has the effect of *reproducing* the Western perspective (that there is no *morally* compelling pressure to conform, marry, or procreate), but not as the result of privileging Western perspectives.

Since premises (2) and (3) are not disputed here, asserting that this is the case demands some explanation for how universally applicable moral norms come to be normative in some cultures and not others. This is what Allen Wood provides when he argues that

Different cultures have widely different conditions of life and historical backgrounds in apprehending [moral] truths, the awareness of any culture regarding this will be fallible and probably partial or skewed in certain ways. Some cultures do not fully appreciate some values, because they have not had the historical opportunities to be fully acquainted with the objects exemplifying these values. Some cultures may be acquainted with certain values, but their acquaintance may interfere with their full appreciation of them, because they are so situated that they can afford to underestimate their value without suffering dire consequences, while other cultures better appreciate them because their failure to do so, given their circumstances and traditions, would have more immediate and painful consequences.²⁷⁷

Wood continues

If it is correct that objective value is better estimated by those in a position to appreciate its vital importance than by those whose circumstances relieve them of the necessity of appreciating it, then the natural conclusion is that African cultures probably are closer to the truth about social solidarity than Western cultures.²⁷⁸

This account of the relationship between objective [universal²⁷⁹] moral claims and cultural variation strikes me as convincing, and grounds the possibility of normative claims both prudential in some social circumstances but not others and morally normative for persons under any description. Allowing that such a thing is *possible*, however, it is still necessary to provide reason to believe that the specific claims (G-L) are instances of such claims, and not better explained away as mere parochial prudential strategies.²⁸⁰ Here, three reasons to give such an assumption the benefit of the doubt present themselves: the African

²⁷⁷ (Wood 2007, 339).

²⁷⁸ (Wood 2007, 341)

²⁷⁹ Wood only argues for the existence of objective ethical claims, Metz notes in response, but also needs the claim that these objective ethical claims are universally applicable, since objective-but-not-universally-applicable ethics (such as objective demands on Jews but not gentiles, or “moral twin-earth” cases) are possible (Metz, *The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics* 2007, 370-372). I include it here for congruence with Metz’ position.

²⁸⁰ This is, I think, plausibly what Wood does for claims (H), (K), and (L), arguing that in their cases characteristically African perspectives may have been unjustifiably overemphasised because the countervailing claims carried less (prudential) weight in the societal contexts from which they emerged (Wood 2007, 341-343). It is noteworthy that where he finds the other claims to be plausible candidates for objective-but-not-universally-held ethical value claims, he does so with reference to their also being endorsed in some form in the West. This appeal to convergence is consistent with Wood’s position in the paper – that certain universally held values are effectively emphasised or de-emphasised by variant cultural contexts – though it seems to take his claims that objective value is best estimated by those in a position to appreciate its vital importance somewhat less seriously than I have here.

philosophers cited by Metz are positing these claims *qua* objective ethical claim, and the claims ought therefore to be examined as such; asserting these claims as objectively true, but under-explored in the West is congruent with a project of critique of *lacunae* in extant philosophy developed in the West; and the outcome of a reflective equilibrium procedure which takes these claims seriously is quite convincing.

The first point, as I have noted repeatedly while rehearsing the claims, is that there is reason to read them not simply as artefacts of life in small-scale societies. Rather, as Metz notes,²⁸¹ the contemporary African philosophers surveyed argue that these claims are relevant even in contemporary contexts. Rather than simply lionising traditional beliefs as traditionally understood, the authors cited argue that the values glossed by claims G-L are persistently relevant, and work to situate them plausibly in the context of contemporary, large-scale society. Here, for example Wiredu and Wingo argue for the value and implementability of consensus in modern polities; Tutu,²⁸² Mokgoro,²⁸³ Cornell *et al*²⁸⁴ argue for the value and implementability of reconciliatory accounts of criminal justice in contemporary contexts; and Reuel Khoza²⁸⁵ and Mfuniselwa Bhengu²⁸⁶ argue for contemporary management paradigms intended to foster cooperation rather than harmful competition. Given that these authors assert the cited claims as objective, universal ethical claims, it is thus reasonable to evaluate the claims in that context.

The second point is that in doing so, the authors cited are not simply offering up value claims themselves. Rather, they are engaging in a far more interesting project: a critique of extant ethical theories developed primarily in a Western societal context, lacking “the necessity of [fully] appreciating”²⁸⁷ communal solidarity, suggesting that this context produced theoretical *lacunae*. Just as Marxist, Feminist, and race-based critiques assert *lacunae* in extant theories (due to hegemonic patriarchy, capital, or white-supremacism respectively), so it seems that the African claims Metz outlines can be seen to entail a broad

²⁸¹ (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 373)

²⁸² (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999)

²⁸³ (Mokgoro 2011)

²⁸⁴ (Cornell and Muvangua 2011)

²⁸⁵ (Khoza 2005)

²⁸⁶ (Bhengu, Ubuntu: the global philosophy for humankind 2006)

²⁸⁷ (Wood 2007, 341)

communitarian critique²⁸⁸ of extant theories' *lacuna* with regard to the true value of communal solidarity. The corrective to this theoretical *lacuna*, as with more familiar critiques, can be had by developing theories which take the elided positions seriously, as Metz and those he cites do. It may be the case that this critique tilts at nonexistent windmills, but that cannot be assumed at the outset.

The third point is that the outcome of a reflective equilibrium procedure which takes these claims seriously yields a promising basic moral principle. Here he argues that at least one of the principles offered to justify *all* of the claims in the constellation presents a "strong candidate"²⁸⁹ for an account of basic moral value, and if the familiar claims are thus convincingly entailed, then the unfamiliar claims are plausibly entailed to the same extent. This argument, that the proof is effectively in the pudding, naturally depends on one's assessment of the principles offered, which I turn to now.

Metz' anatomy of *ubuntu* accounts

Having established the intuitions to be theorised, Metz initially outlines five candidate principles suggested by African philosophy which might capture a basic value claim underpinning *ubuntu qua* 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.

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.

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 or fails to enhance the welfare of one's fellows without violating rights.

U4: An action is right just insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realises oneself an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one's nature as a social being.

²⁸⁸ I use the term "broad communitarian critique" here to distinguish the position from more familiar political communitarian theories, because the scope of the moral claims picked out by the constellation is broader than the merely political normativity of that familiar debate.

²⁸⁹ (Metz, *The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics* 2007, 373-374)

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.²⁹⁰

Rejecting each of these, he endorses a sixth principle, but it is worth briefly rehearsing these alternative principles, and Metz' reasons for rejecting them before outlining his preferred account. U1, Metz notes, treats *ubuntu* as something very like Kantian deontology.²⁹¹ He finds support for more or less Kantian readings of this account in Constitutional Court Justices Yvonne Mokgoro and Pius Langa's²⁹² positions, which seem to equate dignity in something like the familiar Kantian sense with *ubuntu*. This reading, however, does not seem to justify normative pressure toward reconciliation over retribution (H), traditionalism (K), or procreation (L). Another reading consistent with U1, Metz suggests, is one offered by Godfrey Onah,²⁹³ who argues for a "reverence for life" as the basic moral claim. Here Metz responds

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).²⁹⁴

U2, of course, seems to justify African moral claims on something like a Utilitarian account, defining as ethical "any action of behaviour that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others."²⁹⁵ Metz finds support for some version of this account in work by Wiredu,²⁹⁶ Gyekye,²⁹⁷ Tangwa,²⁹⁸ Ikuenobe,²⁹⁹ and Bewaji.³⁰⁰ As with other basically Utilitarian theories however, such accounts seem unable to account for rights not to be stolen from (D) or

²⁹⁰ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 328-334)

²⁹¹ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 328-330)

²⁹² (The State vs T Makwanyane and M Mchunu Case 1995, paras 309, 225), reprinted in (Cornell and Muvangua 2011, 76-108)

²⁹³ (Onah n.d.). Metz also finds support for this interpretation in (Bujo 2001, 2, 52, 62, 66, 88) and (Deng 2004)

²⁹⁴ (Metz 2007, 329)

²⁹⁵ (Gyekye and Wiredu, *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* 1992, 109)

²⁹⁶ (Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* 1996, 65)

²⁹⁷ (Gyekye and Wiredu 1992, 109)

²⁹⁸ (Tangwa, *Bioethics: an African perspective* 1996, 189, 192)

²⁹⁹ (Ikuenobe, *Moral education and moral reasoning in traditional African cultures* 1998)

³⁰⁰ (Bewaji, *Ethics and morality in Yoruba culture* 2004)

discriminated against (F), as such actions could be performed to promote the end of greater welfare overall.³⁰¹

U3 avoids this objection by enjoining one to promote welfare (communally construed), but only where doing so does not violate rights. This principle captures the position advocated by Kwame Gyekye, whose “moderate communitarianism”³⁰² is constructed to balance excessive Consequentialist demands against a recognition of rights, taking them as co-equally basic, and thus normative to the extent that their demands coincide. Here Metz responds that “Consensus (G), cooperation (I), and tradition (K), which are pro tanto morally desirable on many an African perspective, can be inefficient as ways to promote human welfare”, which can frequently be “promoted most effectively with majoritarianism in politics, labour- and consumer-markets in economics, and innovative and unconventional behaviour in civil society.”³⁰³

Thus far I have taken Metz’ reasons for rejecting candidate principles to be convincing, but this is not the case for his treatment of U4. Metz notes that “this is probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature,” on which *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is taken “to be a call for an agent to develop her personhood.”³⁰⁴ Metz finds support for this position in the work of Shutte,³⁰⁵ Ramose,³⁰⁶ Gyekye,³⁰⁷ Mokgoro,³⁰⁸ Bujo,³⁰⁹ and Drucilla Cornell and Karin van Marle,³¹⁰ and I will spend the second half of this chapter detailing why such an account is attractive as an explanation. Metz rejects this theory because its foundation in “personal growth”³¹¹ seems to allow cases in which murder for one’s own benefit is allowed, violating (A); and self-preservation is paramount even in the face of others’ stronger need, violating (J). Moreover, Metz argues that even if an account can be given on which U4 evades these objections, it is still an implausible basis for moral value

³⁰¹ (Metz 2007, 330)

³⁰² (Gyekye, Person and community in Akan thought 1992, 121)

³⁰³ (Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory 2007, 331)

³⁰⁴ (Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory 2007, 331)

³⁰⁵ (Shutte, Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa 2001, 30)

³⁰⁶ (Ramose, African Philosophy through Ubuntu 1999, 52)

³⁰⁷ (Gyekye, An Essay on African Philosophical Thought (2nd revised edition) 1987, 156-156)

³⁰⁸ (Mokgoro 2011, 364)

³⁰⁹ (Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality 2001, 87-94)

³¹⁰ (Cornell and van Marle, Exploring uBuntu: Tentative Reflections 2011, 462)

³¹¹ (Shutte 2001, 30)

since, on such an account, “it is one’s own good that has fundamental moral worth.”³¹² I will address U4’s capacity to withstand Metz’ criticisms in the following chapter. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that Metz considers his objections sufficient to reject this “dominant” account of the basic value underpinning *ubuntu*’s constellation of claims, and thus seeks alternatives.

Metz finds support for something like U5 in Lovemore Mbigi and Jenny Maree’s relatively early work, *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*.³¹³ He adapts Mbigi and Maree’s perspective somewhat, as they construe *ubuntu* as action guiding with regard only to a stipulated constituency; as “a concept of brotherhood and collective unity for survival *among the poor* in every society.”³¹⁴ Later, they state “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*.”³¹⁵ On Mbigi and Maree’s account then, *ubuntu* is a descriptive statement or perhaps a prudentially normative strategy for persons under certain descriptions, rather than an account of basic ethical value. But, as adapted by Metz in U5, it can serve as a *prima facie* attractive basis for ethical value, on which moral actions are those which express or embody solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened. This constraint is still too narrow to account for all claims in the constellation, however, as Metz notes:

Surely not every right action is one likely to realise 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.³¹⁶

For these reasons, Metz rejects U5 as well, but not without taking on a distinctive and useful feature of the theory. Metz notes that the first four accounts

... ground morality in something internal to the individual, whether it be her life (U1), well-being (U2), rights (U3), or self-realisation (U4). A different understanding of the morality of *ubuntu* includes the idea that moral value fundamentally lies not in the

³¹² (Metz 2007, 332)

³¹³ (Mbigi and Maree 1995)

³¹⁴ (Mbigi and Maree 1995, 1) My italics.

³¹⁵ (Mbigi and Maree 1995, 58) Italics in original.

³¹⁶ (Metz 2007, 334)

individual, but rather in a *relationship* between individuals. The distinction here is analogous 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 members of certain relationships.³¹⁷

U5 does not derive ethical value from anything internal to individuals, but rather from a specific relationship – solidarity – between them. While U5 is too narrow a conception to account for the constellation of *ubuntu* claims, Metz finds the novel³¹⁸ approach of vesting ethical value in interpersonal relationships compelling both in that it provides “the most promising theoretical formulation of an African ethic”³¹⁹ and in that this shift from “individual” to “holistic” value may account for the oft-repeated descriptions of Western theories as “individualistic” relative to “communitarian” African positions.³²⁰ Thus, Metz offers a sixth, relational, principle:

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 community.³²¹

Metz finds support for this position in Tutu’s claim

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.³²²

and in Mbiti’s claim “What is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong.”³²³

Though the relationship of harmony or something like it is prized by these authors, the term is under-defined in the literature. As such, Metz develops an account of harmony in the

³¹⁷ (Metz 2007, 333)

³¹⁸ While there is some similarity to the Ethics of Care and Political Communitarianism, Metz argues these are distinct from the account he develops, and “far from dominant” in the West, and (Metz 2007, 333n).

³¹⁹ (Metz 2007, 334)

³²⁰ (Metz 2007, 333)

³²¹ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 333)

³²² (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 35)

³²³ As recounted by (Verhoef and Michel 1997, 397). See also (Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* 1991, 65-67), (Silberbauer 1991, 20), (Khoza 2005, 58-59), and (Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* 2006, 128-138)

relevant sense. In *Toward an African Moral Theory* Metz cashes harmony out as “the combination of shared identity and goodwill,”³²⁴ though his account of these constituents is refined somewhat over subsequent work. As such, I will refer now to his later account, on which the same properties are labelled “identity” and “solidarity”³²⁵ respectively.

Relationships of (shared) identity, or “sharing a life”³²⁶ involve “thinking as a member of a group. Instead of the self being ‘I’, distinct from others, the self becomes ‘we’, including others and included by them,”³²⁷ qualified by two success criteria: reciprocity and sharing joint projects. Reciprocity is a necessary condition for a shared identity because, as Metz puts it, “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.”³²⁸ In addition, “Conceiving of the self as in common with others also involves engaging in group projects. Life is shared with other people when activities are coordinated for a common end.”³²⁹ While “it is logically possible to be part of a group that does not do anything,” Metz argues, “the relevant sort of group under consideration here is one that has some projects.”³³⁰ It is thus worth construing Metz’ claim that that shared-identity *involves* shared projects³³¹ as a success criterion, such that shared-identity, properly understood, *must manifest as* shared projects.³³² What I have in mind with this term is something like the Aristotelian idea that a virtue which does not manifest as proper action is not properly a virtue. Similarly, to identify with a group in the absence of a disposition to engage with that group’s projects seems a thin and implausible description of shared identity. I might, for example, identify as a Kaizer Chiefs supporter, and receive recognition by those who self-identify as such. Yet I never attend or watch matches, or support the team in any but a nominal sense, having decided I liked the team nickname “amaKhosi” despite not being a

³²⁴ (Metz 2007, 335-337)

³²⁵ (Metz, *African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality* 2009, 341). This revised terminology is consistent through (Metz, *Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory: toward a new philosophy of human rights* 2010), (Metz, *The Reach of Amnesty for Political Crimes: which burdens on the guilty does national reconciliation permit?* 2010) and subsequent work.

³²⁶ (Metz 2009, 341)

³²⁷ Ibid

³²⁸ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 335)

³²⁹ (Metz 2009, 341).

³³⁰ (Metz 2007, 335)

³³¹ (Metz 2009, 341). See also.

³³² For large or diffuse shared identities, such as “fellow citizens” or “this group of friends” such projects may be relatively abstract, such as “coexist peacefully” and “engage with one another”; or modal, such as “defend in the face of threats or denigration”.

fan of any sports. In this instance, it seems clear that the reciprocal recognition was tentatively extended to me by other supporters on the expectation that my professed identity would manifest in the shared project of supporting the team. Absent this, my nominal identity seems distinct from theirs, and thus not a shared identity at all. Relationships of shared identity, then, are relationships in which I affirm a group identity which is recognised by others who claim the same identity, and reliably share projects with members of that group. In opposition to these are discordant, divisive relationships, “defining self in opposition to others and subordinating them... through coercion or the deception of innocents, for example.”³³³

Solidarity, the relationship Metz carries over from Mbigi and Maree, is “a matter of demonstrating goodwill or being positively oriented towards others’ interests.”³³⁴ This goodwill is demonstrated through actions which help others,³³⁵ subject to two further criteria, stipulating motive and affect: that one acts for the other’s sake, and that one “care about what happens to others.”³³⁶ On the first of these, solidarity proper seems to exclude helpful actions not undertaken for the other’s own sake. On the second, “People exhibit goodwill in so far as they are happy when others flourish and sad when others flounder. If people’s feelings and emotions are not affected by how others fare, they are not exhibiting full-blown goodwill.”³³⁷ Relationships of solidarity, then, are relationships in which I act in others’ interests, for their own sake, feeling happy at their successes and unhappy at their setbacks. In opposition to these are relationships of ill-will, which “consist of outright sadism and *Schadenfreude*.”³³⁸ These two components are logically distinct, Metz notes.

For example, people may identify with others, but not exhibit goodwill towards them, as in the relationship between workers and management in many capitalist firms. Furthermore, people may exhibit goodwill towards others without identifying with them, as when making anonymous donations to charity.

But a relationship is harmonious, in Metz’ sense, when it manifest both shared identity and solidarity. Here he argues that

³³³ (Metz 2009, 341)

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ This resonates with the Akan saying “*Obra ye nnoboa*: Life is mutual aid.” (Wiredu, *The Moral Foundations of an African Culture* 2001, 310)

³³⁶ (Metz 2009, 341)

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ (Metz 2007, 336)

An African understanding of morality prizes the exhibition of both aspects at the same time, namely, to esteem relationships with others in which people not only think of themselves as a 'we' engaged in coordination but also behave in ways supportive of others. This combination of identity and solidarity is what many English-speakers mean by friendship or the broader sense of love. To have a friend or beloved is basically to share a sense of self and act for another's sake. African ethics can be understood, therefore, as requiring people to prize friendly relationships.³³⁹

Metz employs the language of "prizing" or "esteeming" the relevant relationships in response to Wood's observation that his original account, in *Toward an African Moral Theory*, seemed to conceive of harmony in Consequentialist terms, as the end of ethical activity.³⁴⁰ This would seem to "require violating *ubuntu* as a way of life whenever there might be any increase in social harmony or community as a consequence."³⁴¹

As an alternative, properly prizing harmony – that is, responding consistently to harmony as valuable in all instances – precludes using disharmonious means to achieve a harmonious end. This accords with (in fact, it seems to entail) another qualifying strategy Metz develops to account for "unfriendly" actions in self- or other-defence, on which

One's aim should be to promote harmony without using substantial discord as a means, unless the discord is proportionately distributed among those who have been discordant and is necessary for promoting harmony among those who have not.³⁴²

Read in light of these refinements, "prizing" harmony comes closer to a deontic valuing of such relationships for themselves than a consequentialist treatment of harmonious relationships as fungible and aggregative. The developed version of the principle originally mooted as U6 therefore reads

An act is right just insofar as it is a way of prizing harmony with others i.e., relationships in which people share a way of life and are in solidarity with one another. An action is wrong if and only if it fails to honour relationships in which we identify with others and exhibit goodwill toward them.³⁴³

³³⁹ (Metz 2009, 342)

³⁴⁰ See (Wood 2007, 344-345). See (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 374-375)

³⁴¹ (Wood 2007, 345)

³⁴² Although initially developed in the unpublished paper "Developing an African Moral Theory", this description is taken from (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 374)

³⁴³ (Metz 2009, 339-340).

This principle is notable for two reasons in the current context. The first of these is that it can justify all of the claims in the constellation. Murder (A), rape (B), lying (C), theft (D), promise-breaking (E), and racial discrimination (F) are all discordant acts, (*pro tanto*) incongruent with relationships of shared identity and solidarity. Likewise, relationships defined by consensus (G) and reconciliation (H) are apt to embody harmony, while excessive competition (I) and a strict emphasis on rights in the face of need (J) are, in Tutu's words "corrosive of this good."³⁴⁴ Partaking in shared rituals and acknowledging others promotes harmonious relationships with them, where failing to do so seems to fail to prize what is valuable in these extant relationships.³⁴⁵ Marrying knits together groups of people, consolidating family networks around new bonds, while procreation both reinforces such bonds and produces new nodes for these networks; or, as Metz puts it "creating new human beings enables one to expand the range of a common sense of self, to enlarge the scope of a 'we'."³⁴⁶

In later work, Metz also takes his principle to justify three additional characteristically African dispositions: "Sub-Saharan Africans often think society should be akin to family. They tend to believe in the importance of greeting strangers. They typically refer to people beyond the nuclear family with titles such as sister and mama."³⁴⁷ These latter are not as rigorously sourced or explained as the constellation's claims,³⁴⁸ but neither are they particularly controversial or weight-bearing for the theory. Nonetheless it is apparent that inclusive titles, attention to acknowledging strangers, and approaching larger communities in something like the manner we manage paradigmatic loving groups are strategies congruent with taking harmonious relationships as morally basic. Having settled on Metz' justification of the constellation, it is thus worth noting that further reasonably familiar African dispositions seem organic to it.

³⁴⁴ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 32)

³⁴⁵ While the demand for consistency in Metz' communalistic principle also generates normative pressure toward fostering new relationships, extant relationships (by virtue of their proximity) are the natural locus for producing harmonious relationships.

³⁴⁶ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 339) Importantly, for (L) to be entailed by Metz' principle it must be the case that marriage and procreation offer *unique* opportunities to generate harmonious relationships. Metz does not argue for this claim explicitly, but it appears plausible, given the definition of harmony.

³⁴⁷ (Metz 2009, 342)

³⁴⁸ Though they are also discussed in (Shutte 2001, 29) and (Metz and Gaie 2010, 276).

The second notable aspect of Metz' principle is that positing friendly or loving relationships as the basic bearers of moral value is intuitively attractive. That is, not only does prizing such relationships account consistently and convincingly for the claims in Metz' reflective equilibrium exercise, but it does so by entailing them from an already familiar and plausible source of value: love (understood, here, at the communal scale). To clarify a potential ambiguity here, it is important to note that "love," as conventionally discussed, demands partiality toward specific individuals, and taking it as the basic normative goal seems to leave *ubuntu's* advocates open to demandingness objections similar to those levelled against Utilitarians: surely we cannot love everyone, and it would be too demanding to insist that we do? Here it is worth noting a distinction Pedro Tabensky introduces, between love and care. In a work of Aristotelian scholarship Shutte has said "ends up giving a contemporary Aristotelian rationale for something very like *ubuntu*"³⁴⁹, Tabensky argues that

not only is it clear that there are unavoidable hierarchies even in our closest relationships, but also that most of our relationships with others are indirect. Indirect relationships are precisely that because they involve no level of intimacy whatsoever... So when I say that one must be concerned for one's community, I am not making the radically unreasonable claim that one must love every member of one's community (if someone claimed that they loved everyone then either they would be lying or they would simply have no idea of what they are talking about). Rather... one must *care for one's community at large*.³⁵⁰

Care, Tabensky elaborates, "involves ethical directedness toward others but... does not necessarily involve intimacy of the sort we have in our primary relationships (although, of course, our primary relationships are to a greater or lesser degree relationships of care)."³⁵¹ Importantly, "broader caring relationships," unlike intimate ones, "admit of substitution."³⁵² Construing harmony's "love" as more or less indirect relationships of reciprocal "ethical directedness" toward members of our community seems far less demanding than construing it as a demand that everyone be treated as an irreplaceable intimate. This is congruent with Metz' argument that *ubuntu* forbids strong partiality (such as nepotism) of state officials as the result of consideration for the discord such partiality could generate for

³⁴⁹ (Shutte, Book Review: Tabensky's "Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose" 2004)

³⁵⁰ (Tabensky, Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose 2002, 177), my italics.

³⁵¹ (Tabensky 2002, 209, n82)

³⁵² Ibid.

the community at large,³⁵³ relationships about which the officials are required to *care* despite their being indirect relative to intimate ones. Reading Metz' shared identity and solidarity as calling for care or "ethical directedness toward others" thus appears to avoid absurd demandingness, while retaining the intuitive attractiveness of appealing to a broad sense of love.

Thus far, Metz' account does not resolve all ambiguities impeding taking *ubuntu* as a basic normative theory: for example, it does not obviously resolve the question of what scale of communities should be privileged if actions present conflicts between two sorts of communal relation. The account thus far does not provide exhaustive reason to consider it superior to theories such as Consequentialism or Kantian deontology; though it does appear to be a plausible contender. But Metz' account does appear to account for the constellation of characteristically African claims from an attractive and under-theorised basic value, and do so more effectively than putative competitors. And it does so in a manner distinct from either Consequentialist or Deontic accounts, construing the valued relationships in terms with both deontic and consequence/achievement criteria. In doing so, Metz' account presents itself as an attractive potential alternative to these extant theories by presumably avoiding objections rooted in reduction to either consequences or motives alone.³⁵⁴ For these reasons, it is fair to say that Metz' communitarian account, captured by the principle refined from U6, is the most compelling account of *ubuntu* as a moral theory extant in the literature.

As developed, however, it has difficulties. Metz does not simply construct an account with both consequentialist and deontic components. He also (justifiably) builds affective components into his account of the desired relationships. But there is another approach to theories of ethical value which incorporates motive, consequence, and affect, where other theories do not: aretaic ethics. To properly embody virtue (*arête* or "excellence" of character), virtue ethicists since Aristotle have argued, is to perform the right act, from the

³⁵³ (Metz, *African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality* 2009, 344-348)

³⁵⁴ See (Metz 2009, 340, 343-342), where he addresses the differences between this account of *ubuntu* and these extant theories.

right motive, with the right affect, and to be reliably disposed to do so.³⁵⁵ This last condition, reliable disposition of character, is not explicitly incorporated into Metz' preferred approach,³⁵⁶ though doing so seems natural enough. While relationships might well be understood as (reciprocal) dispositional states, such that they would fit naturally with talk of dispositions of character, doing so would shift the focus from act-descriptions and action-guiding principles, which form the scaffold of Metz' argument in *Toward an African Moral Theory* and much resulting work. Since Metz has been concerned in this work to outline *ubuntu* in ways "that could be compared to dominant Western theories,"³⁵⁷ which conventionally feature this act-oriented focus, he has not explored alternate framings of *ubuntu* in such dispositional or *aretaic* terms. In the following section of this chapter, I argue that the reasons to frame *ubuntu* in *aretaic* terms are compelling, such that Metz' act-oriented account, attractive as it is, does not properly account for *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu as aretaic

In this section I will briefly outline what I mean by *aretaic* moral approaches and then present three arguments for reading *ubuntu* as such: that the language commonly used in discussions of *ubuntu* lends itself most naturally to *aretaic* framing; that *ubuntu* conforms to what Rosalind Hursthouse calls "Plato's requirement on the virtues"; and that Metz' harmonious relationships are best accounted for as dispositional states partially constituted by dispositions of character.

Aretaic theories in outline

By *aretaic*, I mean to pick out theories which articulate moral value through a focus³⁵⁸ on the morality of dispositions of character, rather than on the morality of acts. Most theories

³⁵⁵ Peter Goldie addresses these requirements as a bundle (Goldie 2004, 131n6). Aristotle discusses the need for the right act, right motive, and stable disposition of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics* at 1105a27f (Aristotle 2000, 27-28), and the need for the proper affect at 1099a16-20 (Aristotle 2000, 14). For contemporary discussions, see (Williams 1995) and (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* 1999).

³⁵⁶ Though he raises it as an epiphenomenon of his account, arguing "Recall the common idea that *ubuntu* prescribes self-realisation through communal relationships (U4). What is largely doing the work in this view, I submit, is not the focus on self-realisation, but rather the communal relationships." (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 340)

³⁵⁷ (Metz 2007, 321)

³⁵⁸ This *focus* should not be understood as excluding concern with right action or action-guidingness as a relevant form of moral subject matter (see [Foot] and (Copp and Sobel 2004, 544)). Nonetheless, such theories take the question of moral status of character-dispositions to be, in some important sense, prior to the question of the moral status of acts.

with this focus are theories of Virtue Ethics, taking specific virtues to be either morally basic,³⁵⁹ or partially constitutive of the morally basic condition: the good or flourishing life (*eudaimonia*).³⁶⁰ These do not exhaust the space of aretaic theories, however: Thomas Hurka has taken virtue to be the primary mode of articulating moral theory without considering virtue itself to be prior to the morally basic concepts of the right and the good;³⁶¹ and Julia Driver³⁶² and Onora O’Neill³⁶³ have proposed virtue theoretical approaches which reduce to Consequentialist and Kantian accounts of value respectively. I will use the broader term, *aretaic*, rather than “virtue ethical” to capture the common manner of articulation shared between these positions, but distinct from act-based articulations of morality.³⁶⁴

Much of the virtue ethical literature in the West derives from Aristotle, and to a lesser extent Plato and the Stoics, though some Western accounts have other derivations,³⁶⁵ and *aretaic* theories rooted in Confucianism are receiving increasing attention.³⁶⁶ “But,” Hursthouse notes,

although modern virtue ethics does not have to take the form known as “neo-Aristotelian,” almost any modern version still shows that its roots are in ancient Greek philosophy by the employment of three concepts derived from it. These are *arête* (excellence or virtue) *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (usually translated as happiness or flourishing).³⁶⁷

What is *aretaic* in these accounts is an emphasis on *arête*, or excellence; specifically, excellence of character as the prime articulation of moral value. Here, “character” is generally understood as the aggregation of properties which “constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity,”³⁶⁸ as embodied by aggregated dispositions of individual characters. The normative pressure of such excellences derives from understanding them as improvable or perfectable, such that *eudaimonia* “develops these properties to a high

³⁵⁹ (Slote 2001)

³⁶⁰ (Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics 1999)

³⁶¹ (Hurka, Virtue, Vice, and Value 2000)

³⁶² (Driver 2001)

³⁶³ (O’Neill 1996)

³⁶⁴ I am grateful to Brian Penrose for pointing me to this usage.

³⁶⁵ Here (Slote 2001) draws more directly from the Ethics of Care, and virtue ethical accounts derived from Hume, Nietzsche and others have been mooted (see (Hursthouse, Virtue Ethics 2012), (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993)).

³⁶⁶ See (Tiwald 2010) for a survey of current work in this vein.

³⁶⁷ (Hursthouse, Virtue Ethics 2012)

³⁶⁸ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 3)

degree or realises what is central to human nature.”³⁶⁹ This typically manifests in references to specific virtues – such as courage, honesty, patience, trustworthiness, friendship etc. – and vices, such as cowardice, jealousy, untrustworthiness, irascibility etc. Since the virtues are multiply-realizable and their proper instantiations vary from one instance to the next, properly identifying and embodying the virtues is taken to require *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, best understood as the skill³⁷⁰ of distinguishing the demands of virtue across various situations. Since the development of this skill depends crucially on experience of life, Aristotle famously argued that the full or proper understanding of ethics cannot be taught to the young,³⁷¹ which Hursthouse corroborates, saying “there are youthful mathematical geniuses, but rarely, if ever, youthful moral geniuses.”³⁷² And since *phronesis* and *arête* concern dispositions to respond to values, rather than action-guiding rules,³⁷³ they are best learned through identifying and emulating exemplars, or *phronemoi*. As such, virtue ethical theories are characteristically concerned with moral education, and specifically the education provided by emulating the practically-wise.

What I have strained to illustrate in the foregoing description is that these are not simply ideas contingently associated through a shared lineage, but rather that the recurrence of these concepts, or something like them, follows from pursuing a project of the sort aretaic theories pursue. If we take seriously the claim that the morality of acts does not exhaust, or necessarily capture what is morally relevant in life, it follows that we must also take seriously additional considerations, like affective responses and enduring or reliable dispositions to act. If we take seriously the moral question of how one ought to *be*, rather than how one ought to *act*, then it follows that these dispositions would provide a natural articulation of this *being* as normative. And if we take seriously the claim that it is more difficult to identify and realise such states of being than to adhere to action-guiding rules, it follows that we ought to focus on moral exemplars and questions of moral education. If I am right that these concerns naturally follow from one another, then we should expect them to reappear in novel contexts with the same concerns, and take their presence together as *prima facie* reason to think that the novel context is itself *aretaic*. In what follows, I argue

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ See (Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* 2011) and (Stichter 2007).

³⁷¹ 1095a (Aristotle 2000, 5)

³⁷² (Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion* 1991, 231)

³⁷³ See Aristotle’s discussion of the “Lesbian Rule” at 1137b (Aristotle 2000, 100).

that claims about *ubuntu* offer such a parallel, suggesting that the values glossed by *ubuntu*'s constellation plausibly have an aretaic focus themselves.

Aretaic Language

Recall that the word “*ubuntu*”, stripped of its web of putative entailments and absent the constellation of characteristically African claims, is simply the abstract term for “humanity”. Tutu says that the concept “speaks to the very essence of being human”³⁷⁴ (or, to invoke Ramose’s emphasis, “be-ing human”³⁷⁵), and on Shutte’s account “our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human.”³⁷⁶ This is particularly salient in light of Hurka’s description of *aretaic* and other perfectionist theories as concerned with those features which “constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity.”³⁷⁷ As I noted above, this concern with states of being, rather than acts, frequently leads *aretaic* theories to outline lists of virtues definitive of, and vices which undermine such (normative) humanity. And when Tutu begins to detail the attributes of someone who “*has ubuntu*,”³⁷⁸ it is precisely by listing a set of virtues characteristic of such a person – “they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate”³⁷⁹ – and vices “corrosive of” this good: “anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness.”³⁸⁰ Some corroboration of this articulation is offered by Solomon Nkesiga:³⁸¹ he glosses C.L. Sibusiso Nyembezi,³⁸² claiming that (in Zulu usage), “as a conglomeration of virtues, *ubuntu* manifests in behavioural aspects such as hospitality, expressions of gratitude, and kindness:”³⁸³ and Semantimba Barlow,³⁸⁴ claiming that (in Baganda usage) “*ubuntu* is ascribed to a person in whom virtue conglomerates.”³⁸⁵ Citing linguist Anton Rutesire, Nkesiga goes on to note that “among the Banyarwanda *Infura* is the descriptive name given

³⁷⁴ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

³⁷⁵ (Ramose 1999, 232)

³⁷⁶ (Shutte 2001, 30)

³⁷⁷ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 3)

³⁷⁸ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 32)

³⁷⁹ *Ibid*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*

³⁸¹ (Nkesiga 2005, 309-311). Nkesiga’s project is not to develop these African accounts of virtue, but rather to establish some extant African virtue ethical context, which he ultimately proposes to populate with a more familiarly Western and Christian mix of virtues.

³⁸² (Nyembezi 1963)

³⁸³ (Nkesiga 2005, 310, n119)

³⁸⁴ (Barlow 1987)

³⁸⁵ (Nkesiga 2005, 311)

to a person with *ubuntu*”, continuing “*Infura* is a person who is fair, generous, honouring confidentiality, patient and considerate, kind and caring.”³⁸⁶ Perhaps similarly to these articulations of traditional morality in virtue ethical terms, when Peter J. Paris seeks to reconstruct a shared African-African American moral perspective,³⁸⁷ he produces a list of “some African and African American moral virtues:”³⁸⁸ “beneficence”, “forbearance”, “practical wisdom”, “improvisation”, “forgiveness”, and “justice.”³⁸⁹

In this vein, Ifeanyi Menkiti talks about “the in-gathering of *excellences* of the person as one ages,”³⁹⁰ developing an account from “Tempels’ native informants that the word ‘*untu*,’ which stands for the human person, implies the idea of an excellence attaching to what it designates.”³⁹¹ This approach translates Menkiti’s famously contentious claim “personhood is the sort of thing which has to be achieved, the sort of thing at which individuals could fail”³⁹² as asserting that a sort of practical wisdom is required “to attain the full complement of excellences seen as definitive of the person.”³⁹³ Here, seeming to recall Hursthouse’s claim that “there are youthful mathematical geniuses, but rarely, if ever, youthful moral geniuses,”³⁹⁴ Menkiti says that

Although we would not have a great deal of difficulty talking about an 18-year-old mathematical giant, we would have a great deal of difficulty talking about an 18-year-old moral giant. The reason for this is that morality and the maturation of the human person are so intimately bound up that a still evolving specimen of the person, lacking a full record in the area of lived experience, would be hard-pressed to present the sort of personal history needed for an elevation to the status of moral exemplar.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁶ Rutesire is cited in conversation, (Nkesiga 2005, 310).

³⁸⁷ In something like the mode of Africana philosophy I noted in the previous chapter as championed by Lucius Outlaw.

³⁸⁸ (Paris 1995, 136)

³⁸⁹ (Paris 1995, 136-154) Of these, “forbearance” seems to me to be a particularly apt (and, as far as I can discern, unique) articulation of a commonly cited disposition in African value discussions. “Practical wisdom”, as noted already, is conventionally seen as a precondition or constitutive condition for virtue, rather than a distinct virtue in its own right, and something similar seems to be the case for “improvisation”.

³⁹⁰ (Menkiti, *On the Normative Conception of a Person* 2004, 325)

³⁹¹ (Menkiti 2004, 326). He is glossing (Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* 1969, 10)

³⁹² (Menkiti 2004, 326). See also (Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought* 1984) for the original defence of this claim, (Gyekye 1992) and (Gyekye 1997) for a critical response, (Wiredu 1992) and (Wiredu 2004, 17) for overviews of the debate.

³⁹³ (Menkiti 2004, 326)

³⁹⁴ (Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion* 1991, 231)

³⁹⁵ (Menkiti 2004, 325-326)

Framing the full embodiment of human excellences as necessary to be considered “fully human”³⁹⁶ or “really human”³⁹⁷ is a more strident articulation³⁹⁸ than is common in Western *aretaic* theories, but nonetheless seems to trace the same concerns with coming to embody exemplary virtue. Starting from the position that “one can be more or less of a person, self, or human being, where the more one is, the better,”³⁹⁹ Menkiti’s “in-gathering of excellences” (virtues) “develops these properties to a high degree or realises what is central to human nature.”⁴⁰⁰ “So construed,” Metz and Gaie note, “sub-Saharan morality is a ‘self-realisation’ or ‘perfectionist’ ethic, akin to Aristotelianism.”⁴⁰¹ It ought not to be surprising that this perfectionism issues in discussions of virtues and vices, and a practical wisdom born of lived experience as the necessary condition for moral exemplars: as I noted earlier, these concepts seem logically interrelated. Given as much, it is apparent why such a construal is “probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature,”⁴⁰² and rather odd that Metz’ own act-oriented account does so little to address these concerns. Notwithstanding his doubts about the efficacy of an Aristotelian account of basic moral value, it seems that any talk about *ubuntu* ought to accommodate and address its characteristic concerns with moral ways of being, the specific dispositions of character involved, and the practical wisdom necessary to distinguish these.

Plato’s Requirement on the Virtues and *ubuntu*

Not only do theorists articulating *ubuntu* tend to do so in terms which reproduce the characteristic concerns of virtue ethics; *ubuntu* also seems amenable to a very particular set of claims intended to pick out the characteristic shape of virtue ethical theories. Thus far, I have outlined *aretaic* theories’ account of virtues as partially constitutive of *moral normativity*; where being fully virtuous develops properties definitive of human nature to the highest degree.⁴⁰³ Virtue ethicists, however, characteristically commit to the further

³⁹⁶ (Shutte 2001, 30).

³⁹⁷ Tutu, quoted in (Waldmeir 1998, 268)

³⁹⁸ See (Gaie 2007, 33) and (Metz and Gaie 2010, 275), where the authors states that “just as we might say that a jalopy is ‘not a *real* car’, so Africans would say of an individual who does not relate positively to others that ‘he is not a person.’ Indeed, those without much *Ubuntu/Botho* are often described as animals.” They cite (Pearce 1990, 147), (Bhengu 1996, 27), and (Letseka 2000, 186) in support of this latter claim.

³⁹⁹ (Metz and Gaie 2010, 275)

⁴⁰⁰ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 3)

⁴⁰¹ (Metz and Gaie 2010, 275)

⁴⁰² (Metz 2007, 331)

⁴⁰³ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 3)

claim, which other moral theories do not: that the virtues are also *prudentially beneficial* to the individual. Hursthouse cashes this out as the three interrelated claims she calls “Plato’s Requirement on the Virtues:”

1. The virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to flourish, to be and live a life that is, *eudaimon*.)
2. The virtues make their possessor a good human being (Human beings need the virtues in order to live well, to flourish *as* human beings, to live a characteristically good, *eudaimon*, human life.)
3. The above two features of the virtues are interrelated.⁴⁰⁴

Taken together, “Plato’s Requirement on the Virtues” asserts that virtue ethical theories commit to the striking assertion that morally valuable dispositions of character are also, in some meaningful sense, prudentially beneficial to the agent who embodies them, such that the right way to be is reliably *the prudent way for the agent to be*. This needn’t be the case for all *aretaic* theories – at the very least, Hurka’s Perfectionism, eschewing reduction to *eudaimonia*, does not and need not commit to it – but it captures the commitments of the Ancient Greeks⁴⁰⁵ and the Neo-Aristotelian⁴⁰⁶ school of contemporary virtue ethics epitomised by Hursthouse. Of course, different theories of virtue ethics have different accounts of the interrelationship in (3). Frans Svensson outlines the three major approaches: the “Stocratic view” (attributed both to the Stoics and Socrates) stipulates that the virtues are necessary and sufficient for the good life, exhausting what is truly prudential for the agent;⁴⁰⁷ the Aristotelian view sees virtue as necessary to the flourishing life, but not sufficient for it, since external factors such as luck are irreducibly part of a flourishing life;⁴⁰⁸ and the “best means view” on which virtue, while “not conceptually connected” to flourishing, is nonetheless “the only reliable bet for human beings with a view to achieving good lives.”⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁴ (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* 1999, 167)

⁴⁰⁵ (Crisp, *Introduction to Nicomachean Ethics* 2000, xiv)

⁴⁰⁶ (Svensson 2006, 19)

⁴⁰⁷ (Svensson 2006, 20)

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.* For examples of such external factors, see *NE 1100a6-10* (Aristotle 2000, 16-17), and (Hursthouse 1999, 171).

⁴⁰⁹ (Svensson 2006, 21). Svensson notes that the best means view also includes Geach’s theologically-derived account, in which a prudentially flourishing life, while conceptually distinct from the morally good life, is nonetheless awarded by God to those who are morally good (Geach 1977). In keeping with my emphasis on value claims independent of such deep metaphysical support, I will not be discussing this account in any further detail.

This last view is the position Hursthouse advocates, arguing that the relationship between our prudential flourishing and the virtuous life parallels the relationship between health and a regimen of exercise, healthy diet, and non-smoking: contingencies can take our health despite such a regimen, and some exceptions to it could be healthy. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense in which the regimen functions as a “law-like generalisation”⁴¹⁰ about how best to be healthy, or flourish. Thus Hursthouse argues that: “to claim that the virtues, for the most part, benefit their possessor, enabling her to flourish, is not to claim that virtue is necessary for happiness. It is to claim that no ‘regimen’ will serve one better – no other ‘regimen’ is remotely plausible.”⁴¹¹ Whether conceptualised as the Aristotelian or best means account, this parallel of the flourishing and healthy lives originates with Aristotle. Naturally, any defenders of such a position must account for how it can be plausible that the morally right response could reliably be prudentially valuable to the agent in all or almost all instances, in the face of a number of objections.⁴¹² But, for the moment, what is relevant is that a commitment to defending the interrelated claims of Plato’s Requirement seems justifiably to be characteristic of virtue ethical theories.

Here it is worth noting that support for Plato’s Requirement can be read in one of two ways. In the first place, it is possible in principle to read it simply as an ontological claim: that virtues are both at least partly constitutive of a prudentially flourishing life, and that they develop what is essentially human to the highest degree, and are thus constitutive of a morally good life. This bare ontological reading needn’t derive much motivational force from such prudential flourishing, and thus need not invest heavily in the Aristotelian over the best means account, for example. On such a position, it may be illustrative of truths about human nature that developing our essential characteristics coincides with pleasure or other prudential benefit, but it makes no difference to our motives for seeking to be morally exemplary, a rational goal *qua* moral goal.

A second position is discernable, however, yielding a different motivating relationship with the morally normative than the reasoned attention to morality as a depersonalised concern:

⁴¹⁰ (Copp and Sobel 2004, 529). Copp and Sobel dispute that Hursthouse’s arguments are sufficient to support this claim, but I agree with their characterisation of her goal.

⁴¹¹ (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* 1999, 173)

⁴¹² For objections to the Stocratic view – defended as recently as (Becker 1998) – see *NE 1153b19-21* (Aristotle 2000, 140) and (Svensson 2006, 22). For objections to the best means view, see (Svensson 2006, 22-23) and (Copp and Sobel 2004, 526-532).

the good life or virtuous character is properly pursued not (just) *for the sake of* some value-schema external to the individual, but (at least partly) *for the individual's own sake*. As Terry Eagleton puts it;

acting well was a reward in itself. You no more expected a reward for it than you did for enjoying a delectable meal or taking an early morning swim. It is not as though the reward for virtue is happiness; being virtuous is to be happy Aristotle also thought that if you did not act well, you were punished not by hell fire or a sudden bolt from heaven, but by having to live a damaged, crippled life.⁴¹³

This position has been shaped by, and has allowed virtue ethicists since Plato to address a characteristic interlocutor: the Immoralist. The Immoralist, noting that moral actions frequently demand significant self-sacrifice of the individual, asks “How can significant self-sacrifice be the rational choice for an agent?”

Erik Wielenberg has outlined the Immoralist’s argument as follows:

1. A person has a normative reason to be moral only if it is in that person’s best interest to be moral.
2. It is never [reliably] in anyone’s interest to be moral.
3. Therefore, no one ever has a normative reason to be moral.⁴¹⁴

Most moral theories respond to this argument by rejecting the truth of premise (1), requiring that discussions of morality must and can only proceed from the initial acceptance that there is compelling reason to be moral. At least since Plato however, virtue ethicists have tended to respond to the Immoralist’s argument by treating premise (1) a reasonable and persistent concern, and disputed premise (2). Roger Crisp provides an account of the question as originally posed in Classical Virtue Ethics:

Near the beginning of Book Two of Plato’s *Republic*, Glaucon tells Socrates the story of Gyges, the Lydian shepherd said to have found a ring which made him invisible when he turned the stone: with the help of the ring, Gyges seduced the king’s wife and took over the kingdom. Glaucon suggests that any sensible person would do the same. Socrates is challenged to show that a life of justice – broadly speaking, a life of virtue – is preferable to one of injustice ... the *Republic* can be read as a response to Glaucon’s challenge.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ (Eagleton 2003, 116-117)

⁴¹⁴ (E. J. Wielenberg 2005, 70). I have qualified his second premise with “reliably” in light of his own admission that he stated the position starkly for illustration, and that “the conclusion is surely too strong because in at least some cases self-interest and morality coincide” (E. J. Wielenberg 2005, 170, n6).

⁴¹⁵ (Crisp 1996, 9). The relevant section of *The Republic* is Book 2, 360c.

Beyond the *Republic*, Aristotelian (and significant parts of neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethics continues to function as a response to Glaucon's challenge, arguing that "morality and self-interest always or often coincide."⁴¹⁶ Such a position, that is, offers the potential for a non-moralised or "morally neutral"⁴¹⁷ justification for morality, sufficient to convince the Immoralist that the moral life is rational in that it is prudentially preferable to alternatives. The strategy for doing so is that of Socrates' response in *The Republic*:

It would not suffice for him to argue that justice pays in the sense that it increases the likelihood of one's obtaining the sort of goods pursued by Gyges. So Socrates argues instead that Gyges had a quite mistaken view of what his own happiness consisted in. Happiness is not sex, wealth and power, but, partly at least, justice itself.⁴¹⁸

Arguments for such autocentric foundations for morality are not without their difficulties, and *aretaic* theorists needn't pursue this line.⁴¹⁹ But theories which commit to Plato's Requirement on the Virtues are characteristically capable, where other theories are not, of disputing the Immoralist's challenge by accepting the initial premise – that some morally neutral reason must be provided for moral action – but disputing the second, asserting that prudential and moral goods reliably coincide.

Given that Plato's Requirement on the Virtues is taken to pick out claims characteristic of virtue ethics, it is striking how readily *ubuntu* conforms to a similarly shaped claim. That is, it seems that advocates of *ubuntu* would commit to the following reformulation of Plato's Requirement:

1. The proper relationships with others benefit their participant. (They enable her to flourish, to be fully a person.)
2. The proper relationships with others make their possessor a good human being (Human beings need these relationships in order to live well, to flourish *as* human beings, to live a characteristically good human life.)
3. The above two features are interrelated.

I take claim (2) to be plausible in light of what I have argued in the previous section, and will focus on justifying claims (1) and (3) as advocated by *ubuntu*. There are three reasons to

⁴¹⁶ (E. J. Wielenberg 2005, 70). Wielenberg finds this position in "Plato, Aristotle, and Hume", while Copp and Sobel describe it as an "advantage" of Hursthouse's theory that it aims to provide such a "morally-neutral" defence (Copp and Sobel 2004, 531) though, again, they are not convinced that her defence is successful.

⁴¹⁷ (Copp and Sobel 2004, 531)

⁴¹⁸ (Crisp 1996, 9)

⁴¹⁹ See (Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* 1993, 47, 120-131) and (Annas, *Virtue Ethics* 2005).

read *ubuntu* as arguing for harmonious relationships as prudentially beneficial to the individual: however construed, being “fully” or properly human seems in itself to be a prudentially beneficial goal for any human agent; loving or friendly relationships are appealing in prudential terms; and Tutu, at least, explicitly argues for *ubuntu* as “the best form of self-interest.”⁴²⁰

With regard to the first of these, recall that, where virtue ethicists argue that virtue is necessary to become an *exemplary* person, advocates of *ubuntu* tend to argue that falling short of properly embodying it is falling short of being “fully human”⁴²¹ or “really human”⁴²² at all. I do not intend to rest very much weight on this claim, but it seems plausible to say that being properly human – understood not simply as having a certain status attributed to us by others, but as being capable of benefitting from the full range of characteristically human capacities – seems to be prudentially beneficial to individuals, prior to any other prudential commitments. If, as Menkiti and others argue,⁴²³ there is a threshold below which an individual is not properly called human, it seems that this counts as a prudential loss *for that individual*, in much the same way that a stunted capacity for care might count as harmful to the individual on Slote’s account.⁴²⁴

As to the second reason, it seems almost tautological to say that loving or friendly relationships are prudentially beneficial. Note, however, that Gyges’ lifestyle, as recounted by Glaucon, does not seem to prize or allow for such relationships, and the sensible knave is certainly capable of conceding the value of *benefitting from* such relationships while evading the reciprocal commitments entailed by them. Rather than promoting such relationships *qua* strategies for acquiring benefits such as resources, support, or protection, *ubuntu’s* advocates should be seen as arguing that such relationships – realisable only through actual directedness toward others entailing reciprocal support – are themselves beneficial, distinct from these instrumental advantages.

⁴²⁰ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999)

⁴²¹ (Shutte 2001, 30).

⁴²² Tutu, quoted in (Waldmeir 1998, 268)

⁴²³ (Menkiti, *On the Normative Conception of a Person* 2004), (Pearce 1990, 147), (Bhengu 1996, 27), and (Letseka 2000, 186).

⁴²⁴ (Slote 2001).

One way to argue for such a value is suggested by Tabensky, who argues for the significant value of the right sorts of friendships in that they promote an appreciation of subtle and complex values we could not come to recognise or appreciate alone⁴²⁵. Tabensky means for this appreciation to count primarily as a moral benefit, congruent with the sort of “Developmental” account of virtue ethics outlined by Annas.⁴²⁶ It seems clear, however, that a more developed appreciation of value, like the capacity to perceive otherwise hidden nuances in art one already enjoys consuming, counts as a prudential benefit. While this is, in a sense, still an instrumental value, it is distinct from the sensible knave’s instrumentalism in that Tabensky’s “appreciation” can arise only as the result of entering into and actively participating in relationships of reciprocal care.⁴²⁷

Of course, the case can also be made for friendly relationships as valuable in themselves. Here a familiar method of evaluation is G.E. Moore’s “isolation” test, in which we consider whether friendly relations would be valuable if they had no further consequences.⁴²⁸ Indeed, Moore’s own account of “the most valuable things” consisted of “the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.”⁴²⁹ While Moore’s account of intrinsic value may extend beyond the strictly prudential, it seems reasonable to say that it encompasses prudential value: the isolation test picks out values Gyges has reason to want in his life.⁴³⁰ In the absence of consequences, relationships of reciprocated care for others seem clearly preferable to their absence. And a life with such relationships therefore seems preferable to a life without them. A life with more of them seems preferable to a life with fewer. Friendly relations, we can conclude, are thus the sorts of things which issue in prudential benefits, both as a direct result and indirectly, by promoting an appreciation of values capable of enriching our lives. But such benefits over-determine the prudential value of friendly relationships, since they are desirable even in the absence of consequences.

⁴²⁵ (Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* 2002, 161-178).

⁴²⁶ (Annas, *Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing* 2004)

⁴²⁷ Tabensky distinguishes between these explicitly, arguing that “one should care for one’s community because the caring at issue is implicated in our own happiness as opposed to being something that will function as a kind of means to an end” (Tabensky 2002, 47, n23).

⁴²⁸ (Moore 1993, 235-253): §112-§123 .

⁴²⁹ (Moore 1993, 236): §113

⁴³⁰ Moore uses the isolation test to avoid the error of “neglecting the principle of organic unities” (Moore 1993, 235): §112, the unjustified reduction of complex valuable states to the value of some specific valuable aspect. This is grounds Moore’s repudiation of hedonism, and functions as effectively as a response to Gyges, who can be seen as valuing specific components of life which do not themselves pass the isolation test.

Thus far I have given reasons, on behalf of *ubuntu*'s advocates, to think a life defined by *ubuntu* is plausibly interpreted as prudentially beneficial to the agent. Tutu, however, explicitly says as much himself. Of his paradigmatic instance of *ubuntu*, forgiveness, Tutu says

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanises you, inexorably dehumanises me. Forgiveness gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them. *Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he liked it or not. In the process of dehumanising another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanised as well.⁴³¹

On the previous page, Tutu says that the person with *ubuntu*

Has the proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.⁴³²

In addition to the instrumental (or developmental) benefits of friendly relationships already mentioned, Tutu here provides a list of prudentially beneficial dispositions resulting over time from *ubuntu*'s cultivation of them: resilience, self-assurance, and a sense of belonging. While not virtues in the morally normative sense, these are nonetheless dispositional states of character, which Tutu claims are imbricated with *ubuntu*'s conventionally normative virtues. But here Tutu is not simply arguing that *some* prudentially beneficial states emerge from *ubuntu*. Rather, he sketches a substantive account of the flourishing life, on which these benefits constitute parts of a greater value. As Socrates argued that "happiness is not sex, wealth and power, but, partly at least, justice itself,"⁴³³ this account suggests that happiness is, at least partly, interconnectedness with others. Dismas Masolo argues that this was Julius Nyerere's argument:

So, why is 'acting with regard for others' welfare' ... a good thing to do? Nyerere called this conduct 'the rational choice', implying by this, in my estimation, that a separate value made the principle good and that 'acting with regard for others' welfare' depended upon the realisation of the worth of this other value. In other

⁴³¹ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 32)

⁴³² (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 31)

⁴³³ (Crisp 1996, 9)

words, there must be something else that, being greater in value, would be brought about or preserved when we act as required by the principle that he called 'African Socialism.' Inversely, that something would be compromised or denied when we do the contrary.⁴³⁴

As already noted, this thing of greater value – what Tutu calls “the better thing for which we are meant”⁴³⁵ – is, for *ubuntu*'s proponents, a life of harmonious relations with others, as captured by Metz' account. Here the extent to which a number of African sources frame such harmonious interaction as conditioning prudential benefit is striking. In what could easily be a direct response to Gyges, Masolo cites the Luo proverb “a feast is only so if there are people to call it so” as stating that “a good life can be judged so only in a relational situation [a situation of relationship with others],”⁴³⁶ such that “a life of cohesion, or positive integration with others, becomes a goal.”⁴³⁷ Similarly, for Tutu it is not simply an ontological claim that human beings “belong in a bundle of life”⁴³⁸ or that “we are made for togetherness, for friendship, for community, for family; that we are created to live in a delicate network of interdependence.”⁴³⁹ Rather, we find resilience, self-assurance and happiness in participating in these relationships, in the sense of belonging to these networks. This follows from advocates of such communalism arguing that human activity is so necessarily interconnected that our prudential benefits and characteristic forms of individual flourishing cannot properly be considered in isolation from others. Here Tutu's “delicate network of interdependence”⁴⁴⁰ echoes Martin Luther King's description “you are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny”⁴⁴¹ and resonates with the Akan aphorism, “*Obra ye nnoboa*: 'life is mutual aid'.”⁴⁴²

⁴³⁴ (Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* 2010, 236). He is citing (Nyerere, *The Rational Choice* 1979).

⁴³⁵ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 209)

⁴³⁶ (Masolo 2010, 240).

⁴³⁷ *Ibid*

⁴³⁸ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

⁴³⁹ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 209)

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴⁴¹ First used in his Letter from Birmingham Jail in April 1963 (King 2006), this phrase was developed in terms more explicitly resonant with interdependence in a speech later that year (King, *Speech Transcription: Dr Martin Luther King's 1963 WMU speech* 2005). It may be relevant that King had attended the independence celebrations of Nkrumah's Ghana in 1957.

⁴⁴² (Wiredu, *Moral Foundations of an African Culture* 1992)

This account is frequently described as being “intertwined,”⁴⁴³ “bundled,”⁴⁴⁴ or “caught in an inescapable network,” but perhaps the clearest depiction of interconnection is provided by the Adinkra⁴⁴⁵ symbol *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu*, “the crocodile with two heads and one stomach.” Illustrating the proverbial image of a two-headed crocodile whose heads fight over food because they fail to understand that they share a common stomach, *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu* casts unity and interdependence as basically rational, prudential strategies for the individual.

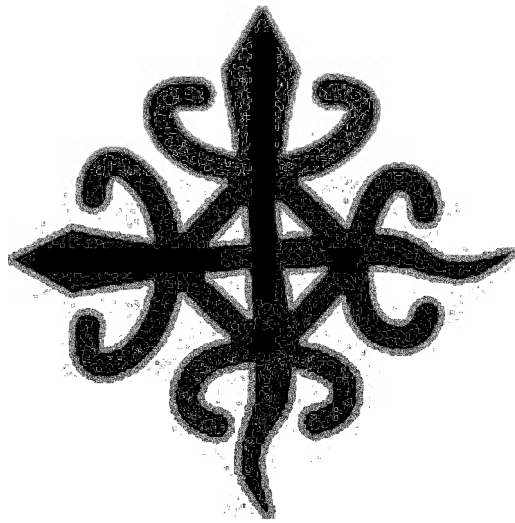


Figure 1 *Funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu*⁴⁴⁶

In failing to acknowledge and respond to our extensive interdependence with others, what is “compromised or denied,”⁴⁴⁷ “subvert[ed] or undermine[d]”⁴⁴⁸ is, at least partly, our own happiness or prudential benefit. If “I am human because I belong, I participate, I share,”⁴⁴⁹ then failing to acknowledge as much is a kind of harm to the agent. This is so not simply because failing to properly apprehend our situation is presumably, likely to frustrate our endeavours in ways commensurate with the competing crocodile heads. Beyond such strategic prudence, this account suggests that all that is most fulfilling for a human being is

⁴⁴³ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 32)

⁴⁴⁴ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

⁴⁴⁵ Adinkra symbols, common to the Akan and Asante cultures, are a set of images, each of which serves as a representation of some specific value claim or proverb (see (Willis 1998), (Macdonald 2001)). Appiah claims that these support “the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief” (Appiah 1992, 132-133).

⁴⁴⁶ (Macdonald 2001)

⁴⁴⁷ (Masolo 2010, 236)

⁴⁴⁸ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

⁴⁴⁹ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

imbricated with our interdependence. To turn away from or fail to accord proper value to our deeply interdependent nature is to draw away from the context in which human beings flourish. This is the sense in which “what dehumanises you inexorably dehumanises me”⁴⁵⁰: *Ubuntu* not only provides an account of value, but of disvalue. Much as Plato and Aristotle sought to show that Gyges’ life was devoid of those aspects he ought rationally to want, Tutu provides *ubuntu’s* account of suffering: to be “dehumanised”⁴⁵¹ by disavowal of our intertwined nature; to be “threatened that others are able and good,”⁴⁵² lacking “the proper self-assurance that comes from knowing [one] belongs in a greater whole:”⁴⁵³ and to fall prey to “the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony.”⁴⁵⁴

It is an open question whether and to what extent such claims can be supported, and I am not currently concerned to do so beyond their plausibility in the context of reflective equilibrium. What is relevant, however, is that claims of this sort – asserting that those without *ubuntu* are harmed, and those who exemplify it benefit – allow *ubuntu*, like virtue ethical theories, to fit Plato’s requirement on the virtues. This need not entail a commitment to converting the Immoralist – recall the bare ontological account, considering Plato’s requirement illustrative of human nature, but not significant to moral motivation – but it is certainly interesting that *ubuntu* appears capable of responding to the Immoralist, a project otherwise taken up (in secular ethics) only by virtue ethicists. That it does so using a parallel strategy to that characteristically employed by virtue ethicists, providing an alternate account of prudential value on which the Immoralist is inevitably committed to morality, suggests again that an aretaic account of *ubuntu* is apt.

Dispositions of character as partially constitutive of harmonious relationships

The third and final reason in favour of an aretaic account of *ubuntu* is that there appears to be an odd misfit between Metz’ account of relationships – which seem most plausibly to be dispositional states – as morally basic, and his articulation of normative prescriptions exclusively with reference to specific acts, rather than dispositions. Aretaic theories, as I

⁴⁵⁰ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 32)

⁴⁵¹ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 32)

⁴⁵² (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 31)

⁴⁵³ Ibid

⁴⁵⁴ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 209)

have noted, articulate normative prescriptions in terms of dispositional states (of character). It seems then that an aretaic theory, on which relationships are dispositional states partially constituted by dispositions of character, and normative prescriptions are articulated primarily with regard to such dispositions, provides a better explanatory fit.

I think it is most plausible to read relationships as partially constituted by dispositions (of character) to respond to another with consistent attitudes across numerous iterations. I say *partially* constituted, of course, because relationships in the relevant sense also require dispositions from others toward ourselves. Thus, it seems to me that dispositions toward shared identity and solidarity with others are necessary for Metz' relationship of harmony; and that others' reciprocating these dispositions toward us while we are so disposed toward them is sufficient for it. To value or honour a relationship, in these terms, is to cultivate the relevant dispositions toward others, and promote reciprocal dispositions toward ourselves. This certainly seems to capture the dispositional aspects of Metz' account of shared identity or "sharing a sense of self,"⁴⁵⁵ on which "life is shared with other people when activities are coordinated for a common end."⁴⁵⁶ A "self" or sense of identity is not simply an occurrent thing, but generally treated as persisting over time, and best captured in the language of dispositions; concomitantly, the sorts of shared projects which contribute toward such a persistent condition are likely to extend over time or multiple iterations, where immediate, occurrent projects like strangers avoiding a collision while walking are not.

Such an account does face an objection, however. There is a sense in which a relationship between persons is simply occurrent; describing the *relation* between two persons in the moment of their interaction. This is the case, for example, where, while avoiding collision on the street, a stranger and I are *friendly* toward one another. Here it is possible for all of Metz' requirements for harmony to be met: we share a (diffuse) identity as "fellow pedestrians", communicating to one another our acknowledgement of this shared identity as we undertake the cooperative project of avoiding collision; we reciprocate solidarity in acting for the others' sake at the same time as our own; and have appropriate affective engagement such that we would be (somewhat) upset for the other if they stumble, and are (somewhat) happy for them as we are for ourselves to have negotiated the impasse. None

⁴⁵⁵ (Metz 2009, 341)

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid

of this depends on a pre-existing or potential future relationship with the other over time. Indeed, it ought not to, since a theory of moral normativity ought to account for our treatment of strangers as well as those known to us. It seems, then, that there are two distinct senses of harmonious relationship – occurrent and dispositional – and that both must be accounted for. As such, my claim’s dependence on the relevant sense of relationship being dispositional appears to be problematised.

Here we might imagine three ways to slice the interaction between the two senses: a) both senses of relationship are equivalently basic, neither derivative from the other; b) relationships in the occurrent sense are basically valuable, and relationships in the dispositional sense reliably realise them; c) relationships in the dispositional sense are basically valuable, and relationships in the occurrent sense conduce toward them with law-like regularity. If a) were the case, then neither sense would necessarily be preferable to the other: but Metz’ theory argues that we ought to promote relationships of the sort developed over time over merely occurrent ones, since

The greater the common sense of self: the more people think of themselves in terms of their group membership; the more ends they share; the higher they rank these ends; the more they share the same reasons for adopting these ends; and the more they sacrifice to achieve these ends.⁴⁵⁷

If the dispositional sense of relationships trumps the occurrent as preferable, this is not yet sufficient to show the direction of derivation between the two. Much as Driver derives the value of dispositions of character from their tendency to realise consequential goods,⁴⁵⁸ b) suggests that the value of relationships in the dispositional sense derives from their promoting a greater aggregate of relationships in the occurrent sense, which are basically valuable. If this is the case, then Metz’ articulation through act-prescriptions is perfectly appropriate, though disposition-talk could be derivative from it. On the opposite scenario, c), relationships of harmony in the dispositional sense are basically valuable, and consistent dispositions toward them entail or reliably conduce toward promoting harmony in specific occurrent contexts. This is similar to Hursthouse’s argument that dispositions of character

⁴⁵⁷ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 335)

⁴⁵⁸ (Driver 2001)

are basically valuable, with the value of specific acts deriving from their being partly constitutive of such relationships.⁴⁵⁹

On the face of it, these two accounts seem equally plausible, but there is good reason to consider c) the proper account. I have argued that the features of harmonious relationships seem meaningfully to be present even in occurrent relationships, but one feature is not meaningfully the same in occurrent and dispositional senses: reciprocity of shared identity. As I noted earlier in this chapter with my example of sharing identity with Kaizer Chiefs supporters, shared identity can be offered tentatively, on the understanding that it will be reciprocated (and this understanding can be mistaken). The shared identity offered in occurrent friendly relationships can therefore be understood as an overture, something like the gamble of trusting another in a single game of Prisoner's Dilemma. Such overtures are distinct from understanding how another is disposed to articulate their identity, or include our own, on the basis of long exposure. While overtures of shared identity are undeniably valuable inasmuch as they allow or promote relationships in which shared identity is premised on known, enduring dispositions, they are not the same as these latter relationships. And it is the latter sort, relationships in which shared identity is premised on known, enduring dispositions, which embody Metz' harmony without qualification. The value of the overtures of shared identity present in occurrent harmonious relationships derives, then, from promoting the realisation of dispositional harmonious relationships. Merely aggregating a number of occurrent relationships of tentatively shared identity does not convincingly derive the value of dispositional shared identity. But the value of occurrent relationships of shared identity *is* convincingly *derived from* reliably conducing toward the deeper reciprocity of shared identity in dispositional relationships.

If Metz' basic value, harmonious relationships, is best understood as a dispositional state, then it does seem odd to articulate normative prescriptions entailed from it in the language of action-guiding principles, as Metz does. This is true both because, as Goldie suggests, act-based articulations of dispositional states fail to capture all that we consider relevant in moral situations⁴⁶⁰; and because, as Hursthouse has argued, dispositional values can furnish

⁴⁵⁹ (Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion* 1991, 227)

⁴⁶⁰ (Goldie 2004, 35)

action-guiding rules readily enough.⁴⁶¹ As I have argued, part of the utility of aretaic language is that dispositions of character are better able to articulate basic values on such a broad scale than act-talk. And if, as I have suggested, relationships of harmony are properly understood as reciprocal dispositions of character toward shared identity and solidarity, then aretaic normative prescriptions would better account for Metz' relationships of harmony than his own act-oriented principles.

Conclusion

Having granted that Metz' *ubuntu*-as-harmony is the best extant account of *ubuntu*'s basic value claims, it nonetheless seems that an aretaic account of *ubuntu*-as-harmony is preferable to the act-based account Metz himself employs. This is so for the three reasons I have noted: the prevalence and fittingness of aretaic language in work on *ubuntu*; *ubuntu*'s congruence with Plato's requirement on the virtues; and the aptness of dispositional rather than act-oriented articulations of the dispositional value of harmonious relationships.

Metz himself has allowed for more aretaic readings in recent work, beginning with his collaboration with Joseph Gaie⁴⁶² and recently in a forthcoming position paper intended to introduce African value claims to a broader audience of virtue ethicists.⁴⁶³ However, while both include useful discussions of framing *ubuntu* in aretaic terms, it is not clear that either commits to an aretaic reading as the basic articulation of *ubuntu*, or concedes any reason to prefer such an articulation to Metz' parallel accounts articulating *ubuntu* in the language of rights,⁴⁶⁴ for example. That is, Metz' discussions to date of aretaic articulations are compatible with such talk as derivative virtue-*theories* such as Driver⁴⁶⁵ and O'Neill⁴⁶⁶ present, on which aretaic language is one of a number of potential ways to discuss moral value, apt in some contexts, but not in others. What I have argued for above, however, is the stronger position, similar to Hursthouse's relative to Driver and O'Neill, that an aretaic normative articulation of the value of Metz' harmonious relationships is superior to

⁴⁶¹ (Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion* 1991, 227)

⁴⁶² (Metz and Gaie, *The African Ethic of Ubuntu/Botho: implications for research on morality* 2010)

⁴⁶³ (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

⁴⁶⁴ A project he has pursued in (Metz, *Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory: toward a new philosophy of human rights* 2010) and (Metz, *The Reach of Amnesty for Political Crimes: which burdens on the guilty does national reconciliation permit?* 2010).

⁴⁶⁵ (Driver 2001)

⁴⁶⁶ (O'Neill 1996)

alternatives, and that any other articulation will fail to properly capture the relevant value claims.

If an aretaic account is, then, to be necessary to a theory of *ubuntu*, rather than a sometimes-contextually-appropriate way to discuss it, it becomes relevant to ask what sort of aretaic account is best. Metz and Gaie, discussing an aretaic reading, say “so construed, sub-Saharan morality is a ‘self-realisation’ or ‘perfectionist’ ethic, akin to Aristotelianism”⁴⁶⁷, accurately outlining (but not selecting between) the options. As I have noted, aretaic theories encompass both “self-realisation” or autocentric accounts much like Aristotle’s, or more broadly perfectionist accounts like Hurka’s. The former type, if it can be supported, lends itself to direct responses to the Immoralist, which is certainly an interesting outcome. The latter, if it can be supported, does not engage with the Immoralist, but does entail a commitment to developing the virtues generally, rather than simply in one’s own person, which may account for the communal aspects of *ubuntu* more plausibly than the interpretations Metz has disputed. As such, I will critically evaluate the viability of a self-development account (a refined “U4” position) in the third chapter; and of a perfectionist *ubuntu* in the fourth chapter, defending them against challenges outlined by Metz.

⁴⁶⁷ (Metz and Gaie 2010, 275). My italics.

Chapter 3: Ubuntu as Autocentric⁴⁶⁸

Introduction

In the previous chapter I noted that Metz rejects “probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature,”⁴⁶⁹ which he glosses as the normative principle “U4,” because it seems unable to coherently justify all of the constellation of *ubuntu* claims, and because an account on which it is one’s own good that has fundamental moral worth⁴⁷⁰ is an implausible basis for moral value. I also noted, however, that U4 is one way to ground the sort of aretaic account I argued best articulates *ubuntu*, and would lend itself to direct responses to the Immoralist in a manner attractive in similar aretaic theories. As such, in this chapter I critically evaluate the viability of such an autocentric or “self-development” account, outlining defences available to advocates of U4 in the face of Metz’ objections.

Metz’ objections to an autocentric account of *ubuntu*

Recall Metz’ formulation of U4: “An action is right just insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realises oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one’s valuable nature as a social being.”⁴⁷¹ Casting moral values as arising from and (in some sense at least) necessarily favouring the agent, Metz picks out this approach as valuing “self-realisation”⁴⁷² or “self-development.”⁴⁷³ In the previous chapter I referred to such a theory as “autocentric”, or “centred on the self,”⁴⁷⁴ and I will prefer this shorthand term, as it neatly captures what is most contentious about such theories (since an account of *ubuntu* which does not reduce to the self as the ultimate source of value may also endorse “self-

⁴⁶⁸ This chapter includes and expands upon arguments in my previously published article (van Niekerk, In Defence of an Autocentric Account of Ubuntu 2007), and Metz’ reply (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 383-387).

⁴⁶⁹ (Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory 2007, 331)

⁴⁷⁰ (Metz 2007, 332)

⁴⁷¹ Ibid

⁴⁷² (Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory 2007, 337)

⁴⁷³ (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 383)

⁴⁷⁴ While the term has been used in differing contexts, it seems to have been coined by psychologist Michael Apter, who explained it as “from the Greek *auto* meaning self, and *kentron*, meaning a ‘spike’ – from which the English word *centre* is derived. (The spike referred to in the Greek is the spike of a pair of compasses, which is placed at the centre of any circle which is to be drawn)” (Apter 1989, 112). This description seems to me to suit my current purposes.

development”).⁴⁷⁵ The set of autocentric moral theories includes Egoism, but (luckily) need not reduce to it. This set also includes Aristotelian *eudaimonism* and, while novel autocentric theories need not reduce to this either, there are some interesting congruencies that seem to me to lend plausibility to an account like U4.

Here I examine Metz’ reasons for dismissing such an approach as unattractive, and argue that the position is more attractive and defensible than his discussion suggests. He raises three objections to the autocentric strategy captured by U4, conceding that the first two are not inescapable. Metz’ first objection to U4 is that it allows *prima facie* counter-intuitive conclusions, such as that it would be permissible or required to kill an innocent for her organs if it will allow me to maximise my good relationships with others. His second objection is that even if U4 can be construed to avoid this concern, “it can never permit, let alone require, giving up one’s life for others”⁴⁷⁶ (on a Naturalist account at least), since this would preclude any future self-development. Metz’ fundamental concern, prior to either of these, is that it is counter-intuitive and implausible to collapse moral value into prudential value at all, and “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.”⁴⁷⁷

In addressing each of these, I want to note that Metz’s list of qualifications to the theory strikes me less as a mounting set of constraints the friend of autocentric *ubuntu* is forced to commit to, and more as a demonstration that appropriate responses to objections come readily to hand when employing this approach. As such, I will emphasise those defences that Metz reads as merely allowable, but strike me as plausible and organic to an autocentric response, before arguing separately that this furnishes a more attractive and robust account than Metz seems to tilt at.

⁴⁷⁵ As, for example, Menkiti’s position might.

⁴⁷⁶ (Metz 2007, 332)

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid

Responses to Metz' objections

Metz' first objection to U4 is that it allows *prima facie* counter-intuitive conclusions, such as that it would be permissible or required to kill an innocent for her organs if it will allow me to maximise my good relationships with others. He then allows that constraints could be built into the theory to exclude such counterexamples – his approach is an appeal to rights, “so that an act is right if and only if it develops one’s social nature without violating the rights of others.”⁴⁷⁸ While Metz favours a rights-based approach to constraint on his own account,⁴⁷⁹ it could be argued that an autocentric account does not entail a theory of rights.⁴⁸⁰ Even if we grant this claim however, the strategy of building in constraints need not derive from, or rely on, an account of rights. An alternative source of constraint, and one which seems plausible, notes that whatever disposition toward others is constitutive of a good relationship with them, taking them to be expendable seems to negate it, and thus cannot be a means to achieve harmonious relationships. That is, embodying the specific attitude “I could take your organs if they enabled me to relate to many others” can be ruled out because it seems to exclude also holding the general attitude “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours.”⁴⁸¹

In allowing for such an account to constrain our actions generally, we must hold that the moral relevance of an act derives at least as much from its impact on our reliable disposition to act properly as from any individual instance of the act, as aretaic theories tend to. This seems natural enough, since the additional premise coheres with the second part of U4, “an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one’s valuable nature as a social being.”⁴⁸² This also seems to be endorsed by those descriptions of *ubuntu* that pertain to character. That is, it seems that we would not describe an otherwise friendly individual who has killed another for their organs as a “*mensch*,”⁴⁸³ nor would we say of her “*u nobuntu*.”⁴⁸⁴ This approach to constraint seems sufficient to meet Metz’ objection, and is endemic to the

⁴⁷⁸ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 332)

⁴⁷⁹ He develops an account of rights derived from a roughly African account of relationships, rather than Kantian accounts of the person, in his two later papers, (Metz, *Human dignity, capital punishment, and an African moral theory: toward a new philosophy of human rights* 2010) and (Metz, *The Reach of Amnesty for Political Crimes: which burdens on the guilty does national reconciliation permit?* 2010).

⁴⁸⁰ I do not defend this claim here, but it strikes me as sufficiently plausible, *prima facie*, to entertain.

⁴⁸¹ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

⁴⁸² (Metz 2007, 331)

⁴⁸³ (Metz 2007, 323)

⁴⁸⁴ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 31)

autocentric account in a way that the appeal to rights may not be. This is not to say that there is any reason to reject Metz' rights-based approach to constraints, simply that it does not appear even to be necessary to constrain the account sufficiently.

Metz' second objection is that even if U4 is constrained as above, "it can never permit, let alone require, giving up one's life for others"⁴⁸⁵ (on a Naturalist account at least), since this would preclude *any* future self-development. His response on behalf of the friend of autocentric *ubuntu* - following Erik Wielenberg's⁴⁸⁶ account of Aristotle's *eudaimonism* - is 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"⁴⁸⁷. Here Metz is tentative about the efficacy of the response, noting that "one can obviously question whether killing oneself when necessary to help others is invariably a way to maximise the realisation of one's communal nature."⁴⁸⁸ One response to this point seems to be that self-sacrifice need not "invariably" realise the maximisation of our social nature. No candidate moral theory, challenged to justify self-sacrifice, need justify *all* instances that seem, *prima facie*, to demand such action⁴⁸⁹ - rather, what is required is that such maximisation could plausibly be realised by self-sacrifice in at least some of the relevant cases. Here it seems to me that there are two reasons to think that such a route to maximising our communal nature could justify such sacrifice in a significant number of cases: narrativity, and investment in others.

The notion of narrativity is another description of what Wielenberg glosses in his "spike" account - that is, a justification of Aristotle's claim that, even on an autocentric account, the virtuous person would prefer "a year of living nobly to many indifferent years, and a single noble and great action to many trivial ones. Presumably, this is what happens with those who die for others."⁴⁹⁰ While Wielenberg's account of a spike in the graph of virtue over one's lifetime illustrates the jump in value, it still suggests an aggregative approach to virtue achieved, and aggregative models come closer to the consequentialism of Metz's "organs"

⁴⁸⁵ (Metz 2007, 323)

⁴⁸⁶ Metz cites (E. J. Wielenberg 2004).

⁴⁸⁷ (Metz 2007, 332)

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Rather, to borrow from Hursthouse's strategy, only those which the morally exemplary would recognise as demanding as much.

⁴⁹⁰ (Aristotle 2000, 176) 1169a.

case than to the approach used by *eudaimonism* (and available to autocentric *ubuntu*). On the alternative, narrative, description, the *telos* is not a high aggregate value, but a certain shape of life or character. Here the value of self-sacrifice is not that of a spike on a graph, desirable because it changes the overall aggregate, but that of a well-timed note in a song, the presence of which balances the overall structure in a way that cannot be improved upon by extending the song's duration (in fact, extending the song only damages its structure). In order to trump continuing to exist *simpliciter* therefore, the act of self-sacrifice need not be (to the agent) one of the most valuable acts in itself in the agent's life. Rather, it needs to be significantly good and narratively-placed such that the crescendo it offers constitutes the best realisable shape for the narrative. This metaphor and Wielenberg's are basically congruent, but I feel it is worth noting the narrative description, particularly since discussions of *ubuntu* do not characteristically discuss lifetime value aggregates, but do seem to refer to shapes of character.⁴⁹¹

The shape of character recommended is, of course, one conducive toward good relationships with others, which raises the second reason autocentric *ubuntu* could plausibly require that we sacrifice our lives: our investment in others. It is possible that our investment in shared relationships constitutes the *most* meaningful or *profound*⁴⁹² part of our lives, and this certainly seems to be a claim that a theory of *ubuntu* would support. An intuitive reason to find such a claim plausible is the additional value we tend to ascribe to experiences defined by "triadic closure"⁴⁹³ or the maintenance of relationships in our social networks. That is, we tend to value experiences shared with others more than the same experiences absent sharing, and generally value shared experiences above others. We also seem to value functioning as catalysts to the formation and maintenance of relationships between others, as evinced by the joy in introducing disparate friends who become close (closing a triad, in network theoretic terms). If a sufficient portion of the value of a life constituted by such relationships is vested in the wellbeing of others, then the benefit of

⁴⁹¹ See (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 31).

⁴⁹² To this end, Shutte (Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa 2001, 58-59) invokes D.H. Lawrence's distinction between "the shallow and the profound, the personal, superficial, temporary desires and the inner, impersonal, great desires that are fulfilled in long periods of time" (Lawrence 1931, 53).

⁴⁹³ First defined (in network theory) as the principle "If two people in a social network have a friend in common, then there is an increased likelihood that they will become friends themselves at some point in the future" (Rapoport 1953), triadic closure also applies to shared interests or experiences which bond individuals together, the sense in which I use it here. For a clear explanation of the concept, see (Easley and Kleinberg, Networks, Crowds, and Markets: Reasoning about a Highly Connected World 2010, 47-50).

self-sacrifice for these others could be a trumping value for us, even if we would not ourselves be present to continue experiencing the relationship. That is, following from the previous point about the shape of the character, it may be that the fullest realisation of our relationships with others is not that these relationships persist, but that they involve action for the other's sake, and catalyse, maintain, or otherwise enable beneficial relationships between those we care for – a condition which, it seems uncontroversial to claim, can be achieved by self-sacrifice.

Note that this does not require a metaphysical claim about a medium through which we live on beyond death (as Setiloane⁴⁹⁴ and Shutte propose⁴⁹⁵), or about the existence or specific nature of ancestors or the afterlife (as Ramose proposes⁴⁹⁶). The claim rests merely on the idea that what is valuable to us can be vested in others to the relevant extent, perhaps if the sort of attitude constitutive of the right shape of life is one in which we genuinely value knowledge of the flourishing of certain others, regardless of our capacity to share in it. In this sense, it seems that we can imagine Shutte's claim "a person who is generous and hospitable, who welcomes strangers to her house and table and cares for the needy... builds an identity that is enduring, that will not disintegrate – even in death – but continue to be a centre of life for all"⁴⁹⁷ as a purely (and plausibly) axiological claim.

This amounts to a novel axiological strategy, suggested by (but distinct from) the precedent of Aristotelian Eudaimonism's investment in a greater teleological project. While rooted in an aut centrism the Immoralist can accept, Aristotelian Eudaimonism compels the rational agent to moral action by "zooming out" to show an investment in a greater teleological project: the project of developing a flourishing life over time. Similarly to the way that the rational strategy shifts from defection to cooperation between a game of Prisoner's Dilemma and Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, recognising oneself as implicated in this greater context ought rationally to change one's assessment of the relative value of actions whose immediate value to the self is high, but whose long-term cost undercuts long-term benefits. This is not to assert that we are compelled by reason to accept the lexical priority of some distinct kind of impartial reasons over partial ones. Rather, the revised context shows that

⁴⁹⁴ (Setiloane 1986, 13-14)

⁴⁹⁵ (Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* 2001, 22-25)

⁴⁹⁶ (Ramose, *The Ethics of Ubuntu* 2002, 50)

⁴⁹⁷ (Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* 2001, 25)

our most profound (partial) reasons for action ultimately coincide with the apparent demands of impartiality. For Aristotelian Eudaimonism, the greater teleological value is realised through developing the right character, even at the expense of immediate self-interest, and this is simply rational in the greater teleological context.

As I noted above, this strategy seems also to be available to advocates of an aretaic *ubuntu*. But “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” and *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu* also seem to suggest a distinct but parallel strategy, zooming-out from the individual perspective to indicate the agent’s investment in a broader, communal, context. If we take “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” seriously as a claim about the self and its relation to value, then *ubuntu* seems to claim that the aspects of ourselves most worth promoting or developing are those which emerge from interrelating with others. This idea, that the most valuable aspects of our lives are those which are shared with others, or properly expressed only through sharing with others, need not shape only our understanding of the teleological picture. Rather, they suggest a strategy in which the Aristotelian zoom-out is applied to another axis. In much the same way that traditional Aristotelian Eudaimonism zoomed out from the immediate to teleological context, this strategy would zoom out from the individual to the communal. As suggested by *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu*, actions taken on behalf of an individual “head” may seem rationally self-interested when the head is all that can be seen, but zoom-out to see these actions taken at the cost of the profound, meaningful relationships which connect that head to a shared stomach and they no longer seem so. Benefits to the individual at the expense of harmonious relations with others are thus recontextualised as contrary to what is, properly considered, most beneficial to the individual. While one *could* chose actions beneficial in the short term at the expense of the longer term, or immediately beneficial actions at the cost of broader imbrications with others, neither of these seem as rational (for the individual) in the broader context. Here it is worth noting that the sorts of harmonious relationships promoted by the constellation of claims characteristic of *ubuntu* seem plausibly to be precisely the sorts to engender meaningful and deeply rewarding interactions with others. The intuitive appeal of loving or friendly relationships in one’s life seems, in fact, to be at least as plausible (if not more so) in autocentric terms as the claim that we ought to pursue these for reasons independent of our own flourishing.

Taken together, considerations of narrativity and our deep and necessary investment in others seem to show that an autocentric account can very plausibly account for our intuitions about self-sacrifice.

Here Metz levels his final objection: while responses such as the foregoing “probably allow the present account to *entail* [the intuitions an African moral theory should],” he questions “whether they can provide an attractive *explanation* of them.”⁴⁹⁸ However plausible such an account can be made, Metz argues, acting for the sake of one’s own development is still a fundamentally less attractive reason to care for others than acting for *their* sake.

Two responses to this final objection present themselves. The first is to argue that the autocentric account is not as unattractive as it initially appears. The second is to note what is positively attractive about the account.

In the first place then, it is important to note the distinction Metz acknowledges when he says that, on an autocentric account, “the basic justificatory reason to [help others] (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.”⁴⁹⁹ “Though not my proper motive” is the key distinction here. As Metz correctly notes, an autocentric basis to moral motivation is not the same as an instrumental approach toward caring for others: on this account the agent does not, as the clever knave might, relate to others as means toward the end of self-development (undermining the possibility of genuine care for others). Rather, the agent aspires to genuinely caring relationships with others, valuing them for their own sake (and fails morally if she does not realise this aspiration), and *this aspiration is a rational one for the agent to pursue* because it ultimately benefits her. While it seems that there is something obviously unattractive about the former description, it is much more difficult to say the same of the latter. It is from a more Kantian bent in justification, but that need not be a drawback as long as it explains our moral intuitions without leaving out any significant aspect of those intuitions.

Moreover, there is reason to find such an autocentric account theoretically *attractive*, in that it provides the sort of direct response the Immoralist noted in the previous chapter.

⁴⁹⁸ (Metz 2007, 332) Italics in original.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. Italics in original.

That is, such an account answers variations on Glaucon's challenge⁵⁰⁰ "why should I be concerned for others unless it is in my best interests?" Such questions appear legitimate, persistent, and (unless addressed) pernicious, and the best response may plausibly be the autocentric one, that ultimately such concern *is* in our best interests, and this is in fact what justifies them. Metz' account, on the other hand, requires (as do most moral theories) that we are compelled by reason to accept the lexical priority of some distinct kind of impartial reasons over partial ones. Friends of an autocentric account of *ubuntu* may consider it a strength of the view that it responds to the Immoralist in her own terms.

It is plausible that Metz' account can be augmented with some other claim that *does* respond to this challenge, but it seems to that a case can be made that addressing the Immoralist is not an *auxiliary concern* of *ubuntu*. What seems one of the most attractive features of *ubuntu* is that - in slogans like "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" and Tutu's "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours"⁵⁰¹ – the response to the Immoralist is, so to speak, up-front. It seems that the claim that the agent's own good is necessarily related to the moral good is natural to discussions in which *ubuntu* is invoked, and that the autocentric account properly incorporates this as a moral justification.

In light of my arguments above, it seems that the autocentric "self-development" account dominant in grounding *ubuntu* is at least as attractive a basis for such a theory as Metz' own account, and is dismissed too quickly in his analysis.

Metz' replies

Metz has replied to my arguments above,⁵⁰² which he describes as having "given me pause,"⁵⁰³ adding that: "I have been forced to reconsider my views, as I acknowledge that the interpretation of *ubuntu* that van Niekerk is articulating is powerful in itself and fits with an awful lot of discourse about *ubuntu*."⁵⁰⁴ "However," he continues, "upon reflection, I find van Niekerk's defence as yet unconvincing."⁵⁰⁵ In what follows I present his replies and

⁵⁰⁰ (Plato 1992) 360c.

⁵⁰¹ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 31)

⁵⁰² (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 383-387)

⁵⁰³ (Metz 2007, 384)

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

assess whether further responses are available to friends of autocentric *ubuntu* with which to bolster the account against these replies.

Metz argues that my proposed responses to both of his initial objections require adopting implausibly extreme views, and that his approach has access to the same advantages I propose, without contradictions entailed even by this most robust autocentric account. In the first instance, where I had responded to Metz' "organs" case by noting that murdering another for their organs is incommensurate with the dispositions toward others constitutive of *ubuntu*, he argues that "this will sometimes be true, but that an empirical generalisation is not sufficient and that principled universality alone is."⁵⁰⁶ To demonstrate the persistence of problem cases, he modifies his original thought-experiment:

Suppose that one needs organs to survive and hence develop oneself in the requisite way, and that none are available by consent. Imagine that one kills an innocent to obtain the organs and then immediately takes a pill to forget having done so. In a case in which one is unlikely to remember having killed an innocent, one may, counterintuitively, be justified in doing so, for such an action might be necessary to realize oneself in the long-term.⁵⁰⁷

Metz' thought-experiment serves to put pressure on the connection between acts and the enduring dispositions of character which the autocentric account takes to imbue them with value. Since prudential benefit is the ultimate source of value, it seems that the agent is compelled to preserve her own life, given the opportunity. If the barrier to murdering specific others is cultivating beneficial attitudes toward others generally, but such a barrier can be circumvented without a lasting change to the agent's character, then some instances of the murder for organs could indeed be not merely permissible, but compelled by autocentric *ubuntu*. Similarly, in response to my alternate strategy, zooming out along the axis of communal interrelationships rather than teleology, it is possible to imagine that the victim of my organ-seeking murder is unknown to myself or anyone in my network of care, such that no members of this network will mourn the loss, and they know as little as I myself remember about my involvement in the murder.

It is worth noting that supernaturalist interpreters of autocentric *ubuntu* have access to a clear response to Metz here. If interrelationships are not a matter of dispositions toward

⁵⁰⁶ (Metz 2007, 384)

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

one another, but instead are literally vested in fields connecting others,⁵⁰⁸ then my murder of another for organs would constitute a real harm, to myself and others, regardless of my capacity to remember it. This would seem to provide a sense in which the harm to oneself of harming another derives from “principled universality”⁵⁰⁹ rather than empirical generalisation. Relying on this approach, however, would sacrifice the metaphysical agnosticism I have taken to be an advantage of Metz’ account, and which I have pursued in my own. Absent such a metaphysical splint, my argument grounded in enduring dispositions of character still allows that at least some cases are possible in which autocentric *ubuntu* seems to compel murdering another for their organs.

As Metz himself notes however, it is still possible that my argument from the narrative value of life forbids murdering another for their organs, since “killing another would also be a blight on the narrative of the agent's life—where that narrative must include the theme of acting for the sake of others—for which she could not compensate.”⁵¹⁰ On the narrative view of value, this can be true independent of my own memory of the act, or enduring dispositions connected to it.

Metz objects to this approach too, however. Conceding that it seems necessary to accept that the “value of a life can be affected by ‘holistic’ considerations, i.e., by the pattern of the life as a whole as opposed to the sum of its parts,”⁵¹¹ he goes on to argue:

However, I balk at the suggestion that holistic considerations exhaust the value of a life, or that they take lexical priority over aggregative considerations, one of which claims van Niekerk needs in order for his response to work. I am willing to accept that holism plays an irreducible role in the value of a life, and while it is less clear to me how it might plausibly bear on our judgments of moral excellence (as opposed to, say, meaningfulness or of nonmoral perfection), I am willing to grant, here, that it does. What I am keen to deny is the view that the value of a life's parts can never (or only rarely) be of more value than its holistic facets, a claim that van Niekerk is implicitly committed to in order to block the suggestion that self-development too often or in the wrong instances forbids self-sacrifice.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ As Tempels (Bantu Philosophy 1969), Setiloane (Setiloane 1986), and Shutte (1993) have argued.

⁵⁰⁹ (Metz 2007, 384)

⁵¹⁰ (Metz 2007, 385)

⁵¹¹ Ibid. As he himself argues in (Metz, New Developments in the Meaning of Life 2007, 209-210)

⁵¹² Ibid.

Fleshing this objection out, Metz contests my musical metaphor of holism, suggesting that we intuitively accept that a piece of chamber music with four parts may include a terrible second part, while the others are good. Here he argues that

it could be worth listening to the whole composition, despite the fact that the composition *qua* whole is not worth listening to; for the value of the parts of the work could make it worthwhile suffering through the second part to get to the third and fourth. Similarly, from the perspective that moral rightness is merely a function of self-development, we can expect there to be irreducible summative factors that often make it morally worth continuing to live, despite the fact that terrible parts such as killing others or refusal to kill oneself have irreparably marred the whole.⁵¹³

This response seems not only to be intuitively plausible, but also to have particular traction against a view commensurate with Menkiti's concern for character development, as an individual in the early stages of such development may well fall short of the character developed in the later stages, but we are presumably intended to value a life developed from such shortcomings. On such a view it would seem that, for the harm such early actions may do to the narrative structure (and thus, holistic value) of a life to be balanced, it is necessary that at least some of that life's value derive from summative values, such that they may outweigh the initial damage. As such, it seems that Metz' point stands: while the interpretations I have offered on behalf of autocentric *ubuntu* may evade his initial concerns in the majority of cases, exceptions are clearly possible. In at least some cases, it is conceivable that a fundamentally autocentric *ubuntu* could compel the agent to murder another or fail to sacrifice herself, without such actions irreparably damaging her character.

The persistence of problem-cases continues into Metz' responses relating to his third original complaint: that autocentrism furnishes the wrong fundamental basis for moral value. Here Metz does not dispute my arguments that *ubuntu* seems to provide for direct responses to the Immoralist by offering scope for a richer sense in which actions are beneficial to the individual. Rather, he argues that this strategy is no less available to his own theory. If the claims I have offered regarding the profound value of shared and communal interrelations are (even approximately) correct, then relationships of *ubuntu* for the sake of Metz' values seem as apt to promote such value as those pursued for the sake of autocentric *ubuntu*. Self-development is not, for Metz, the relevant morally right-making

⁵¹³ (Metz 2007, 385)

property, where it is for autocentric *ubuntu*, but it is nonetheless a feature. Here he argues that:

if the amoralist came along, I could point out to him that there are (non-moral) self-regarding reasons for him to make sacrifices of certain kinds for others as well as note that there are also other-regarding reasons (of morality). True, it is not *qua* moral theory that I am able to reply to the amoralist, but that should be acceptable, for I could nonetheless show that acting in accordance with the moral theory has non-moral benefits to the amoralist (which benefits do not exhaust the reasons the amoralist has for so acting).⁵¹⁴

Metz' point here is that autocentric *ubuntu*, while it does provide a direct response to Immoralists on their own terms, does not therefore have an advantage over his account. Moreover, in the face of the persistent problem-cases noted above, even *ubuntu's* characteristic suggestion of profound interdependence does not align the Immoralist with all cases it intuitively ought to *qua* moral theory. The advantage of taking the Immoralist seriously is thus moot, and even if further argument reverses this by defeating the persistent problem-cases, autocentric *ubuntu* has no special advantage over Metz' own account. And while the problem cases pertain, Metz' theory has the benefit of offering agent-independent reasons for action which do account for the relevant moral intuitions.

Metz offers a further objection to the autocentric account I defended. Recall that I argued that the agent need not be *motivated by* an instrumental view of others, but rather aspires to genuinely caring relationships, and this aspiration is *rational* because it ultimately benefits her. Noting that Augustine Shutte offered the same argument independently,⁵¹⁵ Metz argues that this argument is unattractive in that it entails a kind of (epistemic) "incoherence,"⁵¹⁶ requiring that "a morally ideal agent is a person with a false belief about morality."⁵¹⁷ This is so because "having the motive of acting for the sake of others [presumably] includes having the belief that others are worth acting for without ultimate reference to one's own self-interest,"⁵¹⁸ which the autocentric account takes to be false. Distinguishing between the agent's motivation and the agent's proper justification for acting, therefore, produce the epistemically complicated scenario that "a morally ideal

⁵¹⁴ (Metz 2007, 386)

⁵¹⁵ Metz attributes this response to Shutte in "conversation and correspondence" (Metz, The Motivation for 'Toward an African Moral Theory' [and] Ubuntu as a Moral Theory: Reply to Four Critics 2007, 386) .

⁵¹⁶ (Metz 2007, 386)

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

agent ought to believe that others are worth helping for their own sake, even though [...] in fact others are not worth helping for their own sake (since all basic reasons are constituted by self-development).⁵¹⁹ Metz' own account has less to fear from Occam's Razor, positing that "there are other-regarding, relational basic reasons for action and a that a morally good agent is one who acts in light of this fact."⁵²⁰

Whither autocentric *ubuntu*?

What recourse remains for defenders of an autocentric *ubuntu* appears to require furnishing an account of human interrelation sufficiently inclusive that the agent is necessarily harmed irreducibly by murdering another, even if she does not remember having done so and it does not impinge on her character; defending a view of life's value such that holistic considerations either exhaust the value of life or take lexical priority over aggregated summative values; and denying that the epistemic disconnect between motive for action and justification for action is a significant barrier to plausibility for a moral theory. This may indeed be a project some advocates of autocentric *ubuntu* are enticed to pursue, but the sum of these difficulties strikes me as compelling reason not to.

While a position asserting the exclusive or trumping value of life's narrative may be conceivable, it appears implausibly strong in the face of both our broad intuitions about aggregating value and the specific narrative concerns Menkiti articulates. As such, a position asserting as much would constitute a significant departure from "a lot of discourse about *ubuntu*"⁵²¹, where an ostensive virtue of autocentrism is that it seemed to coincide with much of this discourse. And, while I have noted that a retreat from metaphysical agnosticism to supernaturalism may allow for a sufficiently radical interconnectedness, even this move would not evade the epistemic incoherence Metz points to. Here a defender of the position may argue that the "incoherence" Metz points to is no worse than that asserted by Natural Law theories but, even if this were convincing, this is not reassuring theoretical company to keep. Those strategies which present themselves for rallying autocentric *ubuntu*'s defences, that is, seem uniformly to posit significantly more explanatory entities than Metz' account. In contrast with so complicated an explanatory

⁵¹⁹ (Metz 2007, 386)

⁵²⁰ Ibid

⁵²¹ (Metz 2007, 384)

edifice, Metz' account is attractively straightforward, with greater "monistic elegance"⁵²² and no less capacity to rally the Immoralist, should that be advantageous.

The problem of parochial exemplars

There is one final thing to say about autocentric *ubuntu* before abandoning the strategy. It seems to me that much of the conviction that our interrelation can provide strong enough support for autocentric *ubuntu* derives from exemplars generally being drawn from small-scale societies. In small-scale societies, as Silberbauer and Wood have averred, it is not difficult to find value-bearing interconnections with others, such that harming them is plausibly harmful to oneself. Moreover, in such societies, in which almost no one is a stranger, generosity and self-sacrifice carry a significantly lower risk to the individual than in larger-scale societies in which most persons one interacts with are strangers. This is so because in small-scale societies policing through reputation economies which punish cheats or free-riders is a stable equilibrium. In such a context, it is easy to show that willingness to sacrifice for others is a reliable prudential strategy for the agent, and intuitively compelling to infer that this correspondence continues to scale upward, such that self-interest maps moral normativity in all situations. This is perhaps one reason why autocentric *ubuntu* so easily finds friends among those who cite or remember growing up with small-scale bucolic exemplars of *ubuntu* in action⁵²³. But this is not the case; in large-scale societies such reputation economies lack the scope to adequately police cheats, and broad willingness to sacrifice for others is neither a prudent decision for the individual, nor the basis of a stable equilibrium within society. Under such circumstances trust and self-sacrifice are frequently prohibitive risks, and harming others more likely to be prudentially beneficial to the individual (and, as I noted earlier, the likelihood increases that social networks are sufficiently attenuated that victims could be effectively disconnected from our own network of care).

What Metz' objections take seriously is that *ubuntu qua* moral theory must be applicable always and everywhere, sufficient to compel the agent to sacrifice herself or avoid

⁵²² (Metz 2007, 384)

⁵²³ This is a not-infrequent pattern. A recent example is Moeketsi Letseka's paper "Educating for Ubuntu", delivered at a workshop on the Philosophy of D. A. Masolo held at the University of Johannesburg on the 25th of March 2012.

murdering an innocent in *all* contexts, and not simply in the parochial contexts noted as exemplars of *ubuntu*. More to the point, if all that *ubuntu* amounts to is the claim that in some circumstances the agent's prudential good and what is intuitively morally good coincide, it is not ultimately making a particularly novel or interesting claim. In turning to traditional African accounts of communitarianism, moral theorists ought surely to be doing more than reiterating the findings of game theory, *sans* qualifications about scaling. Rather, what is appealing in *ubuntu* is the suggestion that traditional exemplars point to value claims *beyond* the merely prudential, emphasising morally relevant aspects of life which are not sufficiently emphasised in theories issuing from modern, large-scale social contexts precisely because they are at odds with obvious prudence in such contexts. What is novel and interesting about *ubuntu*, that is, is that it aims to provide reasons to risk sacrifice on behalf of others *even when this conflicts with* our prudential best interests (to at least some degree). Metz' account is capable of doing this, where an autocentric account of *ubuntu* is not, even augmented as I suggested in the early part of this chapter.

Two things follow from this. In the first place, a relevant test of any account of *ubuntu qua* moral theory seems to be whether it justifies a specific response as readily in the context of a large-scale contemporary society — defined by common interaction with strangers and attenuated reputation economies — as in the parochial context of small-scale societies. A viable moral theory, it seems plausible to say, ought to justify intuitively moral responses in both contexts. In the second case if, as it now seems reasonable to conclude, autocentric *ubuntu* is not up to this task, then advocates of a viable aretaic account of *ubuntu* ought to seek elsewhere. Here Metz agrees that a perfectionist account, on which rightness is not a matter of developing the self, but rather of “developing selves in general,”⁵²⁴ is still open to those pursuing an aretaic account of *ubuntu*. I develop and defend such an account the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to develop an autocentric account of *ubuntu* able to withstand Metz' objections to U4, and thus provide a direct response to the Immoralist. Having concluded that even the strongest such account of *ubuntu* is not viable in the face of

⁵²⁴ (Metz 2007, 387)

further objections however, I suggest that the initial attractiveness of such an account may have resulted from an overemphasis on parochial exemplars of community which the best account of *ubuntu* would do well not to rely on. Given the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that the project of responding to the Immoralist by reducing moral values to prudential ones is not, ultimately, one *ubuntu* can pursue.

Chapter 4: Ubuntu as Perfectionist

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that a perfectionist *ubuntu* not only provides the best account of *ubuntu* as aretaic, but also best captures what is attractive in *ubuntu simpliciter*, and lacking from Metz' account. After introducing Hurka's concept of perfectionism (and the criteria he outlines for developing a perfectionist theory), I will propose a perfectionism derived from an account of human nature congruent with *ubuntu*, and refine it in response to the two most significant objections to such an account thus far. These assert that a perfectionist *ubuntu* cannot plausibly account for the intrinsic value of developing one's continence or organising one's mental states; or of pure intellectual enquiry. I conclude the chapter by proposing a refined account capable of meeting these objections.

Before I begin however, it is worth surveying progress up to this point. In the second chapter I argued that an aretaic account of *ubuntu* is *prima facie* attractive for three reasons: that *ubuntu* and aretaic theories share many of the same characteristic concerns and approaches; that *ubuntu* seems amenable to a formulation of "Plato's Requirement on the Virtues;" and that dispositional state-descriptions are a better explanatory fit for relationships than are act-descriptions. I then noted that an aretaic account of *ubuntu* might take the form of either an autocentric or a perfectionist theory. In chapter three I critically examined the potential for an autocentric account – "probably the dominant interpretation of African ethics in the literature"⁵²⁵ – to withstand Metz' objections to it. Such an account, should it prove viable, would be particularly supportive of Plato's Requirement, since moral goodness would reduce to prudential benefit (*ceteris paribus*).⁵²⁶ Having concluded that an autocentric account of *ubuntu* is not viable, however, neither is this reductive response to the Immoralist. Aretaic *ubuntu* is certainly not unique in this regard though, and setting such a project aside need not be a damning objection. As Hurka puts it,

some philosophers find perfectionism intriguing because they think it has grand ambitions... but the ambitions are chimerical for any morality, and we do

⁵²⁵ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 331)

⁵²⁶ In Svensson's terms, this is one way to an "Aristotelian view" (Svensson 2006, 20).

perfectionism no service by considering it only in the context of an impossible philosophical project.⁵²⁷

If turning to perfectionism concedes that *ubuntu* has no *special advantage* over other theories with regard to the Immoralist, this need not suggest that perfectionism is disconnected from aretaic claims that those without *ubuntu* are harmed, and those who exemplify it benefit. But for the perfectionist, Tutu's claim that apartheid's perpetrators were "inexorably being dehumanised"⁵²⁸ need not be defended by showing that the perpetrators' lives were necessarily worse off *prudentially*: it is sufficient that they cannot realise what is intrinsically valuable in human life. And if a life characterised by *ubuntu* is most preferable, it is for embodying properties which are intrinsically valuable, or valuable "regardless of how much a person enjoys or wants them."⁵²⁹ On Hurka's account, then, "perfectionism is not a magical *entrée* into morality, but a substantive position within it. It assumes a general willingness to act on moral ideals, and proposes a specific ideal to follow."⁵³⁰ This is the project of most normative moral theories, and certainly a sufficiently attractive goal for *ubuntu*.

Perfectionism and its Appeal

In his *Perfectionism*⁵³¹ and related work,⁵³² Thomas Hurka isolates an approach common to a range of moral theorists, providing a definitive resource for discussing this "perfectionism" as such. As he articulates it,

In a broad sense perfectionism is any moral view centred on a conception of the good that values human excellences regardless of how much a person enjoys or wants them. As so understood, perfectionism can affirm many different values: knowledge, the achievement of difficult goals, moral virtue, the creation or appreciation of art, deep personal relations, and more. In a narrower sense, perfectionism is a version of this view that grounds its substantive values in a more abstract ideal of realising human nature. *Its central claim is that the human good consists in developing whatever properties are fundamental to human nature, and if*

⁵²⁷ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 30)

⁵²⁸ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 32)

⁵²⁹ (Hurka, *Nietzsche: Perfectionist* 2007, 10)

⁵³⁰ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 30).

⁵³¹ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993)

⁵³² (Hurka, *Nietzsche: Perfectionist* 2007).

*it affirms specific goods such as knowledge and achievement it is for embodying these properties.*⁵³³

Hurka finds this broad perfectionism across a range of theorists including but exceeding virtue ethics' conventional canon: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Marx, Hegel, Bradley, and Nietzsche, and also "Spinoza, Kant, Green, and Bosanquet,"⁵³⁴ "Leibniz...Brentano, Rashdall and Moore."⁵³⁵ The strategy common to theories proposed by this otherwise diverse group is to isolate intuitively attractive features which "constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity"⁵³⁶ and from there propose a normative account which "develops these properties to a high degree or realises what is central to human nature."⁵³⁷ Hurka points to the various forms of this basic approach in the work of a number of philosophers:

Aristotle and Aquinas think it is human nature to be rational, and that a good human being exercises rationality to a high degree. Marx views humans as both productive, because we transform nature through our labour, and social, because we do so co-operatively. The best life, he concludes, develops both capacities maximally, as will happen under communism. For Idealists such as Hegel and Bradley, humans are but one manifestation of Absolute Spirit, and their best activities most fully realise identity with Spirit, as social life does in one realm, and art, religion, and philosophy do in another. Even Nietzsche reasons this way, saying that humans essentially exercise a will to power and are most admirable when their wills are most powerful.⁵³⁸

Hurka argues that all extant members of the set "broad perfectionism"⁵³⁹ fall short of providing the best articulation of the basic idea's promise. As such, he undertakes to distil perfectionism into its most plausible form, developing it in isolation from theoretical "accretions"⁵⁴⁰ (including the response to the Immoralist) into a distinct "narrow perfectionism"⁵⁴¹ of his own. Like Aristotle's, Hurka's account takes rationality to be the essential feature of humanity to be developed (though his account is distinct from Aristotle's in a number of ways).

⁵³³ (Hurka, Nietzsche: Perfectionist 2007, 10) My Italics.

⁵³⁴ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 3).

⁵³⁵ (Hurka, Nietzsche: Perfectionist 2007, 10).

⁵³⁶ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 3)

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 4)

⁵⁴⁰ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 23)

⁵⁴¹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 4)

The account of perfectionist *ubuntu* I outline in this chapter will necessarily differ from Hurka's own narrow perfectionism, and I will not discuss his substantive account in detail or seek explicitly to defend my account as the most plausible version of perfectionism *simpliciter*. While part of defending such a view against objections will turn out to involve arguing that it is at least competitive with Hurka's own theory, we have different concerns: in Hurka's case, to provide the best account of perfectionism *simpliciter*; in mine, to provide the best perfectionist account developed from *ubuntu's* account of human nature. That said, the methodology by which Hurka develops his narrow account provides a useful guide, and I will rehearse his application of it to initial concerns, in order to demonstrate the grounds on which he excludes certain options. Before doing so, however, it is worth noting what Hurka finds appealing in perfectionism, and how this allows for a useful articulation of my concerns with Metz' account of *ubuntu*.

According to Hurka, Perfectionism has "at least three claims on present moral thought."⁵⁴² The first of these is "an appealing central idea. That the human good rests somehow in human nature is, although elusive, also deeply attractive."⁵⁴³ Hurka supports this view by pointing to the idea's history, noting that "If moralists as diverse as Aquinas, Marx, and Nietzsche use the same idea to ground their views, it must have intrinsic appeal."⁵⁴⁴ If this is a reason to consider perfectionism attractive to moral philosophy *simpliciter*, then it is so *a fortiori* for philosophers of *ubuntu*; which, in its most common form, is simply a description of human nature. Indeed, it is significant that most accounts of *ubuntu* work from defining human beings as necessarily interdependent to arguing that this somehow entails the constellation of normative moral claims associated with African communitarianism. This sounds very much like claiming that "the human good rests somehow in human nature,"⁵⁴⁵ such that perfectionism provides an attractive theoretical structure for this project.

Beyond the general attractiveness of the approach, Hurka argues that "perfectionism, when combined with a well-grounded theory of human nature, entails attractive particular judgements" about what is intrinsically valuable and, finally, "offers to systematise these

⁵⁴² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 4)

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

particular judgements.”⁵⁴⁶ Hurka recalls Moore’s isolation test⁵⁴⁷ with the second claim, noting that “many of us believe that states such as knowledge, friendship, and the completion of challenging tasks are good intrinsically, that is, apart from any satisfactions they may bring.”⁵⁴⁸ Where Moore was concerned with the unjustified reduction of complex valuable states to specific values⁵⁴⁹ however, Hurka has the opposite worry; that the isolation test alone leaves us with a handful of disconnected value claims, which would be improved by a systematising account. Thus he argues that “We initially judge many states to be intrinsically good; a morality that grounds them all in human nature can add coherence and system to our views.”⁵⁵⁰ These goals too seem attractive for a moral theory, and all the more so given their fittingness with *ubuntu*’s characteristic descriptions. True to the broader aretaic critique of modern moral philosophy however, Hurka does not stop there:

Not only is perfectionism attractive, but its study also points to defects in current moral philosophy. On the view now dominant among philosophers, morality concerns only acts that affect other people. It tells us not to frustrate others’ desires or interfere with their freedom but says nothing about what we or they should choose for ourselves. Perfectionism strongly rejects this view. It has an ideal for each human – that she develop her nature – and it may criticise her for failing to develop it. (It may also criticise her for failing to help others develop their nature, but this is not the only criticism it can make.) In my view, its acceptance of *self-regarding duties* is a great strength in perfectionism... This point can be put in another way. If the moralities that are currently most studied have an account of the good, it is *subjective*, holding that whether something is good depends on whether it satisfies someone’s desires or answers to positive feelings he has. Such an account cannot support serious self-regarding duties, for it excludes any claims about what humans ought to desire.⁵⁵¹ But perfectionism, either broadly or narrowly understood, has an *objective* theory of the good. It holds that certain states or activities are good, not because of any connection with desire, but in themselves. Because its claims about value are objective, they differ essentially from those canvassed in recent philosophy.⁵⁵²

This critique in terms of self-regarding duties is a specific instance of my concerns in the second chapter, that a normative theory articulated exclusively through act-descriptions

⁵⁴⁶ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 4-5)

⁵⁴⁷ (Moore 1993, 235-253): §112-§123 .

⁵⁴⁸ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 4-5)

⁵⁴⁹ See his discussion of “neglecting the principle of organic unities” (Moore 1993, 235): §112.

⁵⁵⁰ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 4-5)

⁵⁵¹ Lest this characterisation seem somewhat unfair to Kantians, a number of whom engage with self-regarding duties, it is worth remembering that Hurka includes Kant within the broad set of perfectionists. Having said as much, Hurka is not convinced by Kant’s approach (Hurka 1993, 19-20, 65), and may consider the sorts of self-regarding duties available to Kantians to still be too vaguely defined.

⁵⁵² (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 4-5)

leaves out morally relevant normative concerns with the agent's own character (since act-descriptions function almost exclusively to articulate actions aimed outside of the self). Interestingly, Metz has argued that a key distinction between Kantian (and perhaps Utilitarian) theories and *ubuntu* is that the latter asserts no self-regarding moral duties for a human being in isolation (alone on an island, for example). To the extent that they argue for self-regarding duties, the former theories assert that they apply always and everywhere, whereas "African ethics imply that morality is possible only through interaction with others," entailing that "a person who is utterly alone might be more or less happy, but not more or less dutiful. Morality, from a resolutely African perspective, arises only from relationships."⁵⁵³ This seems correct, and a variant of this concern features in Metz' objection to a perfectionist *ubuntu* on the grounds that it does not entail obligations to self-development *simpliciter* (only to self-development in ways relevant to sociability). For the moment, however, it should be noted that this is not to claim that *ubuntu* cannot account at all for self-regarding duties, but merely that it has a distinctive account of the context in which moral duties⁵⁵⁴ come to bear on agents. Perhaps another way to cash out *ubuntu's* position is to say that the isolated individual is in the same moral position as the comatose individual: it is not that the moral pressure toward self-development ceases to be in this context, but rather that it is incoherent to invoke such pressure without the possibility to realise or exercise it. Within the social context there is no reason to doubt that *ubuntu* asserts a moral obligation to develop oneself *through* and *for* relationships with others, arising whenever such relationships do, and that any human being presented with opportunities for such relationships has self-regarding duties to so develop herself. Indeed, such a view is not simply compatible with *ubuntu*, it resonates well with Tutu and Menkiti's accounts of moral pressure to develop our character to fully embody *ubuntu*. Once more, the aims and characteristic concerns of perfectionism and *ubuntu* seem to coincide.

But perhaps the most attractive feature of perfectionism for *ubuntu's* advocates appears when we return to the fit between perfectionism's methods and *ubuntu's* characteristic

⁵⁵³ (Metz, *African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality* 2009, 340)

⁵⁵⁴ I use the word "duties" advisedly here, noting with Lawrence Blum that we "sometimes use the language of 'duty' as a convenient way to refer to [the] territory of being morally pulled, or feeling some sort of requirement to do something. The territory itself, however, includes other moral motives – such as compassion, or the holding of certain principles, that are not coextensive with duty as ordinarily construed" (Blum 1994, 145).

descriptions. “To develop the best or most defensible perfectionism,” Hurka argues, “we need, most fundamentally, the best concept of human nature.”⁵⁵⁵ Developing such an account, he argues, requires two tests: first “our nature as defined must seem in itself morally significant. Second, the specification must have intuitively plausible consequences.”⁵⁵⁶ In this light we can recognise the proverbial claims expressed by “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” “*obra ye nnoboa*,” and *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu* as expressing (morally significant) claims about human nature, and *ubuntu*’s constellation of characteristically African moral claims as the (intuitively plausible) consequences thereof. Perfectionism thus allows us to do justice to the persistent references to human nature invoked by African moral theorists. Metz’ account, by contrast, is focused only on the second concern, providing a plausible and coherent account of the constellation. While important work, this approach seems only to account for part of what most descriptions of *ubuntu* seek explicitly to articulate, thus sacrificing a significant portion of what African philosophers have found attractive in *ubuntu*. If a plausible and coherent perfectionist *ubuntu* can be developed, then, it would be most attractive for its ability to accommodate as relevant *more* of *ubuntu*’s characteristic formulation than Metz’ account. I turn now to outlining such an account.

Hurka’s Perfectionist Methodology

In developing his own narrow perfectionism, Hurka provides the best and most thoroughgoing extant methodology for developing a perfectionist moral theory. I will therefore spend the next few pages on a fairly close reading of his outline of this particular methodology, demonstrating where relevant the African philosophical claims commensurate with those he rejects.

Hurka’s methodology begins by describing a reflective equilibrium test specifically relevant to perfectionism;⁵⁵⁷ then arguing that the properties characteristic of human nature are best understood as some properties essential to humans *qua* living beings;⁵⁵⁸ identifying theoretical “accretions” frequently found in perfectionist accounts but not necessary to

⁵⁵⁵ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 9)

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁵⁸ (Hurka 1993, 10-19)

perfectionism as such;⁵⁵⁹ and proposing a method for defining which properties are relevantly essential.⁵⁶⁰

Since he argues that the best account of perfectionism must derive from the best concept of human nature, Hurka proposes a specific version of reflective equilibrium any such concept of human nature must satisfy, in the form of “two tests”: the account of human nature must itself seem morally significant, and its consequences must also be intuitively attractive.⁵⁶¹ Meeting these requirements reasonably constrains the sorts of concepts acceptable as accounts of a perfectable human nature. As Hurka elaborates,

A perfectionist concept of nature assigns intrinsic value to certain properties, and these must on their own seem morally worth developing. A concept of nature may fail this test by not including some properties that do seem valuable. This flaw is less serious, showing at most that perfectionism needs to be supplemented by other moral ideas. It is more damaging if a concept of nature includes properties that on their own seem morally trivial – if it gives great value to what, intuitively, lacks it. This is a telling objection to the concept. A morality based on the concept will be hard to accept because it flouts our particular judgements about value. Let us give this last objection a name: the *wrong-properties objection*. Then we have a dual task [...] *we want to specify a concept of nature that picks out a subset of human properties by using a criterion that is intrinsically appealing and true to the perfectionist idea. We also want a concept that avoids the wrong-properties objection, by having fall under it only properties that seem in their own right worth developing.* We can hope that these two desiderata will coincide. If the perfectionist idea is genuinely appealing, the concept of nature most faithful to it should also have the most plausible consequences. Conversely, if a concept of nature picks out wrong properties, it should somehow deviate from the perfectionist idea.⁵⁶²

As to what it means for a theory to define what is characteristically human, Hurka notes that perfectionists have traditionally appealed either to what is distinctive of human beings,⁵⁶³ what is essential to human beings,⁵⁶⁴ or whatever features are both distinctive and

⁵⁵⁹ (Hurka 1993, 19-36)

⁵⁶⁰ (Hurka 1993, 33-36)

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 9-10) My italics.

⁵⁶³ Here he cites Plato’s definition of a thing’s good as whatever “it alone can perform better than anything else” (Plato 1992, 353a); Aristotle’s exclusion of nutrition and perception, as they are shared by plants and animals (Aristotle 2000, 1097b33-1098a2); Kant’s definition of perfection as developing powers “characteristic of humanity (as distinguished from animality)” (Kant, The Doctrine of Virtue: Part 2 of The Metaphysics of Morals 1964, 51); and Marx’ arguments that human labour is distinct from any animals’ activity (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology 1977, 160), (Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (excerpt) 1977, 82) (Marx, Capital Vol 1 1977, 283-284). (Hurka 1993, 10)

⁵⁶⁴ He cites Hegel (Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit 1977, 297) and (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Right 1967, 153); Marx (Marx 1977, 83, 89); and Nietzsche (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 1966, 186) and

essential. He rejects the distinctiveness view for two reasons. The first is that he suspects, *pace* Aristotle, that even human digestion, in its particulars, is sufficiently distinctive when described that the grounds for considering it unique are unclear. The second is that the distinctiveness view falls afoul of the wrong-properties objection:

Humans have some attractive distinctive properties, but they have many others that are morally trivial. Humans may be uniquely rational, but they are also the only animals who make fires, despoil the environment, and kill things for fun. A distinctiveness perfectionism implies that developing these properties is intrinsically good – and absurd implication.⁵⁶⁵

The essence view is more attractive, he argues,⁵⁶⁶ since “that a property is essential to humans is a fact only about humans; it involves no other species. Moreover, it seems to be a fact of just the right kind. A kind’s essential properties fix its boundaries of extension; they determine what is and is not a member.”⁵⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the essence view too falls to the wrong-properties objection, by including intuitively trivial properties as essential:

Whatever their other essential properties, all humans are necessarily self-identical, necessarily red if red, and necessarily occupiers of space. None of these properties seem intrinsically worth developing [...] It may be replied that these trivial properties do not admit of degrees, so including them in human nature cannot affect the important perfectionist judgements distinguishing different modes of living. There may be something to this reply, but I doubt that there is enough. Can we be certain that no trivial essential properties admit of degrees? If humans necessarily occupy space, may some not do so more by occupying more space? More importantly, a concept of nature that includes morally idle properties is, to put it mildly, inelegant.

(Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 1968, 693) as explicitly advocating essence, Aristotle, Aquinas and Plato as using synonymous conceptions of “form” and “soul” (Hurka 1993, 12). He adds that “other claims that seem equivalent to ones about essence are: that perfection consists in the conformity of human existence with its ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ (Hegel, Marx, Bradley), that something is the ‘species-being’ or ‘species-activity’ of humans (Marx), that something constitutes ‘life’ or humans’ ‘life activity’ (Marx, Nietzsche), and that certain capacities belong to a human’s ‘real’ or ‘true self,’ as opposed to his ‘apparent self’ (Kant, Bradley) (Hurka 1993, 193-194, n12).

⁵⁶⁵ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 11) On the same page he diagnoses the source of this difficulty, arguing that “if the distinctiveness view fails the second test about consequences, it because it fails the first test, that is, fails to respect our original understanding of ‘nature.’ Whatever it is, human nature must be something located in humans and dependent only on facts about humans. For this reason it cannot consist in distinctive properties. To say a property is distinctive is not just to say something about humans. It is to say that the property is possessed by humans *and not by other species*. It is to say as much about non-humans as about humans, and how can facts about non-humans affect *our* nature and *our* good?”

⁵⁶⁶ On a Kripkean understanding of essence, on which “an essential property of a kind is one the kind possesses necessarily, or possesses in every possible world where it exists” (Ibid).

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

If narrow perfectionism is a serious moral ideal, it should be specifiable without such clutter.⁵⁶⁸

In light of this, a hybrid strategy – using features both essential to and distinctive of humans – seems attractive,⁵⁶⁹ as it excludes distinctive-but-not-essential properties like making fires or despoiling the environment, and essential-but-not-distinctive properties like occupying space.⁵⁷⁰ Unfortunately, as Hurka puts it,

The view inherits defects from the distinctiveness view. It shares the difficulty about what is and is not distinctive, say, about the human digestive system. It also makes our good depend on facts about other animals. Just as a property can cease to be distinctive because of changes to other species, it can also cease to be essential-and-distinctive.⁵⁷¹

These examples, in addition to ruling out pedigreed but ineffective strategies for defining human nature, ably demonstrate the application of Hurka's two tests. After culling the bulk of strategies traditionally used to define human nature, Hurka refines his position to settle on those properties "*essential to humans and conditioned on their being living things*,"⁵⁷² which he calls the "essence-and-life view."⁵⁷³ This view is attractive in that "it excludes trivial essential properties we share with inanimate matter, such as self-identity and occupying space," and "does not depend on difficult decisions about distinctiveness or make our good depend on other species," while accounting for perfectionism's traditional emphasis on "the good life."⁵⁷⁴ Hurka then argues that a perfectionism conforming to the essence-and-life view is capable of withstanding the general objection to moral claims derived from human nature: that such accounts of human nature are not simply descriptive, but partly evaluative. He does so by noting that the relevant evaluations need not be *morally* evaluative, since,

⁵⁶⁸ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 12)

⁵⁶⁹ And, indeed, Hurka argues that at least "Aristotle, Aquinas, and Marx" (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 13) appeal to both essence and distinctiveness.

⁵⁷⁰ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 13)

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. On the same page he adds the objection that this account pushes perfectionism away from the idea that bodily properties ought to be included as perfectible, where he believes they should, but this is not particularly relevant to the current discussion.

⁵⁷² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 16) Italics in original.

⁵⁷³ Ibid. Naturally he arrives at this position through further argumentation (Hurka 1993, 13-16, 18-22) but, having demonstrated the application of his test criteria, I do not find it necessary to rehearse all of his remaining arguments. Suffice it for current purposes to say that this final view seems justified.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

If we believe, with Kripke, that its atomic structure is essential to an element such as gold, this is not because of a *moral* preference for atomic properties. If anything, it is because of an explanatory preference. A common epistemological view holds that essential properties are identified by their central role in good scientific explanations. We know that its atomic structure is essential to gold, the view holds, because this structure is central to the best explanations of gold's weight, colour, and other properties.⁵⁷⁵

As long as our account of nature is not shaped by moral evaluations, that is, it avoids vicious circularity. For this reason, Hurka argues that perfectionism ought not to be, as most are, "moralistic." "A moralistic perfectionism," as he stipulates the term,

takes one human essential property to be something like practical rationality, and characterises this property in such a way that realising it to a high degree requires developing dispositions commonly considered virtuous, such as temperance, justice, and honesty, or abiding by the rules – 'do not kill,' 'do not lie' – commonly counted as moral. Moralism makes goodness by perfectionist standards in part the same as goodness by the lights of commonsense morality. It makes the degree to which humans develop their humanity depend on the degree to which they fulfil popular notions of morality.⁵⁷⁶

Given that Hurka's first test stipulated that an account of human nature must be morally attractive, this strong position against moralism may seem odd. What Hurka takes exception to, however, is not normative moral content at the level of the account of human nature, but definitional gerrymandering intended to make such a definition conform to a conventional account of morality. While perfectionism advocates for "in Kant's terminology... categorical, not hypothetical imperatives,"⁵⁷⁷ Hurka shares Nietzsche's suspicion that such imperatives map too neatly onto conventional morality, and wants to keep conventional morality's thumb off the scale. As he puts it:

It is one thing to use moral judgements to fine-tune a concept of nature; doing so is acceptable and even necessary... it is quite another to let moral considerations affect one's claims about what falls under a concept of nature once that is defined. Moralistic perfectionists, too eager to square themselves with commonsense morality, do that latter and make claims about human nature that, on any acceptable definition of nature, are false.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁵ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 19)

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁷ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 17)

⁵⁷⁸ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 20). An example of such a false conception discussed on the same page, which may give Kantians pause, is constraining the definitions of rationalist such that a burglar must necessarily be less rational than a philanthropist.

This seems, initially, to be problematic for my project, given that I intend to argue that a perfectionism developed along Hurka's lines will yield a justification for *ubuntu's* constellation of characteristic morally normative claims. Whether I can do so without unjustifiably fine-tuning remains to be seen, but there is reason for hope: *ubuntu*, in any formulation, begins with a description of human nature as radically interdependent, and whatever property is selected ought to capture this interdependence. This is not itself a richly stipulative moral account, though it is one which seems likely to entail normative claims about relating to others, without untoward theoretical tampering. That is, while Hurka's concerns ought to be borne in mind by my account (and any attempt to develop a perfectionist account of *ubuntu*), interdependence does not seem so rich a starting point that conformity to conventional morality is necessarily smuggled in, and vigilance can prevent its undue appearance as the theory is developed. If such an account is developed with due attention to the risk or moralistic assumptions however, it would certainly be possible, and perhaps unsurprising, were it entail commitments like those Metz has grouped together as promoting harmonious relationships.

Having argued against moralism, Hurka next suggests a number of other theoretical "accretions"⁵⁷⁹ common to perfectionist theories which should be avoided. These are: that self-development makes us "more real;"⁵⁸⁰ that perfectionism entails that the freedom to develop oneself is the highest form of freedom;⁵⁸¹ that developing our nature fulfils our function or purpose *qua* human;⁵⁸² the "natural tendency doctrines"⁵⁸³ (that humans tend historically toward greater development of their nature, that we naturally desire to develop our natures, or that doing so is necessarily a source of pleasure) ; and the accretion I began this chapter with, that perfectionism can ground morality in non-moral properties.⁵⁸⁴ While recognisably mainstays of much perfectionist thought, none of these are entailed by the idea of developing human nature or by that nature conforming to the essence-and-life view. To include these accretions in a perfectionist theory thus multiplies explanatory entities

⁵⁷⁹ (Hurka 1993, 23)

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid. Hurka finds this claim in (Green 1988, 372) and (Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 2nd Edition 1927, 57). Since this seems the accretion least relevant to perfectionist *ubuntu*, I will not return to it.

⁵⁸² (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 23-24)

⁵⁸³ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 24-26)

⁵⁸⁴ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 30)

unnecessarily, committing to claims which either do no additional explanatory work, or entail absurdity.

It is noteworthy that the first unnecessary accretion on Hurka's list is the claim that "in developing our nature we become more *real*, or acquire more *existence*,"⁵⁸⁵ which he finds defended in Aquinas,⁵⁸⁶ Spinoza,⁵⁸⁷ and the Idealism of F.H. Bradley⁵⁸⁸ and Bernard Bosanquet.⁵⁸⁹ This is interesting in light of the bundle of African philosophical claims which seem to pursue parallel commitments: increasing "life force" as Tempels⁵⁹⁰ and a number of subsequent African philosophers⁵⁹¹ advocate; becoming more "*fully human*"⁵⁹² or "*really human*" as Tutu,⁵⁹³ Menkiti⁵⁹⁴ and others⁵⁹⁵ argue. I have already suggested that supernaturalist accounts of life-force entail unnecessary commitments to metaphysics, and Hurka says much the same of these and all other vitalist theories: "Does any new moral guidance flow from the idea that in developing our natures we gain reality as well as we do what we ought? Does the theory acquire new foundations? If not, this strange doctrine should be discarded."⁵⁹⁶ Hurka is confident that the answer, for the precedents he cites, is clearly no, and that talk of becoming more real can only be a "rhetorical flourish."⁵⁹⁷ It may be that invoking the metaphysic of "*seriti*"⁵⁹⁸ does indeed propose new foundations for a perfectionist *ubuntu*. But, to explain why increasing life force cannot be achieved as easily though disharmonious means such as dominating others, such accounts seem either to depend on suspiciously constrained metaphysical definitions (*seriti* just doesn't flow that way), or to refer back to the value of harmonious relationships themselves. In the first instance, the project of describing the metaphysics of fields of life-force such that it favours

⁵⁸⁵ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 23)

⁵⁸⁶ (Aquinas 1981, 1a, q5, art. 1)

⁵⁸⁷ (Spinoza 1955, Book 2, def 6)

⁵⁸⁸ (Bradley, Appearance and Reality 1893, 360)

⁵⁸⁹ (Bosanquet 1899, 132)

⁵⁹⁰ (Tempels, Bantu Philosophy 1969, 51)

⁵⁹¹ (Setiloane 1986, 13), and (Shutte 1993, 52) certainly. In addition, (Metz, African Ethics 2013) finds this life-force view in (Dzobo 1992), (Kasenene 1994), (Bujo, The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South 1997), (Magesa 1997) and (Iroegbu and Echekwube 2005, 78-83, 435-439).

⁵⁹² (Shutte 2001, 30).

⁵⁹³ In (Waldmeir 1998, 268)

⁵⁹⁴ (Menkiti 1984), and (Menkiti 2004, 326).

⁵⁹⁵ (Pearce 1990, 147), (Bhengu 1996, 27), and (Letseka 2000, 186).

⁵⁹⁶ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 23)

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ (Setiloane 1986, 13), (Shutte 1993, 46-58).

harmony over disharmony seems to invite the definitional gerrymandering Hurka sought to avoid by excluding moralism, in addition to my general qualms about invoking rich metaphysics to discuss value. In the second, since taking something like harmony seems by itself to account for *ubuntu*, there seems little reason to undertake such an unpromising metaphysical excursion. Taking Hurka's objection seriously, then, suggests that perfectionist *ubuntu* ought to shed the accretion of conflating developing our nature with increasing our ontological *reality*.

The next accretion worth avoiding is a similarly problematic metaphysical excursion: the claim that human beings have a function, and that this function defines our nature. Famously propounded in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁵⁹⁹ this "function argument" depends from a presumed teleology Aristotle saw as "a primitive fact about nature, but some perfectionists ground [in] theology,"⁶⁰⁰ but which contemporary philosophers find difficult to defend.⁶⁰¹ However, "the claim that, in doing what is good, a human also fulfils the human purpose does not alter the theory's account of what is good or right. It has no concrete moral implications,"⁶⁰² and perfectionism therefore has no reason to assert this claim or commit to its defence. As such, a perfectionist account of *ubuntu* ought not to invest in defending the normative weight of Tutu's claim that "we are made for togetherness, for friendship, for community, for family; that we are created to live in a delicate network of interdependence;"⁶⁰³ or Lufuluabo's conflation of "the realisation of what human nature demands" with "that for which humans were created and exist."⁶⁰⁴ These things may well be essential to humans *qua* living beings, or entailed by something which is, but our being "made for" them does no explanatory work.

Similarly, Hurka argues against a "family of *natural tendency doctrines*," which "claim, optimistically, that humans tend naturally to develop their nature to a high degree, and perhaps to the highest degree possible."⁶⁰⁵ The most familiar of these is Marx and Hegel's

⁵⁹⁹ (Aristotle 2000, 1097b23-1098a17) [*]

⁶⁰⁰ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 24)

⁶⁰¹ Though some, such as (Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* 2002, 21-23), attempt to do so, to maintain the integrity of Aristotle's justification.

⁶⁰² (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 24)

⁶⁰³ (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* 1999, 209)

⁶⁰⁴ (Lufuluabo 1962, 58), translated by and cited in (Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* 2010, 234).

⁶⁰⁵ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 24). Italics in original.

historical teleology, arguing that human society is inevitably progressing, and will culminate in the conditions under which human nature can most fully be developed. While this particular teleological doctrine may seem an easy target (and does not immediately call to mind African parallels), it illustrates the type of a natural tendency doctrine, and Hurka finds this type also in the more widely espoused claims that humans themselves tend naturally to desire developing their nature to its highest degree,⁶⁰⁶ or to take pleasure in doing so.⁶⁰⁷ Given that togetherness, friendship, community, and other forms of shared-selfhood associated with *ubuntu* all seem intuitively desirable and pleasurable, those of us advocating a perfectionist *ubuntu* may well be tempted to consider this relevant, as indeed I did in the previous chapter's defence of an autocentric *ubuntu*. But, Hurka notes with Aquinas⁶⁰⁸ and Bradley,⁶⁰⁹ perfectionism values the achievement of our highest perfection in itself, while the pleasure of this achievement is merely "something attendant on it."⁶¹⁰ While distinct from satisfaction-based moralities though, it is possible that pleasure could still weigh as a positive good, such that the resulting perfectionism would be "extensionally equivalent to one, supporting the same judgements about right and wrong."⁶¹¹

But "surely", Hurka argues,

no doctrine strong enough to support this equivalence is true. History has no single tendency, nor do all humans have one unifying desire. Some desire perfection but many do not, and even those who desire perfection often have competing desires that are stronger. As for the pleasure doctrine, some weak version of it seems plausible. Perfectionist activity is often enjoyable... but we cannot affirm a strong version. Although perfectionist activity is one source of pleasure, it is not the only source or always the greatest source available.⁶¹²

The function and natural tendency doctrines have traditionally been taken together to entail a teleological view on which "developing human nature is each human's 'end' in three senses. It is his metaphysical purpose, perhaps given him by God; it is what he actually strives for or desires; and it constitutes, by logical necessity, his good."⁶¹³ Such a teleology, compatible with (if not the explicit goal of) the autocentric *ubuntu* I posited in the previous

⁶⁰⁶ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 24-25)

⁶⁰⁷ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 25-26)

⁶⁰⁸ (Aquinas 1981, 1a2ae, q. 4 arts 1, 2.)

⁶⁰⁹ (Bradley, Appearance and Reality 1893, 97)

⁶¹⁰ (Aquinas 1981, 1a2ae, q. 4, art 1)

⁶¹¹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 26)

⁶¹² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 26-27)

⁶¹³ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 30)

chapter, “may encourage” philosophers to pursue a response to the Immoralist, and this is the last accretion Hurka argues should be excised from perfectionism. However tempting it is to seek “to show the incoherence of moral nihilism or to provide some logically inescapable route into morality,”⁶¹⁴ this promise seems illusory (as my previous chapter’s rehearsal of such arguments demonstrated). More to the current point, however, this project’s excursion into “metaphysics, psychology, and meta-ethics are all accretions to perfectionism. They do not affect the theory’s substantive claims about what is good and right and therefore should be abandoned.”⁶¹⁵ The perfectionism which remains when flensed of these accretions is committed to defending far fewer flanks than most accounts of virtue ethics.

It defines its ideal in terms of essential properties without tying those properties to any metaphysical purposes. It says that humans may desire perfection, but denies that there is any psychological compulsion to this... [and] it does not claim to find in human nature an ‘Archimedean point’ from which morality as a whole can be justified.⁶¹⁶

Hurka’s final methodological contribution is to propose a method for defining which human properties are relevantly essential. If perfectionism is to be developed from an essence-and-life view, then it matters that we have some procedure for defining essences. Hurka finds two such approaches predominant in the epistemic literature: the “intuitive” approach associated with Saul Kripke,⁶¹⁷ and the “scientific explanatory” approach associated with Hilary Putnam.⁶¹⁸ On the first,

we discover essential properties by making intuitive judgements in thought experiments involving candidate members of a kind. To learn whether its atomic structure is essential to gold, for example, we imagine a series of possible substances with gold’s atomic structure but a different outward appearance. If we judge all of these substances to be gold, our judgement shows that its inner composition is essential to gold and its phenomenal properties contingent. We learn what could and could not be gold by asking how we could and could not imagine gold’s existing.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁴ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 30)

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid*

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid*

⁶¹⁷ (Kripke 1980)

⁶¹⁸ (Putnam, *Is Semantics Possible?* 1975), (Putnam, *The Meaning of 'Meaning'* 1975).

⁶¹⁹ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 34)

An important *caveat* here is that the sort of essential property sought is not simply essential to humans, but “essential to humans and conditioned on their being living things.”⁶²⁰ Hurka qualifies this stipulation by noting that this corroborates the common perfectionist focus not on “a momentary state of affairs, but a whole mode of living. Aristotle, for example, says that perfection can be achieved only ‘in a complete life’.”⁶²¹ As such, Hurka argues that properties which define the good life “must contribute to a way of living by themselves being forms of life.”⁶²² While this qualification does not apply to gold, it is relevant to intuitive tests of human nature in the following sense: it is possible to imagine, coherently, human beings created *sui generis* (perhaps by God) and lacking features necessary to humans over a complete life. For example, it is sometimes argued that rationality could not develop in a lifetime without language-use, such that language-use seems essential to human rationality.⁶²³ If we assume as much for the sake of argument, the shortcomings of the simple test emerge: since it is possible to imagine a rational human being created *sui generis* without language, simply positing an example of a human condition fails to capture the relevant essence. At the scale of the complete life however, it becomes impossible to imagine rationality coming to be without language use. When applying the intuitive test to human essence then, we have reason to consider properties of human lives as a whole, and excluding merely occurrent possible properties of humans.

On the second approach,

we identify essential properties by their central role in the explanations given by good scientific theories. That gold has a certain atomic structure *explains* its colour, weight, and other phenomenal properties, but it is not in turn explained by them. Gold’s atomic structure is thus explanatorily prior to these properties, and [thus] essential.⁶²⁴

⁶²⁰ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 16).

⁶²¹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 16). The Aristotle reference is to (Aristotle 2000, 1098a18-20)

⁶²² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 16)

⁶²³ I will not defend this claim, and need not. It does seem that Wiredu commits to this strong “language-first” position when he claims that “to possess a specific concept, an idea, entails some linguistic ability, however slight (Wiredu, Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective 1996, 19). While Wiredu’s position here is not far removed from claims Dennett (The Role of Language in Intelligence 2004), among others, has made, I am not sure the position squares with empirical research on the topic (Hespos and Spelke 2004). More to the point, I am sure that we need not drill quite so far down as to provide a theory consciousness in order to describe the social interplay of rationality and language, and that the current discussion therefore need not concern itself with this debate in the philosophy of language.

⁶²⁴ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 34). My italics.

Given that the epistemological literature is unresolved as to which of these accounts is correct, but “it seems that at least one of these methods must be canonical [and] whichever is not canonical seems likely to collapse into the other, it may not matter practically which is which.”⁶²⁵ He thus proposes using both approaches, counting as essential whatever properties are picked out by both the intuitive and scientific explanatory methods. This approach seems appropriate. Having thus mapped the conceptual space available to a viable perfectionism, Hurka proceeds to populate it with an account of human nature taking rationality to be the relevantly essential feature to be perfected. In what follows, I will demonstrate an account of human nature congruent with *ubuntu* which meets all of Hurka’s methodological constraints, and avoids the errors he has noted.

Developing Perfectionist *Ubuntu*

The development of a perfectionist *ubuntu* is, then, shaped by the converging requirements of Hurka’s methodology and the theoretical project of developing a moral theory of *ubuntu*. Hurka’s methodology, to begin with, proposes both a programme and a set of constraints. What is wanted is a conception of human nature – on the essence-and-life view – which is itself both plausible and intuitively morally attractive. This conception should entail intuitively attractive normative prescriptions, and avoid entailing intuitively unattractive normative prescriptions. To develop such an account we should identify essential features through both the intuitive and explanatory methods; and test the resulting conception of human nature and its entailments for enshrining the wrong properties, via reflective equilibrium.

The perfectionism which emerges from this conception of human nature ought not to commit to or rely on teleological claims that perfecting our nature is our function, or that we tend naturally toward such perfection. Rather, it should claim only that some feature of human nature is relevantly morally valuable, and that its fullest development is most valuable. It need not defend or assume the project of converting the Immoralist on the grounds that so perfecting oneself is the only rational goal, prior to a commitment to morality. And it ought not to seek a complete justification of received morality.

⁶²⁵ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 35)

Having said as much, the project of developing *ubuntu qua* moral theory imposes its own demands. In this thesis I have argued that Metz' constellation of characteristically African normative claims picks out at least a core set of actions proscribed by *ubuntu*, such that any account of *ubuntu* ought to account for them. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that perfectionism is attractive relative to Metz' account because this constellation and its justification seem, on his reading, to leave out the entailment from an account of human nature characteristically invoked by descriptions of *ubuntu*. The project these claims leave me with it, then, is to argue that some attractive conception of human nature plausibly entails the constellation. But, if the constellation has stipulated which normative entailments are desired, am I not engaging in precisely the definitional gerrymandering Hurka disallows?

I have already argued that any account of something like interdependence seems likely to entail normative claims about relating to others without procrustean stipulation, but the issue at hand is whether I am selecting such a concept precisely for this reason, and thus begging the question. In response, it is important to note that what I aim to do here is use Hurka's explicitly perfectionist methodology to articulate an argument which is already extant in various forms. That is, I am crash-testing an extant idea, on what I must demonstrate to be its best conception, rather than generating my own, wholly new concept of human nature with the intention of matching it to the constellation. In this respect I ought to be no different than Hurka himself, who invokes rationality as his fundamental value – presumably with some hopes as to its efficacy, given its provenance – though on independent grounds to Aristotle. African moral theorists of various theoretical bents converge on the claim that human nature is defined by our radical interdependence, and that this entails a normative commitment to community (which I have argued is best captured by the constellation). In recreating this argument on its best perfectionist formulation, I aim to provide the most plausible account of this interdependence, and test whether it entails this best account of *ubuntu's* normative proscriptions (as I take it the best formulation of perfectionist *ubuntu* would, if valid). While this recreation leaves room to unjustifiably stipulate the two parts of this account into coherence, simply undertaking to test whether one entails the other does not seem to me to beg the question.

This automatically rules out one option for picking out the relevant essential property of human nature: I cannot simply convert Metz' account into a perfectionist *ubuntu* by positing *the capacity for harmonious relationships* as the relevant essential feature. Tempting and time-saving as such a move might be, it goes wrong in at least two ways. This first is that it is far too normatively prescriptive, falling immediately afoul of Hurka's concerns over moralistic tampering. The second is that such a description seems, at a glance, insufficiently basic. While human beings may defensibly be essentially capable of harmonious relationships, we are also essentially capable of a range of other relationships. While there is something attractive (and congruent with much of the theoretical thrust of *ubuntu*) in picking out capacities for relationships essential to humans, stipulating the capacity for harmonious relationships in Metz' sense does not pick out the most basic morally attractive relationships. This is so because Metz' sense of harmony, recall, is an amalgam of the more basic relationships, shared identity and solidarity. Neither of these alone need entail the other, and stipulating that the amalgam be taken as basic seems justified only by invoking the efficacy of fit with the constellation (the moralistic objection)⁶²⁶. On the other hand, we fair no better by generalising; taking as relevantly essential the capability for *any* relationships essential to human life, since this would include exploitative or otherwise morally unattractive relationships. And these are simply the first of a number of contenders to dismiss.

If I am looking for a more basic property, why not "interdependence"? I have already noted that interdependence is the thread running through a number of characteristically African claims about human life, notably the paradigmatic positions expressed by "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," "*Obra ye nnoboa*," and *funtunfunefu-denkyemfunefu*. But, while interdependence seems a concept which the relevant property of *ubuntu's* account of human nature should capture, interdependence *simpliciter* falls to the wrong-properties objection. This is because interdependence consists both in allowing others to depend on us, and on our depending upon them. It follows then, that if I am able in some capacity, but making myself less able would develop the extent to which I depend on others, then I ought to hobble myself in the relevant way, for the sake of increasing opportunities for

⁶²⁶ This is not a problem Metz' own account faces, since it is concerned only with conventional reflective equilibrium. It is only when seeking to move from an account of human nature to normative prescriptions that the problem of moralistic stipulation arises.

interdependence. But while helping others seems intuitively morally attractive, both increasing others' burden and undermining our own abilities seem intuitively to be very unattractive.

Taking another tack, what about “sociability”, our capacity for (and disposition to) associate with our fellows? Importantly, there is some ambiguity in this term. Many creatures are social, sociable, or gregarious without being so in the manner we are: social insects form incredibly cohesive social units with fellows effectively genetically identical to themselves; many herd or pack animals share resources and align goals with one another; and many primates devote significant amounts of time to grooming one another in order to maintain relationships in the context of a social environment. But what humans do is interestingly distinct from any of these alone, or what is common to them. We are altruistic toward our kin and mates, but not exclusively to them. We share resources and coordinate toward common goals, but we also share our perspectives on the world, and confirm those perspectives through interaction with one another. And while we do maintain relationships with others in a social environment through reciprocal interactions, we do so at a far higher-bandwidth, communicating our inner states and incorporating sophisticated models of the states of others.⁶²⁷ This is not to say that we are using the distinctiveness criterion rather than what is essential to pick out the relevant human properties, but it is relevant that the manner in which humans are sociable seems to demand more definition than sociability *simpliciter*, whose realisation in other animals seems not to map the particular manner in which we are social. But even if we develop a more specific account of sociability, it seems likely to run into difficulties. While sociability easily admits of degrees⁶²⁸ – we can become more social by associating with others more – it does not seem to distinguish between types of sociability: bullies and dictators can, for example, be very sociable, in the sense that they associate regularly with others, without the relationships they have with others being intuitively morally desirable. This view itself is thus intuitively unattractive, even before its normative entailments fall to the wrong-properties objection. These objections suggest that,

⁶²⁷ While some other social primates are capable of second-order (and, in the case of chimpanzees, possibly third-order) intentionality when modelling their fellows, none approach the human capacity for fifth- or sixth-order intentionality (Dunbar, Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language 1996, 102).

⁶²⁸ Thus allowing it to be perfectable.

however appealing sociability itself may be, our characteristic sociability must be captured by some more discriminating property.

A more promisingly discriminating property might be our disposition to share. As social animals, sharing of one form or another seems essential to our lives, and picks out a particular activity which seems to admit of degrees. This need not be interpreted as a thickly moralistic concept, since sharing in essence is simply apportioning resources between agents. To share or have a share of something does not itself entail any specific proportions to the sharing, so no distributive justice is smuggled in. And neither does sharing *simpliciter* pick out a single motive for doing so: there are many reasons to share a portion of our resources, including currying favour and manipulating others, so the concept of sharing need not smuggle a bias toward altruism into the essential concept of human nature. That said, sharing is at least attractive in that it presupposes an interpersonal context, and thus some commitment to considering others. That we are the sorts of beings who can and must share our lives and resources with one another seems relevant to defining our nature. This option faces difficulties, however. One difficulty is that the promise of an interpersonal context may not go far enough to distinguish types of sharing and exclude unattractive ones: if no proportionality is entailed by the concept of sharing *simpliciter*, then selfish apportioning of resources would be as deserving of development as unselfish or egalitarian apportioning. I am not convinced of this objection, as it may be that sharing is an activity such that egalitarian or unselfish apportionments clearly realise it to a higher degree than do selfish apportionments. However, I am not committed to exploring either of these claims, because there is another sense in which sharing is insufficiently specific: motive. Since sharing can be the means to a variety of ends, sharing *simpliciter* seems to under-describe the concept we are after. Not all sharing is pursued for its own sake, and many instances of sharing are pursued for motives which are intuitively morally unattractive, and this concept thus falls to the wrong-properties objection.

Since the difficulty with sharing *simpliciter* is its imprecision, however, a natural corrective measure is to make the definition more precise. If not all sharing is pursued for its own sake or from attractive motives, why not posit as our essential property some form of sharing which is? The specific form I have in mind is the description of humans living together as “sharing a life”. There are several attractive aspects to this concept. One is its provenance. A

number of authors talk about a “shared life”⁶²⁹ as central to *ubuntu*, and Metz himself uses it a shorthand for *ubuntu* when he says African morality “fundamentally values sharing a life with others”⁶³⁰, or treats a person as though her “capacity to share a life with others is (in part) the most important value in the world.”⁶³¹ Another attractive aspect is that we seem to share our lives with one another simply for the sake of doing so: taking place at the scale of a whole life, it seems incoherent to suggest that we could have an ulterior motive for sharing our lives with others. Our everyday phenomenal experience of sharing our lives with others also seems to corroborate that we do so for its own sake, which makes it attractive in that it passes Moore’s isolation test. And Tabensky, who associates “sharing a life” with Aristotelian “virtue friendship,”⁶³² argues that it has attractive entailments when he says that when

one engages with an individual not just for this or that reason, but in ways that summon the mutual expression of our characters, one engages with someone’s whole life. It is in the process of this sort of dialogical engagement that one is able to recognise one’s humanity in the fullest sense – one is able to recognise that one is relevantly like those one is sharing with – and in this manner one is best able to inform one’s actions towards others (not just friends, but persons in general) in a way that reflects a sensitivity to the subtleties of the human spirit.⁶³³

Sharing a life is, then, a fairly attractive account of our essentially human property, and as such the objections to it are somewhat subtler than to previous instances. The first of these is that it still lacks precision: picking out the shared-ness of our lives does not obviously isolate a particular activity which we can do to a greater degree. That our lives are shared with others, and that we think this is good for its own sake, may be easily acknowledged. It is less clear what this means, precisely. Which, if any, aspects of our lives do we share simply for the sake of doing so? Are there any aspects we never share (and thus ought not to, at the normative entailment stage)? Do we develop our capacity to share by sharing in certain proportions, with greater numbers of others, or more extensively with some others. If all of these, is there a lexical hierarchy to them, or some other mechanism for resolving conflicts

⁶²⁹ See (Shutte 2001, 9), (Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* 2002, 169) and (Forster 2007, 245).

⁶³⁰ (Metz, *African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality* 2009, 343)

⁶³¹ (Metz, *Ubuntu as a moral theory and Human Rights in South Africa* 2011, 548)

⁶³² (Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* 2002, 160), referring to friendship for its own sake, rather than for utility, as discussed in (Aristotle 2000, 1156a 23–4)

⁶³³ (Tabensky, *Happiness: Personhood, Community, Purpose* 2002, 169)

between their demands? It may be that the answers to these questions are not hopelessly obscure. It may be, for example, that our relevant characteristic activity is *coordinating with others* to share *whichever* aspects of our lives we choose; that *any* improvement in the quality of our lives' shared-ness develops that property; and that we resolve conflicts by seeking the resolution which best balances or distributes life's overall shared-ness. It still seems that something is lacking from this description however, such that a more precise concept or conception might illustrate clearly *why* these answers follow from the essential value of sharing a life.

A second subtle objection is that this account of our coordination-toward-shared-ness explains humans *qua* social, but does not obviously explain why humans-*qua*-social is the relevant context for what is essentially human. That is, there are other candidate essentially human properties, or at least one: rationality. But shared-ness or our coordination toward it, as stipulated, have nothing to say about this competing property. Granted, there may be many properties essential to humans and conditioned on our being living things, and not all of them morally applicable in the relevant ways. But Hurka has explicitly made a case for rationality as a competing essentially human property perfectable in the relevant way,⁶³⁴ so it would be useful if the property I promote has something to say about its relationship to rationality. Ideally, that relationship would make it lexically prior to rationality.

The answer to both of these subtler concerns, I think, becomes clear by diverting the discussion for a moment from sharing, to consider a pair of other attractive potentially essential human properties. Two attractive candidate properties essential to humans and conditioned on their being living things are rationality and language-use. Even without further conceptual specification, it is clear that both properties are essential to human lives *qua* human. Rationality seems *prima facie* to be both more relevantly morally attractive, and explanatorily prior to language-use, which may explain its popularity among perfectionists (having been chosen, on one conception or another, by Aristotle, Kant, and Hurka). It is worth noting, however, that these are properties of humans and human lives *taken as individuals*. Thus far I have worked from some concept or other which expresses humans' social or interdependent nature. But, if there is a lesson to be synthesised from various African philosophers' claims that the Western default in professional philosophy is

⁶³⁴ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 39-51)

too individualistic, surely it must move us to consider that the relevant essential feature of human lives might be an emergent property of those lives lived with others. That is, perhaps a more promising strategy than starting from concepts such as interdependence or sociability *in isolation from* discussion of other attractive essential properties is to ask whether these properties, well-canvassed by extant perfectionist philosophies, entail some emergent property which is itself an attractive candidate when considered in a social context.

Here it seems to me that an emergent property does indeed come into focus. Human beings are not only rational and language-users; interacting with one another, we direct these capacities toward characteristic ends. We are not simply beings which have complex self-reflexive inner states and suppositions about the world, but beings which communicate those states and suppositions to others. And we are not simply beings capable of ratiocination with regard to any subject, but beings who apply that capacity disproportionately to modelling the dispositions and inner states of our fellows, based on information they communicate to us. Put another way, we are not simply beings capable of a *high quality* of intensionality but, *ceteris paribus*, of *high orders* of intensionality; understanding not merely our own beliefs, but characteristically devoting much of our energy to understanding others' beliefs, and others' beliefs about our beliefs about their beliefs.⁶³⁵ In neurotypical humans this manifests as a sophisticated Theory of Mind, but even those for whom it does not address such social situations by applying both rationality and language-use. Applying our rationality and language-use in this way is ubiquitous to human lives, such that it forms the substrate to almost all of our actions, whether coordinating with one another to achieve specific goals, or sharing our perspectives on the world and confirming those perspectives through interaction with one another. This is not simply communication, but *communion*. If there is a characteristic activity picked out by these essential features in a social context, it is that we *commune* with one another.

This term is apt in a number of ways. One is that it shares with "communicate" the root "common", which captures what it is to commune: to mutually express our inner states (preferences, beliefs, evaluations, moods) such that they become common between

⁶³⁵ (Dunbar, Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language 1996, 83-87), (Dunbar, The Human Story: a new history of mankind's evolution 2004, Ch 3, "The Art of Mind-reading").

ourselves. To commune, that is, is to establish and maintain a common context for understanding one another's states. The word is also apt because to commune is to share, and specifically to share something of our lives, thus inheriting the attractiveness of that concept (since it picks out a precise sense in which we share aspects of our lives however, it does not inherit that concept's imprecision). And it is particularly apt that the verb "commune" captures that this interaction is a directed, intentional activity, rather than a passively occurring condition of life. And while "to commune" is an action undertaken by agents, *communion* is a *relationship between them* realised by this action, which captures what Metz finds philosophically novel in *ubuntu's* approach; that it proposes relationships as bearers of value. Finally, a collection of individuals disposed to commune with one another is, of course, a *community*, such that this might fairly be called a *communitarian* account of human nature.

Lest this observation be taken as moralism, note that the concept is attractive in itself. As Kant was moved by the essential distinction between mere things and those rational beings capable of apprehending value, so we might be moved by the distinction between beings capable of calling into existence a shared context for reciprocally understanding one another's inner states, and all those things which are not. This is not to say that our being *distinctive* in this regard justifies it as *human* nature: not only is distinctiveness an inadequate criterion (as Hurka has shown), but we do not know (and have no reason to commit to proving) that human beings *are* the only beings capable of communion in the relevant sense. But our capacity for communion is certainly qualitatively distinct from what many mere communicating beings are capable of, such that it bears remarking on. Intuitively, it seems a plausible source for value. And this capacity is, as I have said, ubiquitous to the activities of human lives, such that it plausibly seems essential to our nature. Before testing to see whether the concept is essential though, some more refinement is necessary.

I have posited the capacity to commune, or engage in relationships of communion, as the essential property relevantly definitive of human nature. I have characterised this capacity as something humans exercise through the joint use of our capacities for language-use and rational thought (specifically, higher-order intentionality), in reciprocal interaction with one another. This definition, while sufficient to capture individual occurrences of communion,

has not yet touched on the medium or mechanism through which communion is promoted and maintained. This medium or mechanism is ongoing social relationships: which is to say, some relationships exist to promote and maintain long-term communion. While humans are capable of short-lived relationships of communion with strangers – opening a channel to cordial communication of our states by discussing the weather or sharing a look of frustration that elevators seem to stop at every floor – it is significant that our lives are not shaped simply by a series of distinct occurrences of communion. Rather, we promote and maintain long-term dispositions toward recurrent communion through the management of social relationships with others. Here the word “disposition” may give us pause: if I assert a disposition to promote instances of communion, an interlocutor may wonder, am I not falling afoul of Hurka’s objection to the natural tendency doctrines? No. I am not asserting that humans reliably tend toward or desire the most-developed forms of communion. Rather, I am making the descriptive claim that the characteristic manner in which humans promote relationships of communion over the course of a life is through long-term relationships with others, which offer repeated opportunities to commune. The relevant property of human lives as a whole, then, is our capacity to promote long-term relationships of communion with one another.

I have now defined communion as a capacity of our social interactions, and as the goal of (some) social relationships. Since these social relationships are themselves constituted by social interactions over time, it would help to distinguish these terms more explicitly, at least to demonstrate why they are not tautological. In the first place, social interactions are not identical, even in humans, to instances of communion. As I have already noted, beings very different to humans are capable of some form of sociability, which need not demand intensional modelling any higher than second-order (“I think she thinks x”). The boundary for “social interaction” is thus very much lower than the high-bandwidth communications and higher-order intensional modelling characteristic of communion. Even among human beings, in whom the capacity for communion is ever-present, not all social interactions invoke this capacity. Two examples are how, in large crowds it is unnecessary (and wasteful of our attention) to take the intensional stance toward all those around us, and how we may choose not to initiate or respond to overtures of communion. In both of these instances it is possible to engage in functional social interactions without engaging in a communally-

constructed understanding of our respective inner states. And since communion is just one form of social relationship, there is nothing tautological in its promotion over time being a goal of some relationships. It may follow from this that a number of occurrent instances of communion are best way to secure and ongoing dispositional relationship toward communion, but this is no more tautological than saying that the best way to ensure lasting friendships is to be friendly toward others. It is perfectly coherent that a dispositional state is partially constituted by instances of what it disposes one toward.

It seems obvious at this point that Metz' harmonious relationships will be among those which promote communion, but that is hardly an unexpected result of framing a communitarian account of human nature. More to the point, at this level of description those relationships which promote communion *per sé* also include solidarity and shared-identity singly, mere cordiality toward others, loving relationships exclusive to small numbers of consequential others, and a range of other options, so the definition is not obviously stipulating moralistically. However, while broad enough to avoid excessive prescriptivism, the range of such relationships *does* seem narrow enough to avoid the wrong-properties objection. Taking "the capacity to promote long-term relationships of communion" to be the human property worth developing, that is, does not seem obviously to import any morally unattractive entailments. On the face of it then, it seems that the capacity for relationships of communion provides the most robust property for a perfectable communitarian nature thus far; it picks out both a characteristic activity of individuals which admits of degrees, and a relationship which is an emergent property of other essential human properties applied in social contexts; it is neither so prescriptive that it is moralistic, nor so wide that it entails the wrong properties; and it picks out a plausible feature of human lives as a whole. All of these make it a strong candidate account of what is relevantly essential to human nature. What remains to be shown, then, is that it *is* essential to human nature.

To begin with, on the intuitive test a feature is essentially human if, through thought-experiments, we cannot imagine a human life without it. To provide an idea of what Hurka takes to be a sufficient intuitive account, here is Hurka's intuitive defence of rationality as relevantly essential:

We do not think there were humans in the world until primates developed with sufficient intelligence, and the same view colours our judgements about possibilities. If we imagine a species with no capacity for a mental life, or with none more sophisticated than any other animals', we do not take ourselves to be imagining humans. Whatever their physical form, they are not of our species. The degree to which humans exercise rationality varies from time to time in their lives, being lower, for example, when they are asleep. But beings who never envisage or plan for a future are not, intuitively, humans.⁶³⁶

This seems plausible, and as such I will take the case for rationality as read. To meet my burden, however, I must argue that a similar case can be made for the capacity for language-use, the capacity for communion, and the capacity to realise dispositions for communion through long-term social relationships. This, it seems to me, can be done readily enough. A very similar case to Hurka's can be made for language-use, in that the current consensus has it that "the appearance of our own species, *Homo sapiens* was marked by the appearance of language"⁶³⁷ and "man's particular position in organic life on earth must be attributed largely to his use of speech and language *and* to his capacity for both concrete and abstract thought"⁶³⁸. If we imagine beings or lives without the capacity for language then, we do not take ourselves to be imagining humans or human lives. While we can imagine individual human lives without language, two points are immediately relevant: in the few recorded instances of persons raised without language, they nonetheless retained some *capacity for language*;⁶³⁹ and for those individuals, such as extreme autists, unable to communicate with others at all, it seems that we intuitively feel that they are deprived of what is most relevant to the human experience.

If the intuitive case can be made for these two essential properties, then what of the case for the emergent property: the capacity for communion? Could we imagine humans as both rational and language-using, but incapable of applying these capabilities together to create a context of common understanding of one another's inner states? It seems to me that, just as it is possible to imagine rational beings created *sui generis* without language, it is possible to imagine rational beings employing stripped-down language to convey an equivalent

⁶³⁶ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 39-40)

⁶³⁷ (Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* 1996, 112)

⁶³⁸ (Fry 1977, 2) My italics.

⁶³⁹ Children raised abusively in isolation and discovered in adolescence characteristically display the linguistic capabilities of 1-2 year-olds (Tartter 1998, 113-121), (Davis 1940), though a deaf man raised by attentive parents who could not sign attained a full linguistic capability when taught sign-language (Schaller 1995), suggesting that even language-deprived humans have an essential capacity for language.

degree of information to that found among lower primates, sufficient for social organisation without demanding complex intensional models of others. But these beings would lack, at least, culture (shared perspectives writ large), literature and fiction (which are only possible for beings capable of third-order intensionality and higher⁶⁴⁰), and loving relationships of reciprocal identification. Regardless of whether all critics are convinced that loving relationships are the basic bearers of moral value, it is unlikely that anyone can conceive of beings essentially incapable of such relationships as human. Similarly, it does not seem to be the case that we can imagine humans without fiction or culture.

The last question, then, is whether we can imagine humans possessing the capacity for communion, but lacking the capacity to realise dispositions toward communion through long-term social relationships. There are species which fit this pattern: rhinoceros, for example, spend much of their lives alone, but occasionally congregate in large gatherings where they seem occurrently socially competent without necessarily forming long-term relationships with others. But this does not seem to capture the nature of social interaction in human lives. As Kwame Gyekye puts it, “community life is not optional for any individual human person”, as we are “naturally oriented toward other persons and must have relationships with them.”⁶⁴¹ This seems correct. It seems that if we imagine a species otherwise like ourselves, but capable only of occasional communion without long-term relationships (for purposes other than mating or child-rearing) – without persistent friendships, rivalries, glancing-acquaintanceships, or solidarities – we do not take ourselves to be imagining humans. It seems then that my account has passed the intuitive test, and ought on those grounds to be taken as essential to human nature.

As to the explanatory test, recall that the criterion is that the property be central to explanations given by good scientific theories, such that it explains our phenomenal properties, without in turn being explained by them. Here Hurka accounts for rationality by arguing that “at least intentional human action [is explained] by citing beliefs and aims that make it rational.”⁶⁴² He defends this claim with more detailed arguments,⁶⁴³ but it is not necessary to rehearse them: I accept Hurka’s explanatory argument that rationality is

⁶⁴⁰ (Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* 1996, 102)

⁶⁴¹ (Gyekye, *Person and Community in African Thought* 2002, 300)

⁶⁴² (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 40)

⁶⁴³ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 40-44)

essentially human. For my emergent properties also to be essential, I will need to show that language-use and communion are also relevantly central to explanations of human nature given by good scientific theories. In addition, it is not enough that these properties be coequal floating explananda: for communion to have the necessary lexical priority, it should explain the other properties and not be explained by them.

Once again, this requirement can be met. The scientific theory I have in mind is an evolutionary account of human beings, and specifically the explanation provided by Robin Dunbar's "Social Brain" hypothesis.⁶⁴⁴ On this account, the evolution of both the rational brain and language-use in humans has been driven by their combined capacity to generate and maintain social bonds capable of sustaining larger and more successful groups (larger than any other primate, in fact). For primates, so the theory goes, there is a strong evolutionary advantage to large group size. Since such groups are comprised of individuals with their own concerns, intentions, and agendas, maintaining group cohesion demands both significant time invested in reciprocal bonding (normally achieved in primates by grooming), and significant mental capacity to model others' intentionality and track the history of interaction with each additional group member (such that increasing this capacity is the driver of increases in cognitive capacity generally). Since increasing size of primate neocortices correlates reliably with increasing group size,⁶⁴⁵ this pressure seems a plausible explanation for the trend in our primate forbears toward larger brains and greater intelligence. There is, however, an upper limit on the amount of time that can be devoted to social bonding while also attending to all other activities necessary to life, and this upper limit is roughly twenty percent of daylight hours. This would seem, *ceteris paribus*, to place an equivalent upper limit on both group size and brain size in primates, capping both at the values for chimpanzees, whose group size is fifty to fifty-five. In fact, however, humans characteristically form groups of one-hundred-and-fifty (what has come to be called "Dunbar's Number"⁶⁴⁶), and proportionately have neocortices roughly three times the size

⁶⁴⁴ See (Dunbar, The social brain hypothesis 1998), as well as (Dunbar 1996, 55-105) and (Dunbar 2004, Ch 5)

⁶⁴⁵ (Dunbar, Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates 1992), (Dunbar, Coevolution of neocortical size, group size, and language in humans 1993).

⁶⁴⁶ This number is predicted by the correlation between neocortex size and group-size, assuming the processing power needed to manage relationships at this scale is the primary demand on the neocortex. It is remarkably consistent across societies, as the average size of hunter-gatherer bands, traditional villages, families with the maximum number of simultaneous living generations, and military units (Dunbar 1996, 69-77), (Dunbar 2010). Even in large-scale industrial societies, "it seems to represent the maximum number of

of chimpanzees', despite also spending only twenty percent of our time on social interaction. According to the theory, this is the result of humans' evolution of the capacity for language-use which, by virtue of its increased efficiency in transmitting information, allows roughly three times the social interaction of grooming for the same investment of time.

On Dunbar's evolutionary account then, sociability sufficient to bond large groups of individuals together is an explanatorily essential property of primates, and the specifically high-bandwidth sociability of humans is essential to explanations of our brain and group size, and corresponding cognitive and linguistic abilities. On this account, that is, our particular form of sociability (which I take to be congruent with what I have called communion) is *explanatorily prior* to our rationality and language use (though both of these latter explain a number of other human features). It seems, then, that our capacity for communion and the long-term relationships which promote it are central to the explanations of our nature in at least some scientific theory. To avoid an excursion into evaluating the relative merits of competing evolutionary accounts, at this point I will simply stipulate that the explanatory efficacy and reasonably broad acceptance of Dunbar's theory qualify it as a *good* scientific theory, and concede that the account I have given here depends significantly on that being the case.

Having said as much, this evolutionary account only gets me half way to proving explanatory essence since, as Hurka has it, explanations of *how* a species *came to possess* certain properties are not identical to explanations of *why present properties are essential* to members of that species; and explanations of group origin do not account for what is essential to each member of the group.⁶⁴⁷

individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us... the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar" (Dunbar 1996, 77).

⁶⁴⁷ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 49). Hurka also argues that evolutionary explanations rely on *relational* properties which refer beyond the species – such as "its being yellow when its predators cannot detect yellow – and as such cannot define *essentially* human properties (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 48). This objection is directed against arguments for evolutionary fitness *simpliciter* as essential, and is successful as such. But note that this objection would not defeat explanations of any *particular* property resulting from *intra*-species relations (like sexual selection). Since I do not use Dunbar's theory to argue for evolutionary fitness *simpliciter* as essentially human, and his theory posits evolutionary responses to a social environment constituted by intra-species social relations, I take this first argument not to be relevant to my position.

If all Dunbar's theory did were to explain how humans as a species came to have the properties they do, my account would not be sufficient. But, in fact, Dunbar's theory also has effects which bear directly on the present properties of human lives (which is unsurprising, given that Dunbar self-identifies as an evolutionary psychologist⁶⁴⁸). The first of these is that experiments undertaken to test Dunbar's theory have uncovered a number of new properties of humans (most of them emergent properties of humans in groups) which illuminate the pressures driving the ongoing relationship between these properties, and not simply to their origin. Among these are: that humans spend the majority of our conversational interactions (and vastly more than on anything else) on detailed discussions of one another's social relationships;⁶⁴⁹ that humans are characteristically capable of, and utilise, fifth- to sixth-order intensionality;⁶⁵⁰ and that humans in societies of every type relate to others in groups defined by the Dunbar number.⁶⁵¹ These novel observations pick out "present properties" of human beings, and taking them as such corroborates and explains features of human social behaviour observed in other fields concerned with our nature, rather than its origins, such as business organisation theory,⁶⁵² sociology,⁶⁵³ educational theory,⁶⁵⁴ and social psychology.⁶⁵⁵ Here the evolutionary account itself does not do the work of explaining the present properties of individual members of the species. The data corroborating this theory's observational outcomes, however, does offer explanations at this level. What unites these disparate explanatory accounts is the second relevant effect of Dunbar's account: a common strategy of hypothesising that other human properties are explained by our characteristic sociability. This strategy, justified by Dunbar's theory, reverses the traditional direction of fit which explained human properties from the initial assumption of our rationality.⁶⁵⁶ I take this broad corroborative consensus to indicate that this hypothesis is central to scientific theories of the right sort to define essential properties. Taking these arguments together, my use of Dunbar's evolutionary theory is

⁶⁴⁸ (Dunbar, Barrett and Lycett, *Evolutionary Psychology: A Beginner's Guide* 2007)

⁶⁴⁹ Roughly 70% of all conversation consists in such "gossip" (Emler 1992), (Dunbar 1996, 123).

⁶⁵⁰ (Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* 1996, 84)

⁶⁵¹ (Dunbar 1996, 69-77)

⁶⁵² (Dunbar, *Dunbar's Number* 2010, 25)

⁶⁵³ (Dunbar 2010, 26)

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁵ (Dunbar 2010, 33)

⁶⁵⁶ (Dunbar 1996, 79)

thus sufficiently distinct from the appeals to evolution Hurka disallows to pass the intuitive test at the relevant level of description.

Having said as much, a potential objection to this account (on either test for essence) is that it excludes from humanity persons incapable of communion and the long-term social bonds which promote it in human lives. On the face of it, this excludes not just familiar problem-cases such as foetuses and the comatose, but also autistic people, many of whom easily meet the criteria for rationality. A first response to this concern is that autism covers a range (indeed, a diagnostic “spectrum”) of conditions of varying severity:

Some are very severely handicapped, never develop language and show no ability to interact socially with others. Others develop language, but remain social isolates. Sufferers from its mild form, commonly known as Asperger’s Syndrome, can seem quite normal aside from their social gaffes and occasionally bizarre behaviour.⁶⁵⁷

What connects these disparate conditions is that all autists lack a Theory of Mind (ToM), the characteristic manifestation of high-order intensionality in which we model interlocutors’ intensional responses to ourselves and others. While high-order intensionality is the characteristic application of human rationality and language-use to sociability however, it is not identical to our capacity to commune: high functioning autists compensate for the absence of a ToM by consciously attempting to model others’ behaviour based on information communicated to them, and are generally capable of promoting some long-term relationships promoting communion to some degree. It is certainly the case that lacking a ToM is a handicap in promoting such relationships, but it is not equivalent to lacking the capacity for communion or long-term relationships of communion.⁶⁵⁸ It is true that more severely affected autists, incapable of language or recognising others, are excluded by my definition; but these individuals also fall short of the criteria for rationality. A second response to this difficulty, then, is *tu quoque*. That is, this difficulty exists for Hurka as well, in that his account excludes “foetuses, babies, and the demented”⁶⁵⁹ as human, and the strategy he proposes in response seems as applicable to my account. This response is to argue that:

⁶⁵⁷ (Dunbar, Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language 1996, 88). See also (Dunbar, The Human Story: a new history of mankind’s evolution 2004, 50-52). The term “Asperger’s Syndrome” is no longer condoned as a distinct diagnosis, but its associated behaviours are included in the autistic spectrum.

⁶⁵⁸ In fact, in addition to somewhat constrained but active relationships with neurotypical peers and spouses, self-described “Aspies” have established online communities of mutual support such as www.wrongplanet.net.

⁶⁵⁹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 47)

[Foetuses] are closer to the human species than to any other species and can therefore be classed as almost-humans. Babies are probably also almost-humans, at least for a short time after birth... The demented are likewise almost-humans, although many others of the mentally disabled are humans. Their intellectual powers may not equal those of other humans, but this is not decisive. So long as they have some sophisticated rationality, and many of them do, they are full-fledged humans... On any view, what matters morally in a foetus or a baby is that it develop its capacities in later life, and regardless of its present status, perfectionism can tell us to promote this development. As for the demented, even if they are not humans, a generalised perfectionism can say they have a partial nature, perhaps involving unsophisticated rationality, that it is good for them to develop. In fact, far from having repugnant consequences for our treatment of the mentally disabled, perfectionism makes very much the right claims.⁶⁶⁰

The same claims can be made for my account, with regard both to all of the categories of person Hurka mentions, and severe autists: to whatever extent such individuals have a capacity to develop their capacity to commune, they should be assisted in doing so.

In light of the foregoing arguments, the capacity for communion (realised through a disposition toward long-term relationships promoting communion) stands as a property both essential to humans and conditioned on our being living things, and intuitively morally attractive, since it does not entail morally unattractive claims, and promotes *prima facie* valuable sorts of relationships.

To function as a full perfectionist theory, what remains is to show that the fullest development of the capacity for communion entails a morally attractive normative account. It is already attractive insofar as the relationships which reliably promote communion (occurrent and dispositional) include intimate loving relationships, harmony, solidarity and shared-identity singly, and cordiality toward others, all of which seem morally attractive. But what is involved in developing this capacity to its greatest extent? Two aspects seem salient to answering this question: that Metz' harmonious relationships outperform other relationships in promoting communion; and that dispositions toward reliably realising such relationships are best achieved by developing dispositions of character. On the first aspect: general cordiality alone promotes individual occurrences of communion, but does not develop the dispositions of character which reliably issue in deep, persistent relationships of ongoing communion with particular others ("strong-ties" in the parlance of network

⁶⁶⁰ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 47-48)

theory⁶⁶¹). And again, loving relationships with such others alone do not also reliably develop dispositions to promote occurrent communions in “weak-tie”⁶⁶² relationships wherever possible. Solidarity and shared-identity can each be generalised to define both ongoing close relationships and occurrent communion with those we have weak ties to; but solidarity alone does not reliably encourage reciprocity, and shared-identity alone does not promote the actions-for-another, which best foster communion. It may well be that there are other candidates than I have listed, but it seems unlikely that they will do a better job than harmony, or “the broader sense of love,”⁶⁶³ in disposing us to mutually express our inner states such that they become commonly understood. If this is the case, then *ubuntu’s* constellation, already plausibly entailed from the value of harmonious relations, is justified by the capacity for communion as the relevantly essential property of humans.

But what follows normatively from valuing the highest development of this capacity is not simply harmony as articulated by Metz’ proscriptive list. The second salient aspect is that communion, itself a relationship even in its occurrent instances, is realised through relationships between persons. As I noted in the second chapter, relationships are interpersonal dispositional states, and communion, like its most developed form, harmony, is a reciprocally-constituted dispositional state. As individuals our dispositions and behaviour at any given time are shaped by particular combinations of desires, concerns, quirks, predilections, neuroses, agendas and hang-ups. All of these, in various combinations, can offer barriers to initiating or maintaining communion. As individual creatures whose actions are constrained by having needs other than communion, opportunities to commune necessarily come at some opportunity- and transactional-cost, leaving us vulnerable to exploitation. This cost, and its corresponding vulnerability to exploitation, vary with the specific nature of communion, from having our time wasted by inconsiderate conversationalists to having our lives ruined by confidence tricksters. In all cases however, the threat of exploitation means that communion demands trust, which must be established and maintained. And as individuals with particular and idiosyncratic histories of relating to others, we have varying strategies for responding to various overtures and opportunities for

⁶⁶¹ (Easley and Kleinberg, *Networks, Crowds, and Markets: Reasoning about a Highly Connected World* 2010, Loc 705)

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶⁶³ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 342)

communion. All of these features must be evaluated and negotiated in order to issue in even occurrent relationships of communion. To develop in ourselves a reliable disposition to weigh and negotiate these various concerns as they apply to various others (in multiple possible combinations) demands more than simply recognising a number of proscribed acts or desirable states.

What such a disposition demands is, for a start, practical wisdom and an understanding of how it is with people, in order to be disposed toward realising communion in as wide an array of circumstances as possible. For example, communion with others generally depends on some degree of respect or consideration for them, and on communicating as much clearly. But this respect is multiply-realizable: in some instances it is best conveyed by adherence to etiquette, and in others by flouting etiquette. The capacity to accurately distinguish between these demands the sensitivity and responsiveness Aristotle relates to a “Lesbian Rule.”⁶⁶⁴ *Phronesis* is necessary to properly developing this capacity then, and since it cannot be taught or learned except through experience and emulating those who possess it, this developed capacity to realise what is essentially human ought to be absent from the young and, *ceteris paribus*, better developed among elders. Since it is such a broadly-defined capacity however, it is helpful (both to my philosophical project and to individuals seeking to develop the property) to identify distinct dispositions of character which issue from this *phronesis*. And the list of dispositional character traits conducive to relationships of communion and harmony looks familiar: beneficence, forbearance, improvisation, forgiveness, and justice,⁶⁶⁵ confidentiality, patience, and consideration,⁶⁶⁶ being “generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate”⁶⁶⁷ and other virtues familiar to proponents of *ubuntu*. Similarly, “anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness”⁶⁶⁸ are clearly corrosive not only of harmony, but of relationships disposed toward communion generally, and developing our character to its greatest extent should involve eschewing these vices. Importantly, these are not simply dispositions to act, but to embody the affective responses which dispose individuals toward the relevant relationships.

⁶⁶⁴ (Aristotle 2000, 100, 1137b)

⁶⁶⁵ (Paris 1995, 136-154)

⁶⁶⁶ Rutesire in (Nkesiga 2005, 310).

⁶⁶⁷ (Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness 1999, 32)

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid

I have argued, then, that perfectionist *ubuntu* aims at developing the *capacity to generate, maintain, and promote relationships of communion into a disposition to do so reliably, and to the greatest realisable extent. While such a disposition necessarily incorporates a success criterion – such that nobody can be said to have it if their actions do not reliably yield communion – the goal is not simply to maximise instances of communion in a life. Rather, it is both to realise relationships of harmony to the greatest extent, and to ensure doing so through developing the disposition to promote such relationship. This distinction is important because the two possibilities yield very different normative instructions. We may imagine, for example, being at a party with opportunities for two sorts of conversations, both with unfamiliar interlocutors: discussing a popular sport or movie with a number of persons, or discussing a relatively obscure (though not uninteresting) topic with a single interested conversant. On a maximising view, one ought to discuss the popular sport or movie, as this would allow for triadic closure, and thus communion, with the maximum number of others. But while this would affirm solidarity and encourage shared identity, it would require of the agent only a rehearsal of extant opinions. Engaging in the latter conversation, on the other hand, would require greater consideration and forbearance, and would develop a novel conversational topic, increasing one’s total repertoire of catalysts for communing. As such, a development view would, on balance, recommend the latter (although both strategies promote communion, and a person aware of tendency in themselves not to converse with larger groups may therefore have reason to develop that capacity through engaging in the former conversation).*

Importantly, the normative pressure of this account is not simply to perfect *our own* reliable disposition toward communion, but such dispositions generally. It is true that “on any view, perfectionism gives a central place to self-regarding duties. It tells each person to seek his own perfection, or to develop his talents, thus finding an important duty where many moralities find none”⁶⁶⁹ but it does not follow that the *only* duties entailed by perfectionism are self-regarding. Hurka finds “an overwhelming case for agent-neutrality”⁶⁷⁰ in perfectionism, for three reasons: it is consistent with the time-neutrality he argues for independently;⁶⁷¹ it best accounts for our moral intuition that it is wrong to develop our

⁶⁶⁹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 62)

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 60-61)

perfection at the cost of others', and follows from taking seriously the idea that there are objectively "better and worse ways others can live"; and is a consistent appreciation of the idea that what we value perfecting is what is valuable *in humans*.⁶⁷² This agent-neutrality does not erase self-regarding duties since, unlike agent-neutral utilitarianism,

there is an asymmetry in agents' ability to bring about the good, one that makes them less able to promote others' perfection than their own. In favourable conditions they can produce their own excellence directly, but they have less power over others'... [this asymmetry] is consistent with agent-neutrality, but can also obscure it. If people can achieve more in their own lives, they should direct more of their energy there. In principle they should care equally about everyone's perfection; in practice, they should attend disproportionately to their own.⁶⁷³

This qualified agent-neutrality fits even more plausibly with perfectionist *ubuntu* than with perfectionism *simpliciter*, since the reciprocity of a relationship of communion provides opportunities to help those we commune with to develop their own dispositions toward communion (this is more or less what we characteristically understand by "friendliness:" not simply an overture to engage occurrently, but an openness which encourages others to do the same, and to consider the world a place where doing so is rewarded). For perfectionist *ubuntu* this agent-neutrality scales to account for relationships with those close to us (in which we have an existing self-regarding interest) and those with more distant others (in which we have an agent-neutral concern). The asymmetry explains why we will sometimes have a moral duty to promote communion through partiality toward our extant communities, and sometimes through impartiality. The prime example here would be between partiality toward our families in everyday contexts, which promotes dispositions toward communion through extant bonds, and impartiality in our professional capacities, where we are better able to influence dispositions more broadly. That is, in everyday life we may better promote the development of dispositions toward communion by communing with loved ones but a government official, for example, has both the means and responsibility to promote communion at a larger scale. As such, the official privileging communion with her own family in a context where she has the opportunity to contribute

⁶⁷² (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 62-65)

⁶⁷³ (Hurka, Perfectionism 1993, 64)

toward a greater communal development would be falling short of perfectionism's moral demands.⁶⁷⁴

At this more precise level of normative detail, it seems that perfectionist *ubuntu* is now capable of addressing the persistent ambiguities I noted at the start of this thesis. Recall that these included the questions: "are we to prefer extant communities to new ones?"; "should we enrich family ahead of greater society, or sacrifice benefits to family on behalf of society?"; and "if persecuting a few would generate solidarity among the many, are we obliged to endorse such persecution or to promote friendlier actions at the risk of creating discord?" As is to be expected of an aretaic account, and at this level of specificity, the answers to all of these depend on details. In the case of whether we ought to prefer extant communities to new ones, for example, the answers will depend upon the context of our relationships to these communities. If we have few strong-ties, or alternately if our strong-tie networks are robust and well-established, then perfectionist *ubuntu* encourages us to develop our relationships with new communities. In fact, in general, new communal engagements are desirable wherever they develop our capacity toward further community. The exception is in cases where such new endeavours threaten to undermine established relationships which constitute the bulk of our communion. So we have reason to expend more energy on communing with our family or loved ones than on doing so with strangers, if the interactions with strangers impinge significantly on the quality of our established close-tie relationships. But in the absence of such prohibitive costs, the perfectionist drive to develop our own and others' disposition toward communion requires that we positively pursue friendly relations with strangers, and take whatever opportunities present themselves for novel communion.

As to the question of whether we should enrich family ahead of greater society, or sacrifice benefits to family on behalf of society, a similar arithmetic provides similar answers. In general families are networks of mutual aid, and contributing toward the wellbeing of family members enacts and cements long lasting dispositions toward communion. However, as noted above, we are sometimes in situations, such as policy-making or hiring, which increase our scope of action such that we may contribute more effectively to developing

⁶⁷⁴ This coincides with the view Metz develops in (African Moral Theory and Public Governance: nepotism, preferential hiring, and other partiality 2009).

strangers' disposition to commune through impartiality, without causing harm to our loved ones. When we find ourselves in such situations, *ceteris paribus*, perfectionism dictates a preference for impartiality.

And it does not matter that persecuting a few would generate solidarity among the many, or that resisting such persecution may generate discord among those close to us: militating for the majority to pursue harmonious relationships the minority, rather than persecuting them, develops the disposition toward communion more effectively than solidarity through persecution does.

The details of perfectionist *ubuntu's* application can be further fine-tuned, but I will stop at this point. My purpose in this chapter has been to demonstrate a coherent and attractive perfectionist account of *ubuntu*, capable of supporting the aretaic approach Metz' account lacked⁶⁷⁵. Taking the capacity for communion as the relevantly essential human property seems to support such a robust and plausible perfectionist *ubuntu*, which inherits the benefits of Metz' account of the constellation as expressions of harmony, but accommodates this harmony within an account of human nature and virtue congruent with such claims in extant African philosophy.

Challenges to a Perfectionist *Ubuntu*

Having developed and defended the account as sufficient to support an attractive aretaic *ubuntu*, it is worth noting two challenges Metz has raised for such a theory in his most recent work:⁶⁷⁶ that it does not explain the intrinsic moral value of organising one's mental states; or of pure intellectual enquiry.

⁶⁷⁵ In his examiner's report on this thesis, Samuel Oluoch Imbo notes that it would be valuable to consider how the accounts of *ubuntu* I dismissed in Chapter 1 might answer the questions I have posed and responded to here. I agree that such a comparative analysis would be valuable, particularly as part of a more detailed study of the normative application of *ubuntu's* value claims. In this thesis I have dismissed these theories on methodological grounds, and here sought to provide an intuitively plausible account within the confines of the best methodology. Imbo's suggestion raises the challenge of a separate test, examining the potential differences and relative intuitive attractiveness of the different theories' normative entailments, irrespective of their theoretical commitments. I am grateful for this suggestion, which is both a natural further step in my research, and a point at which an interlocutor unconvinced by my arguments in favour of an Analytic methodology might seek to engage this work. As regards the project of this chapter however, I feel that doing justice to reconstructions of Ramose and Shutte's accounts and abstracting their answers to my questions from their methodological commitments here would take my current focus too far afield.

⁶⁷⁶ (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

The first challenge notes that perfectionist theories taking rationality as essential can explain the intrinsic moral value of mental health, or the achievement of organising one's mental states. Intuitively, we might think that marshalling one's character is intrinsically morally valuable. We have the intuition, that is, that we achieve something valuable when we develop our continence, or overcome addiction or the complex of self-deceptions and heuristic biases glossed as *akrasia*. Rationality-derived perfectionist accounts like Aristotle's and Hurka's readily find intrinsic value in rationally regulating one's "conative, emotive, and affective states"⁶⁷⁷. But a perfectionist *ubuntu* can only find capacities to regulate one's character valuable insofar as they develop the ability to commune with others. This does not account for many of the intuitively valuable achievements of regulating the self.

Of the second challenge, Metz notes that while African societies "clearly prize education and wisdom... they typically value knowledge for pragmatic reasons,"⁶⁷⁸ such that

It is very difficult to find someone in African tradition akin to Aristotle when he deems it a virtue to know the nature of the heavens and to know it merely because the object of such an enquiry is valuable. Knowing the composition of stars, or the origin and fate of the universe, is unlikely to foster communal relationships... at least not very much compared to other kinds of knowledge.⁶⁷⁹

It is common enough to note that blue-sky research tends to entail beneficial consequences (even abstract disciplines like philosophy may produce students better able to engage critically in areas with directly measurable benefit to society) but, Metz argues

such a response should be unsatisfying to those working in fields such as theoretical physics, cosmology, metaphysics, epistemology and even evolutionary biology. At least part of what confers excellence on those who engage in such scholarship is what it is about, and not merely its expected effects. It appears to be a failure to appreciate the nature of the virtue involved to suggest that knowledge of the fate of the universe is to be valued merely because of its expected contribution to the realisation of community.⁶⁸⁰

On both Aristotle and Hurka's perfectionist accounts, our essential rationality is developed through engaging with difficult or demanding intellectual activities, regardless of the consequences of that engagement for our community, which provides an attractive account

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid

⁶⁷⁹ (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

of the value of pure research. Metz does not find an equivalent defence in African discussions, posing the challenge of accounting for such a value on the grounds of African values.

Here it is worth noting the kind of difficulty these challenges pose. Hurka distinguishes the wrong-properties objection, on which an account of human nature entails intuitively unattractive moral properties, from an account failing to entail some attractive properties, arguing that “this flaw is less serious, showing at most that perfectionism needs to be supplemented by other moral ideas.”⁶⁸¹ Similarly, Metz suggests that theorists friendly to an aretaic *ubuntu* should distinguish between moral virtues and non-moral virtues such as “temperance, prudence and the like, and those that are a function of mental health.”⁶⁸² This approach is likely the best response to the first challenge: it does no violence to our intuitive understanding of mental health, continence, and overcoming *akrasia* or addiction to consider them as prudential concerns. There is still significant force behind this characterisation: prudential achievements are real achievements, valuable to any individual, and worth taking pride in. But we can readily distinguish pride in achieving one’s daily goals or shame in abandoning an exercise programme from *moral* pride in becoming less selfish, or shame in realising one has become vicious. Naturally there is a connection between these senses; for a start, that continence or self-regulation in both the moral and non-moral senses likely involves the same psychological mechanisms. But it is perfectly coherent to treat continence as a prudential concern in all cases, and also a moral one where it impinges on moral concerns. Since communion (and relationships disposed toward it) demand significant self-regulation, this prudential value is necessary to moral conduct, and instrumentally morally valuable for that reason. But it need not be intrinsically morally valuable to accord with our intuitions about its importance, and taking self-regulation to be intrinsically morally valuable may simply be an artefact of theories which take rationality alone to be morally valuable, and not a free-standing intuition.

I suspect that more can be said in response to the second challenge, however. While it is plausible to say that epistemic and moral values can come apart, pure enquiry seems to belong to human nature, and there is something unsatisfying in an account of the good

⁶⁸¹ (Hurka, *Perfectionism* 1993, 9)

⁶⁸² (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

human life which cannot accommodate this intuition. And while I concede that the account I have outlined does not explain pure enquiry as valuable in the same manner as Hurka or Aristotle's accounts, what it does say seems to do much the same work. Recall that one form of communion characteristic of human lives is sharing our perspectives on the world and confirming those perspectives through interaction with one another. This is what we do when we test our opinions against others, share in common narratives of solidarity, or seek consensus. But it is also what we do when we share perspectives on the world and its nature, in the broadest sense, through academic discourse or less formalised intellectual exchange.

The examples of communion which spring most readily to mind are of personal relations, and these are certainly exemplary of *ubuntu*. But these do not exhaust examples of communion. Intellectual and academic engagement is more mediated than direct interpersonal exchanges, but no less a medium for making perspectives common between persons, testing perspectives on the nature of the world against one another, and seeking to generate a consensual understanding of it. Importantly, I am referring to the process of sharing and developing academic or intellectual enquiries with others, and not simply to intellection as an individual activity. As with communion emerging from our application of rationality and language-use in a social context, it seems to me that a perspective consistent with *ubuntu* would not seek to explain intellectual activity itself as valuable, but rather to find the relevant value in our shared engagement with intellectual projects. What is valuable in intellectual activity, on this account, is not that we overcome puzzling challenges, but that we *share* perspectives with one another. This is not simply to say that enquiry itself can be the catalyst for harmonious communal relationships (though even that claim would go further than the suggestion that enquiry is ultimately justified only if it has pragmatic benefits for our communities). Rather, it is to say that enquiry, undertaken as a shared activity, is already one mode of communion, and intrinsically valuable as such. On this view, it may still be true that research projects which yield cures for disease have more moral value than research into cosmology, epistemology or pure mathematics (though that conclusion is hardly unique to *ubuntu*). But it is not true that this view accords no value whatsoever to theoretical projects. On the contrary, as reasoning beings who attempt to fathom the world together, contributions to enquiries into the nature of world are valuable

for contributing to our shared understanding , which is as true of research into theoretical physics as medicine. Being able to say this much seems to me to be both an advantage in light of Metz' challenge, and to follow organically from the concept of essence I have developed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued for a perfectionist account of *ubuntu* which conforms to Hurka's methodology, eschewing theoretical accretions and adhering to the core perfectionist idea of isolating what is relevantly essential to human nature and developing it to its highest degree. In this mode, the essential property I have suggested and developed is not some richly supernatural notion of humans as essentially connected, but rather starts from the position that humans are both isolated from one another as individuals, and essentially capable of overcoming this condition. The property I have defended as relevantly essential – the capacity to commune – is not a property of humans as discrete agents, but rather an emergent feature of our capacities for rationality and language-use, as characteristically used in the context of human sociability. This seems to me to capture the interdependence African accounts of human nature seek to articulate and, I have argued, meets Hurka's theoretical requirements for an account of human nature. When communion is developed to its highest degree, I have argued, it seems plausibly to entail Metz' harmony, and thus the justification of *ubuntu's* constellation of characteristically African moral claims which follow from that, within an aretaic frame. This perfectionist account of *ubuntu* I offer therefore seems able to meet the need for a viable aretaic *ubuntu* I note in chapter two, and seems to offer a more attractive account of the value of pure enquiry Metz finds in extant articulations.

Conclusion and Further Implications of Perfectionist Ubuntu

Conclusion

In this thesis I have pursued the best articulation of *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value. In the first chapter I argued that an analytic methodology best avoids difficulties extant work on *ubuntu* has encountered. In the second chapter I argued that the exemplar of an analytic methodology applied to *ubuntu*, Metz' account as developed in *Toward an African Moral Theory* and subsequent work, captures the constellation of characteristically African moral claims for which any theory of *ubuntu* should account. I noted, however, that Metz' account as it stands fails to capture the aretaic aspects central to, and attractive in, most accounts of *ubuntu*. To account for these aretaic aspects – the language of character and excellence, fit with Plato's Requirement on the Virtues, and harmony's explication as a dispositional state partially constituted by dispositions of character – I argued that *ubuntu* would need to be articulated either as an autocentric or a perfectionist account. In the third chapter I outlined what I take to be the most robust defence of an autocentric *ubuntu*, defending the strongest account of Plato's Requirement on the Virtues, which asserts that immorality is a prudential harm to the agent's character. As this defence ultimately could not yield a plausible basis for a normative moral theory, I began the fourth chapter by abandoning such an attempted response to the Immoralist, and pursuing a perfectionist account of *ubuntu*. To this end, I outlined Hurka's exhaustive methodology for producing a perfectionist theory, and argued that an attractive account of *ubuntu* can plausibly meet all of Hurka's requirements. The account that I have produced in doing so argues that the relevantly essential feature of humans is the capacity to realise relationships of communion through enduring social relationships with others. Taking this to define human nature, I argued that developing the feature to the highest degree yields Metz' relationship of harmony, which he has shown entails the constellation of claims which capture *ubuntu*.

Scope for contestation and development of my perfectionist ubuntu

I take this work be the best account of *ubuntu* as a theory of moral value, but it is neither impervious to contestation, nor is it yet a complete normative moral theory. Neither of these is a damning condemnation. In fact, in the first case it is a positive feature that the work is accessible to a broad range of interlocutors. There are a number of points at which a

fellow-traveller may break from my arguments. Some interlocutors may argue that *ubuntu* cannot be properly accounted for without a religious underpinning, either metaphysical or dogmatic. Others may argue that *ubuntu* cannot be discussed or properly described in isolation from characteristically African claims about human ontology. My account may well be vulnerable to such arguments. But the burden lies with the interlocutors to demonstrate the relevance of these concerns. My analytic approach has been to treat these as, in Hurka's terms, accretions to *ubuntu qua* value theory, and has been sufficient to entail a plausible and attractive account of *ubuntu* without depending on dogmatic, supernaturalist, or ontological claims. If an interlocutor were to take exception to this claim on the grounds that my use of Dunbar's social brain hypothesis dogmatically presupposes evolutionary theory, I suspect it would demand an extended sense of "dogma". Even conceding the point, however, I invoked the theory to provide one defence in one test of the account, and an alternate defence may be substituted without undermining my entire account. I take this to be a relatively low barrier to engagement, particularly relative to works which rely on supernatural or other support to get off the ground at all. And while others may resist or break with my positive arguments, I take the account I have given to provide a coherent, fairly robust position to be engaged with.

This is not to say that the position as developed is exhaustive or complete yet. While I have argued for a perfectionist *ubuntu* which takes aretaic articulations as central, I have not examined the specific aretaic entailments of this account in much detail. I have argued that perfecting the capacity for communion entails Metz' harmony, and thus also entails *ubuntu's* constellation of proscriptive claims. While harmony – a reciprocally-constituted dispositional state of humans – already invokes a range of affective and conative concerns, my specific aretaic conception may constrain the normative entailments of a fully developed theory of *ubuntu* in ways I have not yet examined. Moreover, I noted at the end of my third chapter that *ubuntu's* normative entailments tend to be discussed primarily in the context of traditional small-scale societies – in which strangers are rare, cheats are easily punished, and generosity has relatively low costs – and that *ubuntu qua* moral theory should be equally applicable in large-scale societies. An aretaic account ought plausibly to suggest how and in what ways universally valuable conative and affective conditions might sometimes issue in different responses in these divergent contexts (since, for example, trusting others

carries a higher cost in larger societies). All of this merits further investigation and development, but I need not be so exhaustive in this thesis: most articulations of *ubuntu* are no more specific than the constellation's claims, and my account thus far is congruent with that level of description. It does seem, however, that the perfectionist *ubuntu* I have developed here has promise for resolving challenges which confront a theory of *ubuntu*, and suggests novel moral investigations, and it is worth noting these promising areas for future development.

Perfectionist *ubuntu*'s novel responses to *ubuntu*'s challenges

One recurring challenge to *ubuntu* claims that it characteristically overvalues authoritarianism or conformity to communal will.⁶⁸³ This charge is particularly difficult for accounts built on claims that group identity is prior to individual identity, or that individuals are nodes in a field of force, as these struggle to account for individual persons or their autonomy as intrinsically value-bearing at all. Even Metz notes only that harmony *need not* entail morally unattractive commitments to conformity,⁶⁸⁴ while acknowledging the persistence of this possibility.⁶⁸⁵ His account, that is, is agnostic about individual humans' status (which is not an option for a perfectionist account), but excludes overly authoritarian or conformist entailments on the grounds that they are intuitively unattractive. It therefore seems promising that my account does not rely on the idea of individual human beings as inescapably co-constituted in the strong ontological or supernatural sense. Rather, it starts from what I take to be a phenomenological commonplace: that human beings are individuals, distinct, separate, and (at least at the level of basic ontology) independent from one another; but essentially capable of bridging that separation. *Ubuntu*, on my account, issues not from the dissolution of individual existence at some abstracted level, but from our characteristic capacity to overcome our default separateness through communion. This starting point already provides a buttress against eliding the value of individual humans. In addition, its aretaic formulation requires developing this capacity through the cultivation of character dispositions. Such cultivation is a project of individuals (albeit in interaction with others), such that it presupposes some significant degree of autonomy. While determining

⁶⁸³ What Louw has called "the dark side of ubuntu" (Louw 2001, 19-26).

⁶⁸⁴ (Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory* 2007, 327)

⁶⁸⁵ (Metz, *The Virtues of African Ethics* 2013 (Forthcoming))

the extent of this autonomy and its impact on the normativity of problem cases requires further work, my account seems to provide a solid basis from which to preclude implausibly authoritarian or conformist entailments. At the very least, it provides the basis of a mechanism for doing so.

A related challenge to *ubuntu* is raised by the specific problem case of heterosexism. In parallel with folk-psychological claims that homosexuality is un-African, and wrong for Africans for that reason, *ubuntu* seems to endorse an idiosyncratic form of heterosexism. According to this claim, homosexuality is morally harmful because it estranges its practitioners from their (default heterosexual) communities. This claim brings into focus a novel implication of *ubuntu*: that there is moral harm in *becoming strange to others* in our community. In addition to following naturally from extant understandings of *ubuntu*, this is interesting because it illuminates an argument distinct from (and thus not clearly derivative of) Western positions informing currently contentious discussions of homosexuality in Africa. This view is a challenge for theorists of *ubuntu*, however, for at least two reasons. The first of these is that *ubuntu* seems an odd fit for defending heterosexism, either because it seems in other instances to encourage tolerance of others' difference, or because heterosexism is simply not an intuitively attractive moral position and supporting it should thus count against the plausibility of any moral theory. The second difficulty is that proscribing homosexuality-as-estranging does not do the work that either proponents or opponents of heterosexist positions normally employ such arguments for: it suggests that homosexuality is morally neutral in sexually tolerant societies and harmful in heterosexist ones. While *ubuntu* is not, in fact relativist, this outcome reproduces the least desirable aspects of relativism, casting a way of being as morally harmful (or neutral) on grounds seemingly disconnected from its intrinsic features. In light of these difficulties, it would be desirable for an account of *ubuntu* to suggest an alternative to this contingently heterosexist view, and it seems that my account might. Where accounts such as Metz' require that we respond to *occurrent* opportunities for harmony, which may be more readily achieved by imposing on a minority of the community than demanding that a majority accept them, my account requires that we develop our characters' disposition toward harmonious relationships generally. It seems plausible that such relationships are more reliably achieved by those who cultivate forbearance and an acceptance of others'

difference than by those who require that others conform to their preferences and as such, it seems that a dispositional account of *ubuntu* does not entail heterosexism.⁶⁸⁶ This claim still requires a rigorous critical examination, but I take my position to offer a more promising response to this challenge than does extant work.

A final novel position suggested by this account of *ubuntu* regards gossip. Augustine Shutte provides a striking example of gossip as a basic and pervasive mode of communion in his discussion of German and African sisters in a convent:

The German sisters thought that the Africans were bad sisters. Their idea of a good sister was one who, after having fulfilled her community duties, and spent the required time in the chapel, would fill all the rest of her waking hours busy with some other useful work. Even during the compulsory community recreation she would be sewing or knitting. The African sisters did only the required minimum and spent the rest of their time doing nothing. They were lazy, lacking in commitment to the religious life! The African sisters also thought the Germans bad sisters. Their idea of a good sister was one who, once she had fulfilled her basic community duties, would spend the rest of the time in conversation. These conversations, almost always about people and their problems, were seen as the real purpose, the soul, of religious life. So whenever it was possible, in short intervals between other duties, at recreation, in all free time, they would settle down comfortably to converse, their hands empty, but their hearts and minds full. The German sisters were barbarians, caring only about practical matters and wasting their energies on trivial pursuits!⁶⁸⁷

Motivated by this example, I have argued in a previous paper that philosophy in general, and African communitarian philosophy in particular, has reason to treat gossip as a more morally significant phenomenon than is generally the case.⁶⁸⁸ I argued for a distinction between vicious and virtuous instances of gossip; where vicious instances are inaccurate or slanderous, cultivate vicious appetites, or ignore the right to privacy; and virtuous instances avoid these vices while developing our *phronesis* and understanding of others' lives, police reputation economies, and collaboratively develop our own virtuous characters. In light of the positive account of the capacity to commune I have developed in this thesis, it seems

⁶⁸⁶ While it may be argued that *ubuntu*'s positive pressure toward marriage and procreation provide additional weight to heterosexist readings which are not addressed by my response, these options only need be exclusive to heterosexuals in a heterosexist society. And while many in African societies may object to homosexual families for reasons extraneous to *ubuntu* (patriarchy, or folk beliefs about the importance of consanguinity to family, for example), there does not seem to be anything intrinsic to *ubuntu* which disallows such families. Indeed, if *ubuntu*'s positive pressure to marry and form families is understood as a way to realise harmonious relationships which would not otherwise come to be, it seems to entail promoting such families.

⁶⁸⁷ (Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* 2001, 27-28)

⁶⁸⁸ (van Niekerk, *The Virtue of Gossip* 2008)

that this conception of gossip is not simply entailed by *ubuntu*, but central to it. On this account, gossip makes common a range of others' situations exceeding just our interlocutors', and a community of persons disposed to gossip about one another amounts to a temporally extended act of mediated communion. Moreover, gossip develops our capacity to understand others' lives, and virtuous gossip requires recognising and compensating for others' biases and our own⁶⁸⁹ at high orders of intentional modelling. This would also allow for an internally-derived account of the wrongness of vicious gossip which, in its reliance on rehearsing scandalous tropes and emphasising the salacious, undermines our capacity to commune with one another. Again, while these arguments require further development and evaluation, they seem promisingly to provide further support for my initial observations, and thus to suggest a novel and plausible subject for moral investigation.

These novel responses and investigations suggested by my account, along with its coherence and attractiveness relative to other accounts of *ubuntu*, seem to me to suggest that fellow-travellers in the search for *ubuntu's* best articulation *qua* moral theory have reason to engage with it, and not only with it. An important consequence of my account's explicit framing as both explicitly aretaic and perfectionist in Hurka's mould is that defending what I have argued is the best account of *ubuntu* commits friends of *ubuntu* to debates on these positions outside of African philosophy. If I am correct, that is, then African philosophers engaged with *ubuntu* have a stake in Dale Dorsey's arguments against perfectionism,⁶⁹⁰ the viability of Julia Annas' "developmental account"⁶⁹¹ of virtue and right action, and the status of Hurka's recent arguments about the relationship between perfectionist accounts of virtue and Virtue Ethics as such,⁶⁹² among other concerns. These too promise to be fruitful and interesting sources of novel work for *ubuntu*, and for philosophy *simpliciter*, and both are likely to benefit from the engagement.

However much development and evaluation remains to be done, however, the account that I have furnished seems viably to provide the best articulation of *ubuntu qua* moral theory thus far. In developing it I have avoided methodological difficulties outlined by African

⁶⁸⁹ (van Niekerk, *The Virtue of Gossip* 2008, 406)

⁶⁹⁰ (Dorsey 2010)

⁶⁹¹ (Annas, *Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing* 2004, 68)

⁶⁹² (Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* 2000)

philosophers, common to work on *ubuntu*; and I have avoided methodological difficulties outlined by Hurka, common to work on perfectionism. I have argued for an account of *ubuntu* which incorporates Metz' harmony and its entailed constellation of proscriptions, but which exceeds these and justifies an aretaic articulation of moral normativity. This articulation follows from an account of human nature which is both congruent with such claims articulated by *ubuntu*'s defenders, and independent of parochial claims about human ontology or the supernatural. In conclusion, I have developed and defended as robustly attractive a perfectionist *ubuntu* on which the essentially human feature is our capacity to commune with one another, and its fullest development a reliable disposition of character to promote long term relationships of communion to their fullest realisable extent.

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