AFRICAN ETHICS

A Guide to Key Ideas

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The Virtues of African Ethics

Thaddeus Metz

Introduction

Since its inception as a professional field in the 1960s or so, African ethics has yet to be given serious consideration by virtue ethicists and international scholars in moral philosophy generally.[1] This neglect is unfortunate, since sub-Saharan perspectives on how to live are characteristically virtue-centred and, furthermore, are both different from the most influential Western virtue ethical philosophies and worth taking seriously. According to one major swathe of African ethical thought, community is the foundational value for virtue, while, for another, it is vitality. This contribution spells out these two theories of virtue salient in the sub-Saharan tradition and critically appraises them in comparison to some dominant Western conceptions. The African approaches to virtue should be of interest to a wide readership insofar as they provide attractive alternatives to the most influential ones in the West, which tend to be pluralist views that eschew the search for unity among the virtues, on the one hand, and theoretical conceptions of virtue grounded on the basic value of rationality (or divinity), on the other.[2]

The traditionally African and the classically Greek

By 'African' ethics is meant ideas about what the good life is for human beings and which choices they should make that have been salient in the world views of black peoples indigenous to the sub-Saharan region and, especially, in contemporary philosophical writings grounded on them. This chapter is therefore not concerned with, say, the Islamic philosophy characteristic of Arabs in North Africa, or the Calvinist values of the white Afrikaans society in South Africa. In addition, calling certain ideas 'African' is not meant to suggest either that they are held by all black peoples on the continent, let alone all individuals there, or that only such persons hold them. Instead, to call views 'African', 'sub-Saharan' or the like simply indicates that they have been *salient* in much of that part of the world and for a long time, in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere.[3]

Indigenous black societies below the Sahara characteristically[4] have: been small-scale in number, with nothing approximating the size and anonymity of a metropolis;

been oral cultures, lacking a corpus of written works; maintained that ritual, initiation and tradition have some moral importance of a sort unrecognized in modern societies; held land in common, parcelling it out to households based on need or clan membership, in contrast to permitting profit-maximizing private ownership; lacked sophisticated natural science and technology, with the economy based largely on agriculture, cattle or hunting/gathering; maintained that there are weighty duties to aid particular others that far transcend the nuclear family, centred on what Westerners would call 'extended family' such as uncles, cousins and many other members of a lineage; believed in a duty to wed and to procreate, viewing solitariness as problematic; believed in the continued, disembodied and earthly existence of (and interaction with) ancestors, people who were not merely forebears of a given people, but ones who both lived to a ripe old age and exhibited moral wisdom; resolved conflicts affecting society by consensus, at least some among popularly appointed elders, rather than rested content with either majority rule or the non-consultative will of a monarch; responded to wrongdoing not so much with retribution, but principally with an eye towards reconciliation between the offender and his family, on the one hand, and the immediate victim, her family and the broader society, on the other.

Yet another recurrent feature of indigenous African cultures has been the similarity of the maxims taken to encapsulate ethical ideals. In southern Africa it is common to say, 'A person is a person through other persons' (e.g. Kasenene 1994: 141; Tutu 1999: 35), whereas in eastern and western African the more frequent phrase is, 'I am because we are' (Menkiti 1984: 171; Mbiti 1990: 106). These literal translations appear to express merely descriptive claims about human sociality, to the effect that one cannot meet all of one's needs on one's own, or that one's identity is bound up with one's society. Although these maxims do connote the physical and even metaphysical interdependence of human beings on one another, they also include resolutely evaluative and normative senses. In particular, these maxims are in the first instance prescriptions to develop one's personhood or to become a real self.

The typical thought is that human beings have a nature they share with animals and also one that is distinctively human and qualitatively higher. One's basic aim in life should be to develop the valuable features of human nature, or to exhibit ubuntu, literally humanness, as it is famously known among Nguni speakers in southern Africa. As Desmond Tutu, in his book about having been the Chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, remarks about African ethics: 'When we want to give high praise to someone, we say "*Yu u nobuntu*"; "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate' (1999: 34). And when someone is criticized for immoral behaviour, African people typically say that he 'is not a person' or even that he 'is an animal' (Letseka 2000: 186; Dandala 2009: 260).

At this point sub-Saharan ethics is seen to be characteristically perfectionist and even *eudaimonist*, as one's fundamental aim ought to be one's self-realization. So far, so Greek. The similarities between traditionally African ideals and those of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle continue, in that self-realization is typically understood to be a function of the exhibition of virtue or human excellence. Becoming a complete person or living a genuinely human way of life is not merely a matter of performing actions that are right because they accord with some principle, but rather primarily a function of

displaying certain character traits relating to one's beliefs, desires, emotions and actions that express such states of mind.

Where the African and Greek approaches to ethics clearly split apart concerns the content of human excellences, the traits deemed to exhaust or at least be at the core of living an ideal human life. As is well known, the most influential Greek philosophers held that our capacity to behave rationally is what unifies the virtues; diverse forms of human excellence are ultimately all a matter of ways of realizing our rational nature. The African tradition is different, focusing instead on two distinct goods: vitality and community.[5] The following expounds sub-Saharan conceptions of virtue grounded on these respective values, and considers their merits and demerits in relation to the Greek and other traditions likely to be familiar to readers beyond the African tradition.

Community as the ground of virtue

For one major strand of African ethical thought, at least as philosophically interpreted, self-realization is *exhausted* 'through other persons', that is, through communal (or harmonious) relationships alone. It is typical for African theorists to maintain, or at least to suggest, that the only comprehensive respect in which one can live a genuinely human way of life is by prizing community with other people.

The following claims are representative of the strong view salient among sub-Saharan thinkers that relating communally is one and the same thing as self-realization, humanness or virtue. Consider, first, Tutu's comments on the way sub-Saharans tend to understand ethics:

> 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 ... 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.
>
> 1999: 35

Similarly, South African public intellectual Gessler Muxe Nkondo remarks that if you asked adherents to an *ubuntu* philosophy,

> What do you live for? What motive force or basic attitude gives your life meaning? What gives direction and coherence to your life?, the answers would express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community.
>
> 2007: 91

And, again, the Nigerian theologian Pantaleon Iroegbu sums up African ethics with the claim that 'the purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness' (2005: 442).

These and other characterisations by sub-Saharan ethicists of one's proper final aim often focus on two different elements of community as an ideal, namely participating, being bound up with and belonging, on the one hand, and sharing, promoting the good and serving, on the other. Some have analysed these two conceptually distinct facets of community under the headings of 'identity', or 'sharing a way of life', for the former, and 'solidarity', or 'improving others' quality of life', for the latter, with the suggestion being that the combination of the two relationships not only captures what many African thinkers have had in mind, but also is a rational reconstruction of the ground of a plausible moral theory (Metz and Gaie 2010). The combination of sharing a way of life and improving others' quality of life is what most English-speakers mean by 'friendliness' or a broad sense of 'love'. In short, then, the maxim that 'a person is a person through other persons' is well understood, in a philosophical, principled form, to be this claim: one should develop into a real person, or live a genuinely human way of life, which one does just insofar as one prizes friendly relationships of sharing a way life with others and caring for their quality of life.[6]

This purely relational, and specifically communal, interpretation of the essence of self-realization on the face of it makes good sense of the particular virtues that have been salient in the African philosophical tradition. For instance, Kwame Gyekye, the important Ghanaian moral and political theorist, remarks that for his Akan people, 'ideal and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others' (1992: 109);[7] Dismas Masolo, a key historian of African philosophy, says in a book on sub-Saharan conceptions of self and personhood, '*Charity* and other virtues of altruism such as *politeness* and *benevolence* to others are perhaps the most celebrated aspects of African communitarian practices and ideals' (2010: 251); Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, two South African theologians, associate the following traits with ubuntu: 'Because it is manifested in living in community, it is best realised in deeds of kindness, compassion, caring, sharing, solidarity and sacrifice' (2009: 74); and, finally, in a book devoted to the topic of virtue in the African tradition, Peter Paris remarks, 'No virtue is more highly praised among Africans and African Americans than that of beneficence because it exemplifies the goal of community' (1995: 136). What these conceptions of virtue all have in common is other-regard; one realizes oneself essentially in relation to people distinct from oneself, and in principle cannot do so in isolation from them.

Summing up one major Afro-communal conception of virtue, then, a person exhibits human excellence or virtue just insofar as she has character traits that express a prizing of communal or friendly relationships. Such an analysis would appear to capture additional virtues such as industriousness, respectfulness and fairness.

When it comes to how to inculcate other-regarding virtues, consider some approaches that institutions might usefully take. Primary and secondary schools should avoid competitive assessments of pupils, instead finding ways to encourage them to exhibit solidarity with one another, and they should also strive to prompt pupils to identify with each other, perhaps by requiring uniforms to be worn so that class divisions are minimized. At the tertiary level, a university might develop students' other-regarding capacities by teaching them how to become more aware of their

implicit biases against others, how to identify and deal with conflicts of interest and how to become more attuned to other people's points of view and feelings. In the workplace, it would be apt for managers to consider whether they could form what are often called 'communities of practice', in which workers are not isolated from one another, but instead cooperate to achieve shared ends.

With the focus on other-regard here, the suggestion is not that the African tradition is utterly devoid of more self-regarding considerations. There are, for instance, recurrent proverbs praising traits such as moderating one's desires and being cunning (Ibekwe 1998: 37–8, 127–8). However, sometimes these traits should be viewed as conducive to happiness or prudence, not so much virtue. Other times these individualist values are related to virtue, but either as instruments, that is, as means to behaviour oriented towards communal ends, or as constituents of virtue insofar as they are done to foster community (e.g. Paris 1995: 141–8; Ntibagirirwa 2001). For instance, if one did not look after oneself, then one would threaten to become a burden on others. One may, however, reasonably question whether temperance, craftiness and related traits are related to virtue only insofar as they have an other-regarding dimension, a point discussed below (see below *The vices of African ethics*).

Another way to question the communal conception of virtue is to suggest the existence of additional character traits that appear to be excellences but not to include an essential reference to another person. Perhaps bravery is a good example. Although it appears that Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* believes that bravery is most clearly a virtue only in the context of fighting a just war (1115a25–35), he might be wrong about that. Suppose one were alone on an island that were deserted of other people, but that did have fierce animals on it. Could one not exhibit the virtue of bravery in relation to, say, a warthog or a thunderstorm?

Another sort of counterexample to the communal theory of virtue is excellence that is intuitively associated with mental health. Many believe that those who love themselves, at least to the right degree or in the right way, are better persons in some respect than those who hate themselves. Similarly, those with confidence, determination and vigour appear to have some virtue that those without them, viz. the depressed or neurotic, lack. These traits seem to be virtues, apart from any positive role they might play with respect to facilitating communal relationships.

Although a strictly relational or other-regarding conception of virtue has difficulty accommodating cases such as prudence, bravery and psychological strength, there are other intellectual resources in the sub-Saharan tradition that promise to do so with comparative ease. One finds them in the vitalist strain of African ethical thought, considered in the next section.

Vitality as the ground of virtue[8]

One of the first writers to take African ethical thought seriously was Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary who sought to make sub-Saharan metaphysical and moral beliefs comprehensible to a European-colonial mindset, but is reported to have

been the first Western intellectual to dignify African thought with the title of 'philosophy'. Tempels's (1952) analysis of sub-Saharan views of how to live focuses on the concept of life-force, famously called *seriti* in the southern African Sotho-Tswana language group. While Tempels has been rightly criticized for overgeneralizing, claiming that all Africans of the *bantu* linguistic group place life-force at the centre of their world views, he has captured aspects of one major strain of sub-Saharan ethical thought that present-day African thinkers continue to espouse.

Life-force is traditionally construed as an invisible divine energy that permeates everything in the world in varying degrees. The 'inanimate' mineral kingdom has the least degree of life-force; plants have more than rocks; animals have more than plants; humans have more than animals; ancestors and other disembodied and imperceptible ('spiritual') agents have more than humans; and God, as the source of all life-force, has more than anything else. Appealing to this 'great chain of being' metaphysics, some African philosophers propose a variant of a self-realization ethic according to which one's fundamental aim should be to increase life-force, either one's own or people's generally (Anyanwu 1984; Dzobo 1992; Kasenene 1994; Bujo 1997; Magesa 1997; Iroegbu 2005a, 2005b).

Although these and related philosophers often hold thickly religious or metaphysical interpretations of vitalism, the language they use permits of more secular readings, ones that are likely to be of broader interest to the field. For instance, often enough talk of 'life-force', 'life', 'energy' and the like may be understood in purely physicalist terms, connoting health, strength, growth, reproduction, generation, activity, self-motion, courage and confidence. Correspondingly, a lack of vitality would be construed to involve the presence of disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destructiveness, lethargy, passivity, insecurity and depression. Such naturalist understandings of what counts as 'life-force', or what might be usefully be called 'liveliness', interestingly recall the views of classic German-speaking philosophers such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1791) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) as well as contemporary work by Anglo-American virtue ethicists and self-realization psychologists who prize traits such as spontaneity, vigour, creativity and strength (e.g. Maslow 1956; Rogers 1961; Swanton 2003).

Persons, by virtue of their capacity for reason, are presumably capable of a greater or higher form of liveliness than animals; consider dancers or martial artists. However, rationality and vitality are not one and the same thing, by the present account. The revenue agent who checks tax returns is acting rationally, but does not exhibit much liveliness thereby.

One readily sees that the Afro-vitalist theory easily accommodates the counterexamples to the communal account; prudence, courage and mental health are plausibly united by the property of liveliness. In addition, many of the virtues that motivate the communal theory are arguably captured by vitalist considerations. That is, perhaps what kindness, concern, charity, hard work, respect, fairness and the like have in common at bottom is not that they are ways of prizing communal relationships, but rather that they tend to produce liveliness and to reduce weariness.[9]

The vices of African ethics

This section considers counterexamples to the account of virtue in terms of liveliness, ones that apply with equal force to the communal account, and that hence cut to the heart of characteristically sub-Saharan approaches to human excellence. It first addresses some intuitive virtues that neither vitality nor community can easily entail and well explain, and then some traits that intuitively are not virtues or vices but that the vitality and community theories suggest are.[10]

One virtue that is highly prized in the Western tradition but that is not on the radar in the African is that of 'pure' intellectual enquiry, that is, seeking certain kinds of knowledge for their own sake. Sub-Saharan societies clearly rate education and wisdom highly, but their cultures typically value knowledge for pragmatic reasons, e.g. as ways to foster adherence to tradition and custom, or to resolve moral dilemmas, or to promote well-being or liveliness (Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003; Wiredu 2004). It is very difficult to find a philosopher in the 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 (1141a20–b7). Knowing (as opposed to myth-making about) the composition of stars, or the origin and fate of the universe, is unlikely to foster communal relationships or to improve others' vitality, at least not very much compared to other kinds of knowledge.

A standard response to this concern is to suggest that the search for 'blue-sky' knowledge typically turns out to have useful applications. Einstein was interested in the nature of space-time as such, but his general theory of relativity has enabled us to position satellites accurately, so the story goes.

However, such a response will likely be unsatisfying to those working in fields such as theoretical physics, cosmology, metaphysics, epistemology and even evolutionary biology, and to those who appreciate their achievements. 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 realization of community or vitality. A more promising explanation of why the discovery of such knowledge would constitute human excellence has to do with the proper exercise of theoretical reason.

A similar sort of counterexample, mentioned above, is virtue that intuitively is a function of the organization of one's mental states. Think here of the views of Plato and Aristotle, who find human excellence in those whose desires are reasonable, whose emotions are fitting and, in general, whose judgements regulate their conative, emotive and affective states. Even supposing that such dispositions served the function of enhancing one's vitality (or that of others) or of supporting communal relationships, these considerations do not seem to be the best explanation of why they are virtues. Instead, a prima facie stronger explanation of their excellence appeals to the property of practical reason.

Here is a reasonable reply to be made on behalf of the friend of an African approach to human excellence. What she ought to do is to draw a modern distinction between morality, in the narrow sense of attitudes and actions towards which guilt is an apt

response, and ethics, in the broad sense of how best to live. Although virtue ethicists, including those in the African tradition, tend to eschew such a distinction, it is one worth considering in the face of the above criticisms of sub-Saharan approaches to virtue. At least the friend of the communal conception could suggest that her view captures the moral virtues, traits related to the way one must regard others so as not to be liable for guilt, where non-moral virtues include those concerning intellectual excellence, those relating to temperance, prudence and the like, and those that are a function of mental health. She could furthermore attempt to argue that the moral virtues, of generosity, compassion, politeness and so on, are generally weightier than the non-moral ones, such that the latter ought to be pursued only to the extent that they harmonize with the former. Such a reply merits consideration by the field.

Turn now to a different kind of criticism of the sub-Saharan conceptions of virtue, namely that they have questionable implications about what counts as virtue and vice. First off, notice that many sub-Saharan moral philosophers deem people to have moral obligations to wed and to procreate, or, in terms of virtue, deem those inclined towards such behaviour to exemplify human excellence in ways that others do not (Dzobo 1992: 225–7; Kasenene 1994: 141; Tangwa 1996: 194–5; Magesa 1997: 63, 89, 120–1, 167; Bujo 2001: 6–7, 34–54). Such a view appears to follow from either a vitalist or communal approach to virtue. Traits that foster vitality will include a disposition to create new life, and those that prize community will involve forming friendly relationships that are the most intense instances possible, viz. a family.

Now, such a perspective is not in itself so troublesome, and perhaps even welcome for squarely capturing an important social dimension of human virtue. However, where at least Western ethicists will baulk are further implications that are often drawn out of it. For example, it is characteristic of sub-Saharan countries to frown upon homosexuality, to the point of imposing the death penalty and other weighty formal and informal penalties. Gay partners are of course incapable of procreating, and they flout what are traditional lifestyles in many African societies, and for such reasons are deemed to be base. For a second example, those who get abortions are often deemed to exhibit vice, at least insofar as they fail to prize the value of human life or familial relationships. For a third case, remaining single and aloof from one's fellows, and even failing to remarry upon widowhood, are commonly viewed as indicative of bad character. Truly prizing community would mean sharing oneself and one's time, abilities, knowledge, etc., with others, as opposed to withdrawing; similar remarks go for highly valuing other people's vitality.

So far this section has noted attitudes, beliefs and practices that have been common below the Sahara and that appear to follow naturally from taking the goods of vitality or community to be fundamental to human excellence. There might be ways of interpreting the virtue theories in ways that do not have these implications, e.g. gay relationships could readily be viewed as instances of love. However, such projects have yet to be undertaken in earnest by African thinkers, many of whom might be happy to accept the above, conservative implications.

Consider, now, a second cluster of concerns that at least Westerners will tend to have about African conceptions of virtue. Some sub-Saharan moralists contend that

the virtues include traits such as obedience to authority, conformity to tradition and deference to elders (Dzobo 1992: 229; Mokgoro 1998: 21–2; Ikuenobe 2006). Consider some of the central virtues listed by the magisterial historian of sub-Saharan cultures, John Mbiti: 'be kind, help those who cry to you for help, show hospitality, be faithful in marriage, respect the elders, keep justice, behave in a humble way toward those senior to you . . . follow the customs and traditions of your society' (1990: 208–9).

For some concrete examples of these 'virtues' in action, consider that education among indigenous sub-Saharan societies has usually been parochial, focused exclusively on imparting the norms of the student's culture, and that educators have often used fear and indoctrination to instil values, dissuading students from questioning the – often, gendered – roles being handed down (Pearce 1990; Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003). For another example, artists who draw satirical portraits of African leaders in order to provoke critical reflection and to question authority are typically deemed to be immoral and provoke outrage.

Conformity and traditionalism are often considered virtues, and their opposites vices, in part because they are conducive to other virtues. Supposing that teachers and elders have moral wisdom, one would be most likely to become virtuous by doing as they say, so the reasoning goes (see especially Ikuenobe 2006). Another factor has been the communal approach to virtue, part of which prescribes supporting a people's sense of identity and hence their culture.

Perhaps, upon reflection, taking vitality or community to be the ground of virtue does not entail the aptness of docility towards those in authority and ready acceptance of customary ways of life. The latter could of course be stifling of liveliness, e.g. clitoridectomy, in which case the fundamental value would recommend criticism and change. Similarly, although the communal conception of virtue does include the idea that a common sense of self matters for its own sake to some degree, it also includes values that could regulate or override that one, namely the ideas that genuinely sharing a way of life requires freely choosing it and that people must also care about others' quality of life. Where practices are authoritarian and harmful, e.g. patriarchal, the virtuous person qua one who prizes communal relations has ground to struggle against them, on the interpretation advanced here. Or so the reader might consider.

Conclusion

This chapter has critically explored two theoretical approaches to virtue that are grounded on values salient in the worldviews of indigenous sub-Saharan peoples. According to one perspective, human excellence is a way of prizing communal relationships, conceived as the combination of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life. According to another, a character trait is virtuous just insofar as it is a disposition to promote vitality in oneself and in others. This chapter has striven to show that these theories are worth taking seriously as alternatives to characteristic Western grounding of virtue on rational capacities or the widespread disinclination to seek a ground at all and to rest content with a grab bag. The rise of African ethics as a

body of literature and professional discourse has taken place simultaneously with the flowering of virtue ethics in the West; may the two from here on out continue to grow together, and not merely side by side, as they have done up to now.[11]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   The first real anthology devoted to work in sub-Saharan ethics appeared only about a 15 years ago; see Murove (2009).

2   There are of course exceptions, Hursthouse's (1999) flourishing theory being one, but her view is still not characteristically African.

3   For useful discussion of ethical perspectives characteristic of indigenous, and characteristically small-scale, societies generally, see Silberbauer (1991).

4   The following is taken from Metz (2012: 22–3), which is grounded on anthropological evidence cited there.

5   The influential Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye interprets the tradition differently, contending that what Africans tend to deem virtuous are merely those traits that improve others' quality of life. This chapter does not address his view, partly since it is already accessible to an international audience (see esp. Gyekye 2010), and partly because focusing on well-being is not as useful as doing so on the underexplored sub-Saharan notions of vitality and community.

6   Traditionally, the relevant persons with whom to commune include imperceptible agents such as God and ancestors (e.g. Bujo 2001).

7   Although Gyekye himself believes that these virtues are unified by their tendency to promote well-being (1992: 109), it is plausible that it is rather prizing communal relationships that makes the best sense of them.

8   The next two paragraphs borrow heavily from Metz (2013).

9   Many African ethicists who take vitality to be the fundamental value highlight the importance of community in various ways, either as a reliable means to the production of vitality or a useful way by which to know which courses of actions will do so. See, for example, Magesa (1997) and Bujo (2001).

10 There is of course a major strain of reflection on virtue according to which there is no one 'master value' that would unify all the divergent forms of human excellence. However, in order to know that with some degree of assuredness, it is worth considering promising attempts to establish unity and, furthermore, one would presumably learn much about the virtues simply in the course of searching for such unity, even in the event there turned out to be none.

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