

UBUNTU AND MORAL VALUE

Jason van Niekerk

Abstract

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