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## UBUNTU

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*Ubuntu* is a southern African concept, which means humanness. Humanness implies both a condition of being and a state of becoming. It concerns the unfolding of the human being in relation to other human beings and the more-than-human world of non-human nature. In other

words, the becoming of a human is dependent on other human beings and the cosmos. Moreover, *ubuntu* suggests that a human being is not an atomized individual of the Western tradition, but is embedded in social and biophysical relations. Therefore, *ubuntu* is anti-humanist because it emphasizes the relational existence and becoming of the human being.

*Ubuntu* is derived from proverbial expressions or aphorisms found in several languages in Africa, south of the Sahara. In the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele spoken in South Africa, *ubuntu* derives from the expression: *Umuntungumuntungabanye Bantu*, which suggests that a person's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others, and, in turn, is a true expression of personhood: 'We are, therefore I am'. *Botho* is its equivalent in Sotho-Tswana languages and is derived from the proverbial expression, *Mothokemothokabathobabang*. *Ubuntu* comprises one of the core elements of a human being. The Zulu word for human being is *umuntu*, who is constituted of the following: *umzimba* (body, form, flesh), *umoya* (breath, air, life), *umphefumela* (shadow, spirit, soul), *amandla* (vitality, strength, energy), *inhliziyo* (heart, centre of emotions), *umqondo* (head, brain, intellect), *ulwimi* (language, speaking), and *ubuntu* (humanness) (Le Roux 2000: 43). *Ubuntu* is, however, not only a linguistic concept, but has a normative connotation embodying how we ought to relate to the other – what our moral obligation is towards the other. *Ubuntu* suggests that our moral obligation is to care for others, because when they are harmed, we are harmed. This obligation extends to all of life, since everything in the cosmos is related: when I harm nature, I am harmed. Like all African cultural values *ubuntu* circulated through orality and tradition – its meaning, interwoven in the cultural practices and lived experiences of African peoples. Such cultural values became eroded or effaced by colonization. However, in post-colonial Africa, *ubuntu* and its equivalents have been re-invoked as a part of a decolonizing project, and also enjoys increasing appeal globally as an alternative to dominant notions of development that threaten the achievement of social justice and environmental sustainability. For example, some Afro-descendent groups in South America are invoking *ubuntu* to gain a more nuanced understanding of *buen vivir*.

*Ubuntu* conveys the idea that one cannot realize or express one's true self by exploiting, deceiving or acting in unjust ways towards others. Being able to play, to use one's senses, to imagine, to think, to reason, to produce works, to have control over one's environment are not possible without the presence of others. *Ubuntu* therefore depicts solidarity among humans and between humans and the more-than-human world. It can be invoked to build solidarities among humans in the struggle for social

justice and environmental sustainability, which are central concerns of social movements across the globe. *Ubuntu* proposes that human creativity and freedom should only be constrained when it harms others. *Ubuntu* is the manifestation of the power within all beings that serves to enhance life, and not thwart it. This is a power that is productive, that connects, and engenders care and compassion – it is the power of the multitude that gives impetus to social movements. This form of power is in contrast to power that imposes, that divides, that colonizes – the power of the sovereign wielded by supranational organizations, governments, the military, and the corporate world. The latter form of power results in the erosion of *ubuntu*.

*Ubuntu's* transformative potential lies in providing alternative readings to some of the key challenges faced by humanity in the twenty-first century: growing inequality among humans, impending ecological disaster and human's interconnectedness with new technologies to the extent that it is difficult to determine what 'being human' now is. Concerning the latter challenge, the invocation of *ubuntu* foregrounds the importance of affirming humanness, not by defining what it is to be human so as to declare other entities as non-human, but through a process that involves the unfolding of the human in a context of burgeoning new technologies. Addressing inequality in the world suggests a concern about humans only – it is human-centred – whereas addressing the ecological crisis extends the interest to the more-than-human world – it is eco-centric. *Ubuntu* is transformative in that it transcends the human-centred (anthropocentric) and eco-centred (eco-centric) binary (Le Grange 2012). Relationality among human beings should be viewed as a microcosm of relationality within the cosmos. Nurturing the self or caring for other human beings is therefore not antagonistic towards caring for the more-than-human world – *ubuntu* cannot simply be reduced to a category of anthropocentric or eco-centric. The self, community, and nature are inextricably tied up with one another – healing in one domain results in healing in all dimensions and so too is suffering transversally witnessed in all three dimensions. The struggle for individual freedom, social justice and environmental sustainability is one struggle.

Two potential limits of *ubuntu* might be identified. First, a narrow ethnocentric interpretation of the concept could be used politically to exclude others. By this, I mean that certain groups who have gained political power in post-colonial Africa might claim that the concept belongs to them – even though this might contradict the meaning of the term – or hold the view that it cannot be subjected to critical scrutiny. Put differently, *ubuntu* could become reduced to a narrow humanism that has resulted in atrocities such as

xenophobia experienced in South Africa in recent times. Second, because of its popular appeal, *ubuntu* could be co-opted by supranational organizations, governments and the corporate world to suit their own agendas, or given the dominance of Western ways of knowing, could become assimilated into a Western cultural archive, thus eroding its 'indigenouslyness'.

#### Further Resources

Le Grange, Lesley (2012), 'Ubuntu, Ukama, Environment and Moral Education', *Journal of Moral Education*. 4 (3): 329–40.

Le Roux, Johann (2000), 'The Concept of "Ubuntu": Africa's Most Important Contribution to Multicultural Education?' *Multicultural Teaching*. 18 (2): 43–46.

Novalis Ubuntu Institute, <http://novalis.org.za/>.

Ubuntu Liberation Movement, <http://www.ubuntu-party.org.za/>.

Ubuntu Pathways, <https://ubuntupathways.org/>.

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