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## CONFUCIANISM AND *UBUNTU*: REFLECTIONS ON A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHINESE AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS

### I. INTRODUCTION

Which values are compelling to all kinds of people? And which ones are the contingent products of particular times and places, with no resonance outside of those contexts? Today, it is widely recognized that we need to go beyond “West-centric” outlooks to answer such questions. It is not sufficient to develop a theory of “universal” moral reasoning or a “global ethic” that draws only on the moral aspirations and social practices found in Western societies. Hence, there has been a marked increase in “East–West” dialogues over the past couple of decades: liberals talk to Islamists, Buddhists to Christians, Americans to Chinese, and so on.

However, such dialogues still suggest that Euro-America must be, so to speak, the sun around which the others revolve. Dialogues between two non-Western traditions seem slightly eccentric in a global context so dominated by Western economic, political, and cultural power. Indeed, insofar as some make claims that a subfield of comparative political theory either does or should exist, it is characterized in terms of the study of relationships between Western and non-Western texts; it rarely acknowledges the existence of say, Indian–Chinese comparisons, let alone advocate much more systematic comparisons between non-Western traditions.<sup>1</sup> Upon reflection, though, it is hard to think of a good philosophical reason why such relationships should not also be explored. What if it turned out that two major non-Western traditions, together comprised of more than two billion people, have more in common than either has with the liberal tradition? What if it turned out that many more people in the world actually adhere to such “non-Western” values?

In this article, we compare two major strands of moral-philosophical thought in Chinese and African traditions, namely

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Confucianism and what is known as *Ubuntu*—the term for humanness that Zulu and Xhosa speakers in South Africa use to capture morality as a whole. This journal's readers will naturally be familiar with Confucian perspectives, but we aim to argue, among other things, that it would be worth their while becoming familiar with *Ubuntu*, as it is both similar to and different from Confucianism in theoretically interesting and revealing ways.

Although *Ubuntu* is a word used mainly by people in southern Africa, what it refers to is not restricted to that locale and is rather a tradition shared by a large majority of the precolonial peoples in the sub-Saharan region. Black traditional societies below the Sahara are well known for tending to share certain ways of life. They characteristically are small scale in number so that everyone knows everyone else; are oral cultures, lacking a corpus of written works; maintain that ritual, initiation, and tradition have some moral importance of a sort unrecognized in modern societies; hold land in common, dividing it out to households based on need or clan membership; lack sophisticated science and technology, with the economy based largely on agriculture, cattle, or hunting/gathering; maintain that there are weighty duties to help others that far transcend the nuclear family; believe in a duty to wed and to procreate, viewing solitariness as problematic; have faith in the continued existence of and interaction with ancestors, people who were not merely forebears of a given people, but ones who lived to a ripe old age and exhibited moral wisdom. Such widely manifested cultural features have been both the product and producer of recurrently held value systems the central premise of which is that one ought to develop one's humanness, something one does by entering into communal relationships with others.

Our main motives for comparing *Ubuntu* and Confucianism are academic, among them to deepen understanding for its own sake of the commonalities and differences of two major world traditions that have yet to engage in any form of dialogue; to use a comparative analysis in order to achieve a firmer grasp of our own traditions; to judge what some of the strengths and weaknesses are in each tradition, given a modern setting; and to make a bit of headway on the grand project of discovering—or rather constructing—a contemporary overlapping consensus among the most long-standing and influential moral worldviews. Our scholarly attitude is one of respect, as opposed to either arrogance or deference; we presume neither that our own tradition has everything correct, nor that the other tradition would necessarily have something to teach us. Instead, simply being largely ignorant of the other culture's values, we have approached them as we do our own, with openness, sympathy, but also criticism, where apt.<sup>2</sup>

We have begun with the intuition that the two traditions share “communitarian” concerns, and we aim to unpack more precisely what those concerns are and how they might differ not only from one another in the details, but also, at a broader level, from the values characteristic of Western traditions. Part of the point of doing so is to suggest that characteristically Chinese and sub-Saharan values are in fact more “mainstream” than they seem when viewed from Western perspectives.

However, cross-cultural dialogues should also explore areas of difference. Once the contrasts are clearly spelled out, participants in the dialogue can consider the possibility of learning from them. If such differences are irreconcilable, then we would need to reflect ethically on how to negotiate relationships in light of them. Does one culture have good reason to change? Should both cultures simply operate on a *modus vivendi*? Or might both cultures have moral reasons within them for tolerating one another? Hence, we specify some of the key differences between *Ubuntu* and Confucianism and make some judgments about their pros and cons.

We focus in this article on three key precepts shared by Confucianism and *Ubuntu*: the central value of community, the desirability of ethical partiality, and the idea that we tend to become morally better as we grow older. But for each of these broad similarities, there are key differences underlying them, and we discuss those as well as speculate about the reasons for them. Our aim is not to take sides, but we do suggest ways that *Ubuntu* and Confucianism might have something to learn from each other and perhaps come closer to each other. We hope that our very preliminary reflections can inspire further debate and thinking on a theme—dialogues between long-standing and large-scale non-Western traditions—that is bound to increase in social and political importance as non-Western societies assume greater importance in the global system and as the search continues for a “global ethic.” As two authors born and educated in North American societies whose ethical outlooks have been shaped and transformed by our own personal engagements with non-Western ethical traditions (*Ubuntu* in the case of Thaddeus Metz, Confucianism in the case of Daniel A. Bell), we believe that these dialogues between non-Western traditions also have implications for scholars in Western societies who are, or at least should be, committed to learning from the values of non-Western societies.

## II. METHODOLOGICAL CAVEATS

Before beginning the comparisons, we note two important caveats. First, it is not easy to specify the key values of Confucianism and

*Ubuntu* in an uncontroversial way. Both traditions are diverse and contested. In the case of Confucianism, it is a written tradition dating back three millennia that has been interpreted differently in different times and places and complemented in sometimes conflicting ways with Daoism, Legalism, Buddhism, Christianity, Socialism, and Liberalism. The minute one begins to specify an ostensibly “Confucian” value, a historically informed interpreter of Confucianism can find a counter-example. In this article, we limit our discussion to Confucian values that have been endorsed, or at least not explicitly repudiated, by most contemporary adherents to the tradition.

In the case of *Ubuntu*, it is a largely oral tradition that only in the postwar era has been discussed in written form by academics, or at least by those who are sympathetic and informed. European colonialists ignored and even denigrated indigenous African cultures for hundreds of years, and it has been only in the last fifty or so that Africans have had the substantial opportunities to become anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers who write about their traditional societies, whose work forms the core sources for what we present here as “African” norms.<sup>3</sup> The relative novelty of the academic study of *Ubuntu*, combined with the fact that there are at least several hundred different indigenous peoples and languages below the Sahara, means that there is as yet only a small uncontested core of sub-Saharan morality. Here, too, we limit ourselves to values that have been largely endorsed, or at least not explicitly repudiated, by contemporary interpreters of *Ubuntu*. So, for example, we do not defend patriarchal values that have by and large been rejected by contemporary interpreters of the two traditions.

Second, we recognize that our choice of values is highly selective. We focus on three key themes because they emerged as subjects of discussion in our preliminary dialogue and also because they are shared but interpreted in different ways, and this combination of commonality and difference should introduce the reader to the broad outlines of each and motivate one to make more systematic comparisons in the future. But we leave out values that are held as central by a number of contemporary adherents of Confucianism and *Ubuntu*. For example, both traditions have emphasized the role that ancestors should play in our ethical lives. Also, both traditions appeal to the value of harmony in thinking about our proper relationships to one another, to animals, and to the natural environment. We do not deny the importance of such concerns, and we hope that such issues can be discussed in future dialogues between *Ubuntu* and Confucianism.

In short, we think of the rest of this article as merely a beginning. We believe it is an important beginning because (as far as we know) it is the first time these two non-Western and broadly communitarian tradi-

tions have been compared. Our aim is to provide a motivation for doing something more systematic in the future, involving more discussion of methodology, deeper engagement in each theme, and more comparisons between the two traditions as well as with other traditions.

### III. THE CENTRALITY OF COMMUNITY

Both traditions emphasize that personhood requires a certain kind of community. This is not just a descriptive banality about how our identities are shaped by our communities, but is rather in the first instance a normative claim that human flourishing is constituted by social relations of certain kinds, so that we have an obligation to nourish those relations.<sup>4</sup> Such a claim might seem trivial until it is compared with central claims of other influential traditions. In the case of Buddhism, particular social attachments are the causes of suffering, and we must break off those attachments to free ourselves of suffering and to pursue eternal bliss (nirvana). In the case of Christianity, the key attachment is the relation between an individual and God, with relationships between humans being apt only insofar as they contribute to the fulfillment of His will. In the case of Kantian liberalism, it is morally acceptable for an individual to lead a lifestyle without substantial human interaction, so long as one respects other people's rights; there is no moral difference, so to speak, between somebody who has rich social ties and somebody who seeks the good in, say, technology.

Confucianism prizes social ways of life in the physical world above all else. This is not to deny that Confucianism has a religious dimension: the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucians developed an elaborate metaphysics that goes far beyond "secular" understandings of the world, and the contemporary political Confucian Jiang Qing argues that *tian* 天 (heaven) should provide the main foundation for political legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> But the whole Confucian corpus, however rich and diverse, has only a few things to say about a spiritual essence that continues in an afterlife. A key reason is that the good life is thought to lie in the here and now; it does not get better after we die. The *Analects* (*Lunyu* 《論語》) of Confucius—the key text in the Confucian tradition—is mainly about how we should relate to other people. On the one hand, people are the main sources of pleasure: as Confucius famously put it in the opening passage of the *Analects*, "When friends come from afar, isn't that a great pleasure?"<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the constraints to our pleasure are mainly a function of responsibilities we owe to other people, not to anything otherworldly (such as God) or animals. Other-regarding morality begins via interaction with family

members, and then those moral duties are extended to other human beings by way of other forms of communal life.

Traditionally speaking, adherents to *Ubuntu* have thought of self-realization being a function of communal relationships with human beings and also “spiritual” ones such as God and ancestors, but we downplay these latter facets of the worldview here, as most African theorists do when they explain what community involves, at least insofar as it is morally attractive.<sup>7</sup> For instance, two of the most influential West African moral philosophers say this of community: “The fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good,”<sup>8</sup> and “Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all.”<sup>9</sup> These and other normative conceptions of community salient in sub-Saharan contexts tend to cash it out as the combination of two logically distinct elements, people identifying with one another or sharing a way of life, on the one hand, and people exhibiting solidarity or caring for others’ quality of life, on the other.<sup>10</sup> In order for one to flourish as a human being or to exhibit *Ubuntu* (humanness), one must not only participate with others and think of oneself as bound up with them, but also help others, for their sake and typically out of sympathy.

In short, both Confucianism and *Ubuntu* say that living a morally good life involves, first and foremost, having rich social relations. However, there are key differences in the way that the two traditions interpret community. One key difference lies in what the two traditions mean by “community.” To (over)simplify, interpreters of *Ubuntu* often write as though one community is the main source of obligation, whereas Confucians have long argued about the different kinds of communal attachments we have and how they might come into conflict. For example, Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, two South African theologians, write, “One is able to discover a sense of self-identity only in reference to the community in which one lives”<sup>11</sup> and Augustine Shutte, one of the first philosophers to write a book on *Ubuntu*, says that “one can only do justice to the African conception of community by visualizing it as a *single* person . . . the community has a common mind, a common heart.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of Confucianism, the key texts explicitly discuss the different kinds of social relations that ought to form our circle of commitments. “The Great Learning,” canonized by the Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) as one of the four Confucian classics, opens with a passage about the need to regulate the family, the state, and the whole world. And many of the debates within Confucianism have been over how to interpret passages in the *Analects* and the works of Mencius that suggest ties to parents should have priority over ties to society in cases of conflict.

Such differences no doubt owe much to the context in which the ethical traditions were formulated. In the case of Confucianism, the early thinkers wrote in chaotic times before the country had been unified. Both Confucius and Mencius left their “home” communities and roamed around different states hoping to persuade rulers to adopt their political ideals (they did not abandon the background ideal of universal kinship, but much of their political theorizing assumed a world of competing states). After Confucianism became the official state ideology in the Han Dynasty, Confucian thinkers wrote in the context of what was supposed to be the largest and most powerful empire in a world surrounded by as-yet-uncivilized barbarians. In contrast, *Ubuntu* owes its origins to small-scale societies with extended clans living together without as much mobility. One normally expected to live and die in one community, and the idea that one had to balance and think about how to resolve conflicts between diverse forms of life was not so central to one’s identity.<sup>13</sup>

To the extent that the modern world more closely resembles the “Confucian” context—most of us live in large-scale societies and many of us leave our place of origin, while even those in rural settings are affected by foreign institutions and policies—the “Confucian” idea that we should seek the good in many communities (or forms of social life) makes more sense. And an ethical tradition that says a lot about how we should understand, balance, and prioritize different forms of community might seem more relevant.

That said, *Ubuntu* might offer an attractive understanding of the specific forms these different communities ideally ought to take, roughly, ones in which members act consequent to a sense of belonging and an obligation to engage in mutual aid. Such a normative conception of community has underwritten an influential approach to crimes against humanity in the contemporary context, roughly, one of forgiveness. As Ali Mazrui, the famous Pan-African social theorist, has said, “What is distinctive about Africans is their short memory of hate.”<sup>14</sup> And Barbara Nussbaum, who has applied *Ubuntu* to a business context in revealing ways, adds that “Africans teach their children to communicate, reconcile, and find ways to cleanse and let go of hatred, and import the skills to do so.”<sup>15</sup> The prizing of forgiveness likely emerged from small and relatively stable communities, where it made social sense to find ways of letting go of resentment in the interest of restoring harmonious relations. After all, imagine what would happen to a family if its members responded to wrongs done to one another on a retributive or deterrent basis. However, this approach to conflict resolution arguably applies also to large-scale societies, and in fact has provided the main moral motivation for South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The

TRC is famous for having dealt with apartheid-era political crimes by granting amnesty from both criminal and civil liability to perpetrators in exchange for full disclosure of the wrongs they did. Although Christian values and human rights discourse are often thought to have led to such an approach, they were not the main drivers.<sup>16</sup> Instead, what moved a large chunk of the predominantly African population of South Africa was a moral perspective according to which one lives a genuinely human way of life only insofar as one seeks out community, and hence reconciliation, with others.

In contrast, it seems harder for “Confucian” Chinese to let go of memories of hate.<sup>17</sup> It is true that Confucianism has long emphasized mediation over litigation as a way of dealing with social conflicts, on the grounds that mediation is more likely to restore harmonious relations.<sup>18</sup> But such efforts have not always extended to forgiving truly evil deeds, such as those committed in warfare (or under an apartheid-like regime). If Confucianism can learn from the value of *Ubuntu*-style reconciliation, the memories of the nineteenth-century Opium War and the Japanese aggression against China in World War II might not seem so fresh and painful—and it would be harder for not-so-pure-minded governments to manipulate those memories for the purposes of stifling dissent and detaching people from focusing on present-day concerns. Furthermore, it might be that a proper appreciation of *Ubuntu*'s injunction to prize communal relationships would rule out the death penalty, as South Africa's Constitutional Court argued soon after its inception.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps there are resources within Confucianism that would disallow the death penalty, but it may also be helpful to look to *Ubuntu* for inspiration.

A third key difference in the ways the two different traditions interpret community (beyond which one counts, and what its nature should be) is more directly political. Both Confucianism and *Ubuntu* emphasize political values that conflict with, or at least would constrain, Western-style democracy, but they are different values. A key Confucian public good is that of political meritocracy. The basic idea is that everybody should have the opportunity to be educated—“in education, there are no social classes,” as Confucius put it<sup>20</sup>—but that not everybody will emerge from this process with the equal ability to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, an important task of the political process is to select political leaders with above average education, skills, and motivation.<sup>21</sup> In Imperial China, the value of political meritocracy was institutionalized by means of the Imperial examination system that paved the way to political fame and power for the successful candidates. Today, the value of political meritocracy helps to underpin the recruitment policy of the Chinese Communist Party—top performers in schools and universities



are sought out and encouraged to join the party. Confucian-inspired social critics draw upon the value of political meritocracy to propose ways of reforming the political system so that wiser and more just political decisions would be made.<sup>22</sup> Such proposals are often combined with ones for more democracy, but many Confucian critics have doubts about empowering democratically elected candidates in areas like foreign policy that affect the interests of nonvoters. Confucian-inspired social critics like Kang Xiaoguang 康曉光 also express doubts about multiparty competition that can lead to fractious and petty-minded politics.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of *Ubuntu*, contemporary thinkers have put forward similar doubts about multiparty democracy, but on the basis that it is inconsistent with a search for consensus in political decision making. Western-style multiparty rule is criticized on the grounds that a decision taken on the basis majoritarian rule excludes and tends to alienate minority viewpoints. To prize community, from the standpoint of *Ubuntu*, would require sharing power so that the final decision takes everyone's voice into account.<sup>24</sup> Although there were often kings in precolonial sub-Saharan societies, they tended not to rule in an authoritarian manner. Instead, quite often decisions would be made only upon hearing from anyone potentially affected by the outcome who wanted to speak, or on the basis of consensus among a group of elders who had been appointed by the community as a whole. Many contemporary sub-Saharan *Ubuntu* theorists believe that such an approach remains relevant to today's world. For instance, Kwasi Wiredu, the most influential living African philosopher, has put forward a proposal for a "non-party polity" in which legislators (elected by a majority of the populace on the grounds that it is practically necessary in urban environments) would not be affiliated with a particular constituency for the sake of which they would jockey for a majority of votes; instead, they would propose policies that they think are good for the public as a whole, and would adopt only those that are the object of unanimous agreement among themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Again, the differences between Confucianism and *Ubuntu* might be due to the different sorts of societies in which these worldviews emerged. In chaotic times composed of different warring states, or in a huge and diverse imperial state, the value of consensus is probably not a realistic goal to which to aspire. Hence, Confucius famously put forward an ideal of harmony that contrasts with the pursuit of consensus (*tong* 同; also translated as sameness or uniformity) that he said was the concern of "petty people."<sup>26</sup> The Confucian ideal of harmony involves the pursuit of seeking a greater (aesthetic and moral) good that is built out of diversity. And part of that diversity involves the selection of political elites with the special talent to rule, leaving other

tasks to other people. In the case of *Ubuntu*, the idea of settling upon a common political view that involves at least the contribution of, and possibly agreement by, the entire community (or at least appointed elders) was most obviously feasible in a village context in which one knew all the members of one's society.

Today, the Confucian ideal of political meritocracy might seem more appropriate in urban, industrialized societies where it is important to nurture political talent with the competence and motivation to make policy in an empirically and morally complex environment. As the African National Congress transforms itself from a revolutionary movement to a modern party that is responsible for running a state, it can learn from the experience of the Chinese Communist Party, which has gone from rewarding "red" (commitment to the revolution) to rewarding expertise and talent (this is not to imply that the Chinese political system is as meritocratic as it should be; the reality is that factors such as *guanxi* 關係 and loyalty to leaders influence political promotion more than they should). However, *Ubuntu* reminds us of the need to seek consensus wherever realistically possible: to refrain from false claims about a political consensus that reflect only the thinking of a political elite and also to seek out consultation and advice from different walks of society so that decisions that are made reflect the input of the largest number of people.

A natural interpretation of *Ubuntu* entails that an open and transparent media that is at liberty to propose political alternatives is probably essential to the process of fostering communal relationships of the relevant sort in a modern and pluralistic society.<sup>27</sup> Part of why friendship is valuable goes beyond its relationship of mutual benefit; it is also the fact that people have come together and decided to stay together of their own accord, without coercion and deception, and, more, with a clear awareness of the terms of their interaction. Similar considerations apply to friendly relations at a societal level; for them to obtain, there must be a substantial degree of transparency about how people and institutions are interacting and affecting one another. That, beyond forgiveness, is another major *Ubuntu*-based justification for South Africa's TRC; for blacks and whites to have reconciled in a way that includes major elements of African community, they needed to understand how they have treated one another, basing future policies on a firm grasp of how they have arrived at the present. People cannot truly share a way of life in the political realm unless they make knowledgeable decisions about the policies chosen. Although a free press can be uncouth and even disrespectful in its treatment of political elders, which many friends of *Ubuntu* find immoral to some degree, it is probably all things considered justified as necessary for richly *cooperative* political projects.

## IV. THE VALUE OF PARTIALITY

Both Confucianism and *Ubuntu* defend the value of partiality: our ethical obligations, at least with regard to beneficence, are strongest to those with whom we have personal relationships, and they diminish in intensity the farther we go from those relationships. We do have an obligation to extend love beyond intimates, but there is not the expectation that the same degree of emotions and responsibilities will extend to strangers. The web of caring obligations that binds family members is more demanding than that binding citizens (or perhaps legal residents), the web of such obligations that bind citizens is more demanding than that binding foreigners, the web binding humans is more demanding than that binding nonhuman forms of life, and so on. This view might seem uncontroversial until it is contrasted with other dominant ethical traditions such as Buddhism, utilitarianism, and Kantian deontology, which characteristically defend moral impartiality, the idea that we owe the same obligations to (aid) people whether they are familiar to us or not.

In Confucian ethics, we learn about ethical obligations within the family, and that is also where we have the strongest ethical obligations, at least to care for others. This view was criticized by the proto-utilitarian thinker Mozi 墨子 (fifth century BCE), who argued for impartial care, to the extent that I should care as much for (or give equal regard to) my neighbor's father as to my own father. But Mozi's view was firmly rejected by Mencius, Confucius's most influential interpreter; Mencius argued that morality starts with natural family feelings and is extended to others with diminishing intensity, a view that came to be the mainstream Confucian ethical outlook. But feelings, per se, are not sufficient to justify the intensity of moral obligations. The strongest obligation is to our parents—what Confucians call “filial piety”—because they cared for us, we have the obligation to care for them in return. Hence Mencius condemns those who are “selfishly attached to wives”; instead, people should be particularly mindful of the “greatest” duty of all, the duty to one's parents.<sup>28</sup> And both Confucius and Mencius suggest that care for elderly parents should take priority over public duties in cases of conflict.<sup>29</sup> In short, a combination of natural feeling and gratitude underlie our strong moral obligations to intimates.

It is characteristic of the sub-Saharan moral tradition to think that every human being has a dignity, typically deemed to be a function of a spiritual essence that has its source in God.<sup>30</sup> The view that everyone has a dignity naturally underwrites the idea that one has *some* obligation to help anyone who needs it. However, a strict impartiality is most clearly not a salient theme in African ethics, with personal

ties—traditionally, often those of blood relation—playing a major role in thought about which of the needy have priority and about how much to aid them.<sup>31</sup> Africans often approve of slogans such as “Family first” and “Charity begins at home.” In particular, it is typical of friends of *Ubuntu* to think that one has weighty duties to help one’s kin, where the latter include so-called “extended” family such as uncles, cousins, and additional members of one’s lineage. Indeed, in some traditional African societies, it would be considered theft if one were to slaughter an animal for food and not offer choice parts of it to such relatives.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, however, similarities may mask important differences. Confucians do emphasize that it is desirable—especially for political rulers—to extend concern to outsiders to the extent possible. And Mencius’s famous example of the desire to save the young child about to fall into a well regardless of one’s relationship to the child is meant to show that there is a natural predisposition to do so.<sup>33</sup> But Confucians have not emphasized the idea of respecting everyone’s human dignity<sup>34</sup> or the need to care for complete strangers as part of a fully ethical life;<sup>35</sup> there is nothing comparable in Confucian ethics to, say, the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan who helps a stranger in distress. And the ideal of helping strangers seems pretty marginal to the everyday practices of Chinese society.

Here is where *Ubuntu* may be helpful. *Ubuntu* similarly defends the value of partiality—I owe more to family than to nonfamily—but it also emphasizes the obligations we owe to strangers, simply in virtue of their humanity. In particular, *Ubuntu* emphasizes the desirability of being hospitable. As Munyaka and Motlhabi put it, “the presence of a stranger did not threaten or inhibit. Instead, it gave rise to feelings of respect, compassion, and acceptance. In essence, *Ubuntu* made all people one another’s keepers. Great value was put on hospitality in African society.”<sup>36</sup> When strangers visited a village in the precolonial era, they were typically treated with warmth and generosity, to the point that the best food would often be taken from family members and given to the strangers,<sup>37</sup> a kind of practice that is difficult to justify from a conventional Confucian standpoint, or even a more Western, Kantian one that includes (and may be exhausted by) a resolutely impartial perspective. A Kantian approach to hospitality would largely be a matter of respecting another’s individual rights not to have her autonomy infringed and of helping others to achieve their particular ends or to develop their general capacity for end-realization. A sub-Saharan approach, in contrast, will in the first instance attempt to cultivate a sense of togetherness, to foster cooperative relationships, to improve others’ quality of life, and to do the latter on the basis of sympathy. African hospitality is a matter of aiming to forge a relation-

ship of (active) *belonging* and (compassionate) *benefiting*, neither of which a Kantian gives any intrinsic or inherent moral weight.

It could be argued that *Ubuntu*-style hospitality emerged from a context where communities were generally stable and exceptions could be made for short-term visitors, and that such practices are more difficult to maintain in a relatively mobile modern society. However, it is not hard to think of examples where the ideal of hospitality and kindness to strangers as an exception to a general rule of partiality to loved ones might be relevant today—say, the need to assist refugees at some cost to citizens, or the duty to help strangers in car accidents even if we are late home for dinner—and the *Ubuntu* ideal of not merely maintaining, but also creating, community with others could help to enrich Confucian ethics.

## V. THE VALUE OF AGE

Both *Ubuntu* and Confucianism defend moral hierarchies based on age. The basic idea is that elderly people should be treated with greater respect insofar as they have developed a kind of moral wisdom that is often lacking in young people. There are very young geniuses in science and music, but young moral geniuses are much harder to encounter, so it is—interestingly—often said in both traditions. Other things being equal, lived experience makes us morally wiser, a perspective rarely expressed by Western adherents to utilitarian or Kantian moral perspectives. With respect to the latter, consider Lawrence Kohlberg's extraordinarily influential work in moral education. Drawing on Kant's, Rawls's, and Habermas's ideas about the moral point of view, Kohlberg suspected that some philosophy graduate students in their twenties were capable of exhibiting the highest ("sixth") stage of moral reflection, which, for Kohlberg, is basically a matter of reasoning according to a principle that accords everyone's dignity an equal weight or gives everyone a voice in determining the outcome.<sup>38</sup> Such a conception of moral expertise does not square well with the African and Confucian traditions.

One of the most widely quoted sayings from the *Analects* is the brief account of Confucius's own process of moral growth: "At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my stance; at forty, I was no longer perplexed; at fifty, I realized the "ways of the universe"; at sixty, my ear was attuned; at seventy, I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries."<sup>39</sup> As Confucius gets older, he improves: his capacity for ethical judgment improves, and he can act better, morally speaking. One key reason for growth is that the elderly are more likely to have experienced different roles and forms of life

that increase the capacity for moral judgment. On the one hand, it is a matter of deepening experience in particular roles, for example, the teacher concerned with self-improvement should get better as she learns from mistakes and deals with a wide range of students and teaching materials. On the other hand, it is a matter of learning from new roles, some of which can be undertaken only later in life. For example, parents are more likely to need care as they get older, so it is usually only adults who begin to seriously practice filial piety. Note, however, that moral improvement takes place on the assumption that one is motivated by the quest for self-improvement (and one's mind allows for that quest to take place) and that one stays socially involved and learns from new forms of social relations. Under those conditions, we should improve morally as we age, and this is a key reason why elderly people are generally held in high esteem in societies with a Confucian heritage. Politically speaking, in a society with a Confucian heritage, it may not seem so strange to propose that elderly people should have extra voting rights or more say in institutions for deliberation,<sup>40</sup> nor would it seem as discriminatory, because all of us have the potential to achieve that state.<sup>41</sup>

In traditional sub-Saharan societies, age is usually deemed to be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for moral wisdom or "personhood" as it is usually called. It is possible to be *old* but not an *elder* and hence not to deserve more respect than, say, someone in his or her twenties, if one has failed to develop good character. That said, most indigenous African cultures also maintain that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for someone in his or her twenties to exhibit "full" personhood. The latter would, for many of them, require not only getting married, having children, being productive, and learning the community's folkways, but also evincing a sophisticated and sensitive capacity for resolving conflicts and more generally making morally wise decisions. Ifeanyi Menkiti, a Nigerian philosopher whose work in ethics is among the most widely read in African philosophy, recounts the Igbo proverb, "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up."<sup>42</sup> There are two major reasons why, on an *Ubuntu* ethic, moral wisdom can come only with age.<sup>43</sup> First, moral dilemmas are often complex, and require substantial experience in order to become aware of all the relevant considerations, of how to jointly satisfy them, and of how to make trade-offs among them when necessary. Second, to develop one's humanness by living communally with others requires not merely judgment, but also certain kinds of emotional reactions and other dispositions and skills that require maturity. For example, it takes time: to learn how to let go of resentment and to forgive; to overcome the tendency to assume others feel as one do, and to truly

empathize with them; to set aside one's pressing desires and to be patient when dealing with others.

Once again, however, similarities mask important differences. This time, the differences may be due in large part to the fact that Confucianism is a written tradition whereas *Ubuntu* is an oral tradition (until very recently). Confucians prioritize self-improvement in the form of education in a way that has been historically lacking in *Ubuntu*. Learning is a never-ending process of accumulating knowledge: as Confucius put it, "A person who is constantly aware of what has yet to be learned and who, from month to month, does not forget what has been learned, can be said to truly love learning."<sup>44</sup> From a moral point of view, we need to study, to learn what others have thought and said, in order to get ideas to improve the way that we lead our lives. And the more we read, the more ideas we can have. Since reading and studying is a time-consuming process, the elderly are more likely to have had the time to read and study with a view to improving their lives, where such improvement is in part constituted by this very reading and studying. Hence the elderly are more likely to have the store of knowledge that allows for moral judgment and other forms of self-development. To the extent that modern societies emphasize literacy and learning via reading, then Confucianism offers an outlook that can help to enrich *Ubuntu*, which, while prizing moral wisdom, is virtually never understood deeply to treasure formal education, let alone knowledge for its own sake.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Our aim has been to point out that two non-Western ethical traditions from different historical backgrounds share important similarities, specifically, with regard to the moral importance of community, the role of partiality in moral thinking, and the heightened respect accorded to elders. The similarities seem to us greater than what either share with Western ethical traditions like Kantianism and utilitarianism, or with modern-day liberal perspectives, but we would need to argue that point in a separate article. We have also sought to point out that the similarities between *Ubuntu* and Confucianism bring important differences between them in their wake, so that, for just one instance, *Ubuntu* favors a notion of community requiring consensus in politics, whereas Confucianism does not. We hope the reader agrees that further comparisons and contrasts are worth making in future work.

We believe that each ethical tradition can be enriched by learning from the strengths of the other and by reflecting on the parts of the

tradition that are still morally defensible and feasible in today's world. We do not deny that both traditions can also be enriched by means of an engagement with Western traditions—and that they in turn can be enriched by engaging with *Ubuntu* and Confucianism—but those points would also need to be fleshed out in a separate article.

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### ENDNOTES

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1. For critical discussion of recent attempts to recognize a distinct field of comparative politics, see Andrew March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 4, (2009): 531–65.
2. We take our approach to have avoided some of the pitfalls of comparative politics as often undertaken in the West, where theorists tend to be reluctant to criticize non-Western perspectives; to assume that non-Western perspectives must be valid in some respect; to impose Western categories on non-Western standpoints; and to aim to discover respects in which non-Western worldviews at bottom have values that the West prizes. For these and other concerns, see March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?"
3. For the best anthology of work on sub-Saharan morality, see Munyaradzi Felix Murove, ed. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009).
4. On the normative implications of the Confucian account of the social self, see the essays in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, ed. Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For some clear statements by African philosophers, see, Kwasi Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," in *African-American Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics*, ed. Harley Flack and Edmund Pellegrino (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 104–117; Ifeanyi Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 324–31.
5. See, for example, Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Fan Ruiping, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
6. *Analects (Lunyu 《論語》)*, 1: 1.
7. For a resolutely "traditionalist" account of African morality, see Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).
8. Kwame Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2004), 16.
9. Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy* (Peter Lang: New York, 1991), 65.
10. See Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–41.
11. Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Ubuntu and Its Socio-Moral Significance." Reprinted in Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, 63–84; quotation found on 70.



12. Augustine Shutte, "Ubuntu as the African Ethical Vision." Reprinted in *Ibid.*, 85–99, quotation found on 94, 95 (emphasis in text).
13. See, for example, Kwasi Wiredu, "Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2008): 332–39 (esp. at 337).
14. Quoted in Barbara Nussbaum, "Ubuntu." Reprinted in Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, 100–110; quotation found on 103.
15. *Ibid.*
16. As has been argued persuasively by Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999).
17. Of course, we do not mean to imply that Chinese people necessarily adhere to Confucian political values. The Chinese Communist Party did its best to stamp out Confucian legacies (until the early 1990s) and in Chinese imperial history, different combinations of Legalistic and Confucian values shaped political practices. See, for example, John E. Schrecker, *The Chinese Revolution in Historical Perspective* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991). But for empirical evidence that Confucian political values are increasingly influential in mainland China, see Doh Chull Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Shi Tianjian, *The Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
18. See, for example, Albert H. Y. Chen, "Mediation, Litigation, and Justice: Confucian Reflections in a Modern Liberal Society," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
19. Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa, *The State versus T Makwanyane and M Mchunu*, Case No. CCT/3/94 (1995). Also available online at <http://www.saflii.org/>.
20. *Analects*, 15: 39.
21. Perhaps the most influential statement of Confucius's own highest political ideal is the account of "the Great Way" (*da dao* 大道) in the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 《禮記》), a work compiled during the Han Dynasty on the basis of older materials. This ideal is described as an age when the world worked for the interests of all people (*tianxia wei gong* 天下爲公) and these characters are immediately followed by an ideal of political meritocracy: "the worthy and the able were promoted to office" (*xuan xian yu neng* 選賢與能).
22. For some recent accounts of Confucian-inspired political meritocracy as it might be applied in the contemporary world, see Bai Tongdong, "A Mencian Version of Limited Democracy," *Res Publica* 14, no. 1 (2008): 19–34; Joseph Chan, "Democracy and Meritocracy: Toward a Confucian Perspective," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (2007): 179–193; Li Chenyang, "Where Does Virtuous Leadership Stand?" *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 4 (2009): 531–536; and Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 6. But for an opposing view, see Sor-hoon Tan, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for a Modern East Asia," *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 4 (2009): 537–53.
23. Kang Xiaoguang 康曉光, *Renzheng: Zhongguo Zhengzhi Fazhan de Di San Tiao Daolu* 《仁政：中國政治發展的第三條道路》(Humane Government: The Third Way for China's Political Development) (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2005).
24. For a clear expression of this perspective, see Mogobe Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 135–52.
25. Kwasi Wiredu, "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics," *Polylog* 2 (2000). Available at: <http://them.polylog.org/2/fwk-en.htm>.
26. See Li Chenyang, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (2006): 583–603.
27. For an argument drawing on Confucian ethics that aims to defend a paternalistic model of an open media, see Bell, *China's New Confucianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, rev. ed. 2010), preface.
28. *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 《孟子》), 4B: 30, 4A: 20.

29. See, for example, Qingping Liu, "Filiality versus Sociality and Individuality: On Confucianism as 'Consanguinitism,'" *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 2 (2003): 234–50.
30. For citations and critical discussion of the notions of dignity salient in African world-views, see Thaddeus Metz, "Human Dignity, Capital Punishment, and an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 1 (2010): 81–99, and "African Conceptions of Human Dignity," *Human Rights Review* (forthcoming).
31. On which, see Anthony Appiah, "Ethical Systems, African," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, ed. Edward Craig, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/about>.
32. Thaddeus Metz and Joseph Gaie, "The African Ethic of *Ubuntu/Botho*," *Journal of Moral Education* 39, no. 3 (2010): 273–90, at 278.
33. *Mencius*, 2A: 6.
34. The point here is about emphasis. Some contemporary theorists have argued that Confucian values can be interpreted in ways that are similar to the value of human dignity. For example, Irene Bloom argues that "Mencian idea of dignity" involves a self-awareness on the part of human beings that they are both capable and worth of respect in her "Mencian Confucianism and Human Rights," in *Confucianism and Human Rights*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 109. Even in such cases, however, it is worth noting a distinction between dignity (exhibiting a superlative intrinsic value shared by all or nearly all human beings) and moral status (being owed duties in one's own right). Confucians have typically thought that something other than dignity confers a moral status on human beings.
35. To be fair, Confucianism does defend general virtues of a person that are appropriate for people of different backgrounds and in different social contexts (see Joseph Chan, "Exploring the Nonfamilial in Confucian Political Philosophy," in *The Politics of Affective Relations: East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Hahm Chaihark and Daniel A. Bell (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004). Confucius himself said that one of the requirements of *ren* (humaneness) is to, "In your public life [or "when you are away from home"], behave as though you are receiving important visitors" (*Analects*, 12: 2). But note that the context is "public life" which is different from the *Ubuntu* idea of extending hospitality to strangers in one's home and *Ubuntu* urges hospitality even to guests who may not be socially "important."
36. Munyaka and Motlhabi, "*Ubuntu* and Its Socio-Moral Significance," 77.
37. As discussed in Bénézet Bujo, "Springboards for Modern African Constitutions and Development in African Cultural Traditions." Reprinted in Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, 391–411; quotation found on 395.
38. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 272–73.
39. *Analects*, 2: 4.
40. This is not to deny that there would be substantial opposition to such proposals in countries that have already adopted one person, one vote systems such as South Korea, but it is not impossible to imagine such proposals being the subject of serious debate once there is an opportunity for substantial political reform in mainland China.
41. Such a view helps to explain why Confucius argued that the young should be held in high esteem (*Analects*, 9: 23).
42. Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 325.
43. See Metz and Gaie, "The African Ethic of *Ubuntu/Botho*," 285–86.
44. *Analects*, 19: 5.