# THE HUMANIST IMPERATIVE IN SOUTH AFRICA

EDITOR | JOHN W DE GRUCHY

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Hendrik Geyer
STIAS Director

Stellenbosch
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PUBLICATION

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# AN AFRICAN THEORY
# OF DIGNITY AND A
# RELATIONAL CONCEPTION
# OF POVERTY

Thaddeus Metz

Poverty is degrading, but of what precisely? What is it about human nature that is treated disrespectfully when a state and other agents in society fail to prevent poverty? And what is it that they should be doing to prevent it? What kinds of policies and practices would treat the poor as having dignity? I suggest answers to these philosophical questions by drawing on a large strand of southern African moral thought that instructs us to develop *ubuntu* (in Nguni languages, or *botho* in Sotho-Tswana), that is, to realise our humanness or to live a genuinely human way of life.

In other work, I have articulated and defended a moral philosophy grounded on ideas associated with *ubuntu* that avoids problems of being too vague to understand, too abstract to apply to real life dilemmas, too metaphysical to serve as a public morality, or too implausible to take seriously in the light of recent philosophical insights into ethics (Metz 2010; Metz & Gaie 2010). Here, I briefly spell out my interpretation of *ubuntu* as a contemporary moral philosophy, in order to present under-explored and

promising ways to understand the relationship between dignity and poverty in the context of South African society.

I begin by summarising the way that I approach *ubuntu* philosophically (section 1), which will set the stage for presenting a new conception of human dignity that has a sub-Saharan pedigree and constitutes a promising rival to the Kantian conception of dignity that dominates discussion in contemporary Western ethics and jurisprudence (section 2). According to my African-based theory of dignity, a being has it roughly in virtue of a substantial capacity for communal relationship, a view that contrasts with the characteristically Western view that 'internal' or 'non-relational' properties of rationality or autonomy constitute our dignity. Next, I invoke the Afro-communitarian conception of dignity to answer the questions of why poverty is morally problematic, which goods the state ought to distribute to the needy, and how much they ought to receive, along the way noting respects in which the implications of the sub-Saharan theory of dignity differ from those of the more Western approach (section 3). I briefly conclude by suggesting some additional avenues of research into the indignity of poverty (section 4).

## A philosophical interpretation of *ubuntu*

My approach to *ubuntu* and southern African morality generally is philosophical and constructive, meaning that I draw on values salient in the region in order to create a fundamental theory indicating which actions, laws and policies are morally right. I do not seek to recount what a particular indigenous people believes about morality, as an anthropologist would. Instead, I appeal to many of the values shared widely among peoples in the region with the aim of proposing a basic principle that plausibly provides sound guidance about how we morally ought to treat one another.

It should not be expected that any traditional peoples have actually believed the ethical theory I present, for two reasons. For one, it is an abstract interpretation of morality that could likely come only from a professional philosopher critically engaging with indigenous southern African ideas, a relatively new creature to be found on the sub-Saharan landscape. For another, in seeking to create a philosophically attractive theory, I have used independent judgement, meaning that rather than seeking to unify any and all ideas recurrently associated with *ubuntu*, I spell out a principle that captures only those that I and other contemporary experts in ethics across the globe would tend to find appealing. If someone were to suggest, say, that I cannot obtain *ubuntu* because I am white, then I would deem that to be a poor *philosophical* interpretation of *ubuntu* (regardless of its an*thropological* accuracy), relative to one according to which in principle anyone, regardless of race or culture, is capable of living a genuinely human way of life.

Despite the fact that a professional philosopher, and a foreign one at that, has conceived the moral theory below, it is apt to call it 'southern African', or simply 'African', because it is principally informed by many piecemeal ideas about ethics that have been recurrent among traditional Nguni, Sotho-Tswana and Shona speaking peoples, among others, in the region.

Any promising interpretation of *ubuntu* as a moral philosophy is wise to start with the ubiquitous judgement, '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', in Nguni languages, and '*Motho ke motho ka batho babang*', in Sotho-Tswana, which is usually translated as, 'A person is a person through other persons'. That overly literal translation means virtually nothing to a non-African English speaker, at best connoting empirical banalities to the effect that children cannot survive without parenting or that human beings are always part of a community. However, when those in southern Africa claim that a person is a person through other persons, they are typically (also) making a moral assertion, that is, a recommendation about how to live one's life. It is characteristic for them to think that personhood is an ideal, a virtuous state that is something to be striven for in life.

More specifically, one's proper goal should be to try to become a *full* person or to live a *genuinely* human way of life (Menkiti 2004). To say that a person is a person through other persons is to endorse the aim of becoming a complete person or of having exhibited *ubuntu* to a superlative degree, something that ancestors and elders are thought to have achieved but that the rest of us need to keep seeking out. Just as a jalopy is not a *real* car (Gaie 2007:33), so those who fail to behave properly are not *real* persons, and are occasionally labelled 'animals' (Bhengu 1996:27), beings who stereotypically do not exhibit what is valuable about human nature.

In virtue of what does one realise one's humanness? The answer 'through persons' tells us something, but not very much on the face of it. I interpret this phrase to say that the *only* way to become a real person is in the context of a positive relationship with others, specifically, prizing community with them. As Augustine Shutte, one of the first professional South African philosophers to publish a book on *ubuntu*, sums up the basics of the ethic: 'Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human and this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded' (2001:30).

In a traditional context, the 'others' with whom to commune include ancestors, God and animals that have a spiritual significance such as totems (Ramose 1999; Murove 2007). However, since I seek a philosophical understanding of *ubuntu* that could serve as a basis for public morality in a pluralistic society, I tend not to highlight the more contested, immaterial facets of indigenous sub-Saharan ethics. Most useful is the core, secular notion of communal relationship that is constitutive of one's humanness. In other work, I have sought to clarify with some analytic rigor what community involves, suggesting that it is well understood in terms of the combination of what I call 'identity' and 'solidarity'. Let me spell out these ideas.

To identify with each other is largely for people to think of themselves as members of the same group – that is, to conceive of themselves as a 'we', as well as for them to engage in joint projects, coordinating their behaviour to realise shared ends. For people to fail to identify with each other could involve outright division between them, i.e. people not only thinking of themselves as an 'I' in opposition to a 'you' or a 'they', but also aiming to undermine one another's ends.

To exhibit solidarity with one another is for people to engage in mutual aid, to act in ways that are expected to benefit each other. Solidarity is also a matter of people's attitudes such as emotions and motives being positively oriented toward others, say, by sympathising with them and helping them for their sake. For people to fail to exhibit solidarity would be for them either to be indifferent to each other's flourishing or to exhibit ill-will in the form of hostility and cruelty.

Community in characteristic African moral thinking is the condition in which one finds people *both* identifying with and exhibiting solidarity toward one another, or, as former Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro puts it, where one encounters 'close and sympathetic social relations within the group' (1998:3). Now, the combination of people identifying with each other or being close, on the one hand, and of them exhibiting solidarity with one another or being sympathetic, on the other, is more or less what people mean by 'friendship' or a broad sense of 'love'. A loving relationship is plausibly nothing other than thinking of oneself as a 'we' with another person, participating in joint activities with her, going out of one's way to help her, and doing so on the basis of compassion and for her sake. So, one attractive philosophical way to understand southern African morality is to read it as telling us, at bottom, to become human by prizing friendly or loving relationships with other human beings (cf Tutu 1999:34-35).

## From *ubuntu* to dignity

So far in spelling out a moral philosophy grounded on salient ideas associated with talk of *ubuntu* (and cognate terms), I have not mentioned anything about human dignity. The sense of 'dignity' that I am interested in is the one that is thought to be equal among (nearly) all human beings and is plausibly taken as the foundation of human rights, as is done in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948). I set aside more variable and hierarchical senses of 'dignity', according to which those who have accomplished much in life, such as elders (real persons), may be said to have a 'more dignified existence' than others. So, the question I seek to answer now is this: given a philosophical interpretation of *ubuntu* that prescribes prizing communal or loving relationships with others, which conception of dignity, as the basis of an equal moral worth among human beings warranting respect, does it underwrite?

A plausible answer is to be found in the way one is to develop one's personhood, namely, 'through persons', i.e. by entering into community with others. One does not become a real person by tending rose bushes or saving beached whales, supposing these actions have no bearing on the lives of other human beings. Instead, in typical southern African thinking, one lives a genuinely human way of life only by communing with other human beings. What is it, then, about human beings that makes them the proper objects of community or love? My suggestion is this: they are the most important beings on the planet and demand our love in virtue of their superlative capacity to be part of a loving relationship. Human beings are sensibly deemed to have a dignity insofar as they have a great capacity for communal relationship, and

an African ethic, as I have interpreted it, instructs us to respond to beings with a great capacity for community in a way that prizes community with them, i.e. that draws out, or actualises, this capacity.

Compare this conception of human dignity with the conception that is so influential in Western philosophy, based on the work of the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. Imagine that you are driving a bus that is careening down a hill, and that you must choose between running over a normal, adult human being or a cat. Supposing you must strike one of these beings, it would be right for you to hit the cat, the intuitive explanation of which is that the human is worth more than the cat. The Kantian would say that what makes the human worth more than the cat, or that gives it a dignity, is that it has the capacity to live autonomously, or to exhibit intelligence, or to act out of conscience. That is the conception of dignity that one finds most often in United Nations documents, in judgements by courts with dignity-based constitutions, in recent work by former Constitutional Court Justice Laurie Ackermann (n.d.), and in the influential moral and political philosophies of John Rawls (1971) and Ronald Dworkin (2000). In contrast, the African theory of dignity that I have proposed would say that the reason to run over the cat rather than the human is that the latter is capable of love in a way that the former is not. Even if the human has not utilised this capacity well, and has been rather nasty, he retains a dignity that demands respect simply in virtue of being able to act otherwise.

## Dignity and poverty

I now apply this Afro-communitarian notion of what makes a human being special to several issues regarding poverty. To illustrate the novelty and attractiveness of my construal of poverty as an indignity, I often contrast it with the Kantian approach and do so in the context of South African issues. As I point out, there is a clear sense in which the Kantian conception of poverty is 'individualist', while the African one is 'relational' – and is revealing for being so.

### Why poverty is morally problematic

When we speak of 'poverty', we are usually referring to a situation in which some people are lacking external, material goods and others could alleviate their plight, at least without enormous sacrifice on their part. What is at bottom morally wrong with that kind of situation?

Influential is the answer that avoidable poverty is fundamentally unjust insofar as it is inhuman or is an indignity, a condition in which some people are not treated as the most special beings in the world. However, a more precise answer will turn on the property in virtue of which humans are deemed to have a dignity. A Kantian, for example, believes that people have a dignity in virtue of their ability to make free decisions for themselves, and she will therefore understand the wrongness of poverty as a degradation of that capacity. Roughly, poverty is wrong, on this view, because it is a(n unnecessary) lack of individual freedom. When one is poor, one is less able to make a variety of choices that the rich can make.

That explanation of the wrongness of poverty is 'individualistic' in the sense that a feature utterly internal to a human being is what poverty degrades. In contrast, my Afro-communitarian theory of dignity is 'relational', in that it entails that poverty is an injustice to the extent that it degrades people's capacity to commune with others. Basically, poverty is something that stunts people socially, that impairs their ability to engage in loving relationships. I once attended a National *Ubuntu* Imbizo where an elderly African woman said that the reason she found poverty so troublesome is that it renders her *unable to give to others*.

## What should be distributed to the poor?

Politicians usually think that the way to fight poverty is by increasing the gross domestic product or the amount of income that people receive. More sophisticated economists realise that income is not an ethically basic category, i.e. that poverty can be fought only roughly by giving people more money or some other exchange value such as shares of stock. Most often, they suggest that what ultimately matters with regard to fighting poverty is distributing external, material goods in a way that enables people to satisfy more of their preferences.

A focus on preference satisfaction ('utility') accords reasonably well with a Kantian conception of dignity, as friends of capitalism have often maintained. If what confers a dignity on people is their capacity for freedom, then it appears that poverty is to be fought by doing more to give people what they want or to satisfy their demand in a marketplace. Other Kantians have a related, but different, understanding of what it is the poor should receive. Rawls (1971) and Dworkin (2000) have maintained that since what is special about people is, basically, their capacity for autonomy, what the poor primarily ought to receive are *general-purpose means*, goods that can be used to achieve a wide variety of ends. Money is obviously one such good. However, there are additional forms, such as certain types of technology (nuclear), property (oil, land), and education (literacy, maths). Both the ability to obtain preference satisfaction and the possession of general-purpose means are again 'individualistic' in the sense that they are states of a human being that make no essential reference to others.

The Afro-communitarian conception of poverty is different, conceiving of the relevant external materials to distribute in essentially relational terms. What the state and other wealthy agents ought to provide to the poor are goods that are likely to foster, or otherwise respect, communal relationships (*cf* Nkondo 2007). Money will obviously be included among those goods, but there will be many others that differ from the satisfaction of demand on a market and from the provision of general-purpose means. What follow are five suggestions about what these could include, with a focus on South Africa (but with broader implications).

1.  *Women's Shelters.* Poor women are often forced to stay with abusive men because they and their children have nowhere else to go. Providing temporary shelter for them, and eventually subsidised housing, would help end unloving relationships, and enable many women and children to seek out more positive ones.

2.  *Counselling* and *Rehabilitation.* Broken families, households headed by orphans, by teenagers or by grandmothers, alcoholism, and an inability to resolve conflicts with emotional insight and communicative clarity are widespread problems. Familial relationships, which have the potential to be the most tight-knit, would be greatly facilitated by the provision of therapeutic social services.

3.  *Neighbourhood Parks.* The combination of a car-culture and widespread criminal activity makes it difficult for people in urban environments to feel a sense of community. Funding safe, well-kept parks in neighbourhoods, not to mention inclusive activities in them such as fairs and musical events, would help overcome local residents' isolation.

4.  *Reconciliatory Projects.* Society is splintered among many dimensions beyond the obvious fault-line of black/white, including: young/old, urban/rural, female/male, rich/poor, locals/foreigners and criminals/law-abiding residents. Some of these fractures would begin to mend if programmes such as the following were supported: restorative justice in which offenders work off debt to their victims, including the wider community, and youth service in which unemployed matriculants would, say, build houses for the elderly.

5.  *Integrating Students.* Students should be instructed in a way that would be likely to foster identification with one another, discourage cliques based on wealth and status, fight stigma and alienation, and unite while leading to respect for difference. The above are five examples of the kinds of projects that a state that prizes communal relationships would be sensible to fund or otherwise support.

Note how different the above projects are from the kinds of programmes most often promoted by the ANC, the DA and COSATU. What all these political agendas have in common is a primary focus on money or other general-purpose means as the relevant goods to distribute to the poor. However, the friend of the Afro-communitarian conception of dignity would also propose, plausibly, that people are more wealthy, the more that their state funds things likely to foster communal relationship, such as shelters to house battered women and their children, therapy for those suffering from depression, addiction and neurosis, parks for local residents, programmes in which members of alienated groups labour for one another, and schools in which children engage in activities that are likely to foster cohesion.

## How much the poor should receive

The conception of the right pattern by which economic goods should be distributed is informed by a motivating conception of human dignity and its companion conception of what the relevant goods are. If what is to be honoured about human beings is their capacity for autonomy, so that what the state should allocate to the poor is either preference satisfaction or general-purpose means, then it makes sense to want to *maximise* these things in some sense. For example, economists typically favour the principle of Pareto optimality, according to which, if relative to a given distribution, a different distribution would offer more income to someone and no less to anyone else,

then the latter distribution is more just. Kantian philosophers of economic justice tend to favour a distribution of wealth known as the 'difference principle', according to which inequality is permissible if and only if it would make the worst-off group in particular the best off it can be, relative to any other possible distribution. It is typical of these perspectives to entail that any reduction in inequality would be irrational and unjust if it gave the poor less income (or other relevant economic goods) than they would have under a scheme with greater inequality.

The ANC and DA share this inegalitarian but nonetheless 'poor friendly' standpoint. These two parties favour private ownership of the means of production coupled with a substantial redistributive taxation of the income of those who have prospered on the market. Taxation of property (for non-compensatory reasons) is deemed just in order to provide money, shelter or electricity to the poor and to enable them to obtain the education or other qualifications needed to compete for work. However, neither political party objects, on grounds of economic principle, to market 'winners' garnering extreme amounts of wealth, so long as it results in the 'losers' being somewhat better off than they otherwise would have been.

In contrast, the Afro-communitarian conception of human dignity, with its relational conception of economic goods, entails that a large Gini coefficient reliably causes outcomes that are economically unjust. From this perspective, property must be distributed in a way that expresses esteem for communal relationships, and there is some economic injustice when property is held in a way that disrupts them. Such a view entails less of a tolerance for inequality than what is typical under welfare state capitalism, for a sense of togetherness is extraordinarily difficult to foster when some have much greater wealth than others (as Magesa 1997:277-278 points out). Large inequality not merely prevents the positive relationships of people thinking of themselves as a 'we', engaging in cooperative behaviour and helping one another for their sake, but also fosters their opposites, namely 'division' and 'ill-will'. When some are poor and have expectations that are frustrated in the face of others holding enormous amounts of wealth, then people turn to crime.

My claim is not that a market system, or even capitalism, is necessarily unjust, and I naturally recognise that fewer goods such as money going to the poor is a relevant economic harm to take into account when ascertaining which property distribution is most just. What I suggest, though, is that there is a *prima facie* relevant facet of distributive justice that the Kantian approach neglects and that the Afro-communitarian perspective highlights: one moral cost of substantial inequality (even when the poor marginally benefit in terms of income thereby) is the loss of communal relationship and the likely promotion of discord such as theft and violence. If a competitive economy is justified, then, given a need to respect the dignity people have in virtue of their capacity for community, there is *some* strong reason to regulate it to a much greater degree than the dominant political players have suggested.

If the present conception of the indignity of poverty is indeed more attractive in various ways than the dominant, Kantian view, then in future work it should be compared with additional rivals, such as the influential capabilities approach (e.g. Nussbaum 2000). If the Afro-communitarian perspective is to be taken seriously for public policy, then we need to explore what it might mean to measure the extent to which communal relationship is respected by a certain allocation of economic goods. Such abstract, theoretical analysis should be undertaken if South Africa's people are ever going to live genuinely human lives.

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## PUBLICATION

A CREATIVE SPACE FOR THE MIND

*The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* includes twenty-six multi-disciplinary essays and reflections originally presented and discussed at the two symposia of the New Humanism Project held at STIAS in June 2009 and February 2010. The authors are leading academics and public figures drawn from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, all sharing a common concern: "How can our fledgling democracy not only survive but flourish?" The essays focus on the humanisms that have shaped our society and its constitution; what it means to be human beings together in South Africa, and issues of economic and social justice, human dignity and rights. Developing mutual respect, listening critically and constructively to each other, and promoting a wider conversation are of vital importance. Fostering programmes that enable all people to attain their full potential are identified as an urgent priority.
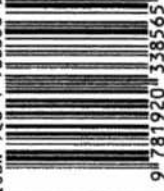
**John de Gruchy,** *a theologian and social scientist, is Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town, Extraordinary Professor at Stellenbosch University and Fellow of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study.*

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