

## On the Educational Potential of *Ubuntu*

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### INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE NOTION OF *UBUNTU*

After having taught a course on African teaching and learning for change through a massive open online course (MOOC) on the Future Learn/Stellenbosch University platform for two one-monthly sessions during 2016 and 2017, I gleaned from several of the comments offered by course participants that *Ubuntu* could provide many non-African communities epistemological spaces to reconsider human engagements. In other words, I learned from the comments of participants that *Ubuntu* might also be a concept that can be used to remedy community problems other than those that show their faces on the African continent. This gave me the idea to expand talking about and thinking through the concept of *Ubuntu* in relation to other global contexts. In other words, unlike some of my critics who lament about *Ubuntu*'s apparently local relevance, it seems from the comments of some of my MOOC participants that *Ubuntu* might not just

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have a local relevance. Hence, I wish to argue for a plausible conception of *Ubuntu* that can impact any form of human engagement, most notably, associative, deliberative and responsible human encounters.

As it has already been mentioned in the brief introductory section to this chapter, I shall not revisit an analytical exposition of the concept *Ubuntu* on the grounds that the latter philosophical activity has already been taken up extensively in the literature on African thought and practice. Drawing on my own seminal thoughts on the concept of *Ubuntu*, I infer that human interdependence and co-existence seems to be the most appropriate way in which the concept can be articulated (Waghid 2014). In the main, the concept is most poignantly depicted in reference to an isiXhosa<sup>1</sup> dictum: *Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabanya abantu*—that is, a person is a person through other persons (Letseka 2000). When an individual in African parlance is only considered as human on account of his or her relations with other individuals, then such an association is referred to as a community of persons. The latter implies that *Ubuntu*, in the first place, is concerned with the co-existence of individuals in some form of community. The point is a community is representative of an association of individuals whose individuality is collectively expressed through the aspirations of the collectivity. Hence, *Ubuntu* is also literally depicted through the phrase, ‘I am because we are’ (Mbiti 1969). Simply put, a human being cannot lay claim to his or her humanity without engaging with other humans. What makes an individual uniquely human is his or her encounters with other individuals. The question is what does an encounter entail?

Firstly, when humans engage in an encounter, they present themselves to one another on the basis of one another’s speech acts, that is, articulation and listening. Individually, they give an account of their perspectives about their conceptions and perceptions of the world in which they live—that is, they offer some understanding of their cultural, rational and ideological attachments to their social contexts. By presenting themselves in such ways, others get to have some idea of who they are—that is, their encounters determine their very being and actions in relation to one another. In this way, humans are said to be in association with one another—a matter of enacting *Ubuntu* on the basis that humans are attentive to one another through sharing and the cultivation of relations of trust—as Steve Biko aptly reminds us of (1978: 42):

[Through *Ubuntu* we are] ... a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.

Hence in all we do we always place [wo]man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism.

Secondly, an encounter among humans is considered as a moment of empathy and compassion humans have for one another. This implies that, in an encounter, humans recognise the vulnerabilities of one another with the aim to contribute towards modifying one another's condition of vulnerability, considered by Ifemesia (1979: 2) as acting humanely. When humans engage in an encounter, they encourage and stimulate one another to develop a sense of self-worth and dignity together with harnessing their accountability to family, neighbours and other members of the community—a matter of living their *Ubuntu* (Waghid 2014: 61).

Thirdly, in an encounter, the younger ones are obliged to show respect for elders. However, such a form of respect is not synonymous with an uncritical adherence to the thoughts of elders. Rather, respect through *Ubuntu* means that humans are expected to listen to the views of elders before proffering their own judgements. In other words, showing respect for authority in African communities implies that humans must first equip themselves with wisdom and guidance before making moral claims themselves about what is good for society. This makes sense because without listening and contemplation, humans would not be in an authoritative position to proffer plausible rational judgements. Rational judgements are most tenable on the grounds that such judgements can be defended, albeit morally, judicially or epistemologically. By implication, listening to the views of elders even without offering any kind of response is an enabling activity in the pursuit of making sense of what elders have to say. Of course, listening in itself is not a sufficient condition for making judgements because the latter later on require that humans (say, younger ones) proffer some sort of response to others' thoughts. However, the latter cannot occur meaningfully if listening to others' thoughts has not been internalised, in this instance, by younger persons. Thus, showing respect is conditional upon listening before any meaningful rational judgement can be offered in response to what has been heard. This makes sense on the grounds that human encounters remain subjected to what is heard before people can offer any kind of rational responses.

In brief, *Ubuntu* is a form of human encounter through which humans can nurture relations of sharing and trust, compassion and respect towards one another. I shall now examine the educational potential of *Ubuntu*.

ON THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF *UBUNTU*

What emanates from the aforementioned discussion is that the concept of *Ubuntu* signifies the occurrence of human encounters whereby individuals engage in association—that is, community, with one another. It is not that individuality is abandoned in association, but rather that humans' individual potential is engaged with through attentive relations of sharing and trust, compassion and accountability towards one another, and mutual respect through listening and the acquisition of guidance and wisdom. In this section, I examine some of the educational implications of *Ubuntu*.

Firstly, when humans encounter one another and do things on the basis of sharing and trust, they are engaged in some form of practice whereby they learn from one another. They are not merely an aggregation of individuals but are intricately engaged in some form of social practice which allows them to become associated with one another through the understandings and ways of seeing the world. Of course, some of them share commonalities, and others experience one another's differences. Although they are equal in humanity, they potentially differ on account of having had different experiences and connections to their respective social arrangements or contexts. This is what *Ubuntu* means for them: being engaged on account of the similarities and differences in particular social settings. And, as has been mentioned previously, their association in a community of individuals is determined by their relations of trust and sharing they embark on. Put differently, their association together is a manifestation of their learning from one another.

Yet, following Seyla Benhabib's (2011: 79) enunciation of education as a public sphere of living in which humans encounter moments of hospitality and hostility, it can be inferred that *Ubuntu* is a way in which education's hospitable dimension can be enacted on the grounds that *Ubuntu* relates to caring, trust, respect and compassion—all virtues that constitute hospitality. However, to care for others does not mean that one cannot evoke their potentialities or even provoke them to think differently and anew. Maxine Greene (1995) makes the point that provoking students to think anew is a matter of stimulating them to discover unexpected truths—an important dimension of educational experience. In this way, *Ubuntu* can also lay claim to cultivating positive hostility. Benhabib (2011: 76) describes this positive hostility as 'hostipitality'—that is, 'a dangerous indeterminacy or mutual suspicion' through which participants in the encounter are initiated into becoming mutually suspicious of undesirable

speech acts, or actions, and are prepared to speak out against it. In this sense, participants or students are encouraged to reconsider particular beliefs and are critical of simply accepting taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world in which they live.

Secondly, a human encounter, such as showing respect for elders, does not imply that *Ubuntu* is remiss of an important educational aspect, namely, deliberation. Mutual respect in the first place implies that people listen attentively to the views of one another before making up their minds in relation to the ways they should respond. Mutual respect does not imply accepting views of another for fear of showing disrespect. Quite legitimately it can be argued that *Ubuntu* obliges young minds to listen to the views of elders. However, this does not mean that elders' views should be endorsed uncritically as if young people do not have anything to contribute to such a human encounter. The point is that listening respectfully is a precondition for judgement. One would not be in a position to judge amicably and fairly if one does not have the wisdom and insights to offer any form of rational response to elders' views. So, even listening and making sense momentarily without immediately responding to elders and then later on reflecting about the guidance and wisdom acquired is in itself a mode of inquiry that potentially leads to taking more informed decisions. In a way, listening to elders and reflecting on their perspectives is tantamount to taking their views into some sort of controversy as it could be that one might either agree or disagree with another's perspective in a deliberative way. And, as it happens in African indigenous communities, someone else can communicate the views and perspectives of younger ones to elders. In turn, elders and or sages would invariably be exposed to views that they potentially act on. In other words, not being able to offer counter views in the presence of elders does not mean that deliberation does not occur.

Deliberation stands the best chance of being realised if different and/or contending views are conceived by one another in light of what can also retrospectively be considered albeit in the absence of those younger ones who offered initial critiques. The upshot is that enacting *Ubuntu* whereby elders' views are more reflectively considered by young minds and when perspectives and counter views are proffered even through the agency of others considered more authoritative is not a denial of deliberation. Instead, deliberation takes on a more reflective and insightful agenda when communication about differences is enacted via the agency of those considered as more thoughtful than perhaps younger impetuous minds. For this reason, *Ubuntu* as respectful action has the potential to engender deliberative action—a significant educational virtue.

Thirdly, a human encounter is a form of engagement whereby people from perhaps different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds face up to one another. In doing so, they encounter one another in their otherness and differing ways of being. And, it could be that some in the encounter present themselves in divergent ways which others might find disagreeable. For the encounter to continue, one would expect some people to perhaps recognise someone else's vulnerability in say, articulating himself or herself about a particular matter of interest. If this does not happen, the possibility is always there that someone would be treated with disdain as if such a person does not have any useful contribution to make. However, for the encounter to last, some people ought to act with compassion such as to recognise the vulnerable speech of others. But, for the sake of avoiding the encounter from perhaps remaining unresponsive, people are encouraged to recognise the vulnerabilities of one another—that is, to act compassionately towards one another. And, when people act with compassion towards others in relation to which they recognise one another's vulnerabilities, they can be said to be acting in a spirit of *Ubuntu*. Thus, an encounter framed through *Ubuntu* is a responsible action in the sense that people recognise one another's vulnerabilities and actually do something about changing what people experience. Put differently, enacting *Ubuntu* involves recognising people's vulnerabilities and subsequently endeavouring to change it. In this way, people would be acting responsibly in the sense that such an activity is intertwined with doing something that would positively modify reprehensible action. Humans acting with *Ubuntu* would then act with compassion—that is to say, they would act responsibly.

In relation to education, Stanley Cavell (1979: 441) posits that humans act responsibly on the basis that they respond to an undesirable situation which they envisage to change. In an educational encounter, humans act responsibly towards one another when they conceive what others have to say from others' points of view with which they (humans) engage afresh (Cavell 1979: 441). Acting responsibly towards one another implies that humans acknowledge one another for who they are and not always what they want one another to be. They acknowledge one another on the basis that they enact their humanity—that is, they acknowledge one another as humans deserved of respect (Cavell 1979: 435). When the latter happens, humans would then act with compassion towards one another—a situation in turn which enhances their responsibility and by implication humans' education. In a different way, educated humans act responsibly by virtue

of their humanity and *Ubuntu* situatedness. When humans act without Ubuntu, they could become irresponsible which would invariably undermine their education.

In sum, human encounters are educational on the grounds that such encounters are constituted by *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* or human interdependence and connectedness can effect hospitable and hostile encounters that are both respectful and compassionate. Such encounters make humans what they are on the basis that their educatedness and hence their humanity would impact the way they acknowledge one another, provoke one another to see things differently and stimulate one another to act with responsibility. Next, I examine as to why *Ubuntu* with its educational impetus has a uniquely cosmopolitan agenda.

### ON THE COSMOPOLITAN OUTLOOK OF *UBUNTU*

Thus far, I have argued that *Ubuntu* has an educational potential on the grounds that the former is linked to the cultivation of associative, respectful and responsible human encounters. I shall now show how *Ubuntu* connects with the cultivation of cosmopolitanism as espoused by David T. Hansen (2011). Hansen (2011) offers an account of cosmopolitanism which situates people in the presence of the world. In other words, when people are present in the world they are both reflectively loyal to what they know and simultaneously show a reflective openness to what is not yet known or what is still to come (Hansen 2011: 7). In relation to African indigenous practices, to be a cosmopolitan implies that people do not just abandon their practices but rather show a willingness to reflect on what is familiar to them and then to reconsider these familiarities with the possibility of embarking on the unfamiliar. The latter implies that people would be willing to listen, even to criticism of their traditions and cultures with the intent to rearticulate their understandings of such traditions and cultures. Yet, they are not closed to any new understandings that might in future impact their traditions and cultures.

Now considering that *Ubuntu* privileges, the cultivation of associative, respectful and responsible encounters, such forms of human engagements cannot happen without reflection and openness. It is inconceivable that people engage in a responsible encounter without reflecting openly in and about the encounter. Likewise, it can also be that human encounters are constituted by particular rules of engagement which people can openly reflect about for the sake of improving the interactions among people in

such encounters without simply abandoning the encounters. In addition, reconsidering the unfolding of human encounters in light of what can still unexpectedly emerge is tantamount to being reflectively open to the new.

Bearing in mind that practices of *Ubuntu* are open to such forms of reflections which involve maintaining a loyalty to the known and showing an openness to what is still to come, traditions and cultures within African communities cannot remain oblivious of a cosmopolitan outlook. It is such an outlook that potentially brings local traditions and cultures into conversation with often global understandings without necessarily abandoning such traditions and cultures. Similarly, adopting an *Ubuntu* approach to human understanding could also open up local traditions and cultures to unexpected and perhaps unimaginable developments that may enhance human engagement rather than stunting it. Therefore, I am in agreement with Marianna Papastephanou's (2015: 88) take on cosmopolitanism that is firstly, 'about enriched cultural choice[s] and the hybridization of the self' and, secondly, 'about the complexities [of encounters] yet to come'. Developing 'enriched cultural choice[s]' goes along with showing a reflective openness to the known and contemplating about 'complexities [of encounters] yet to come' is commensurable with exercising a reflective openness to what remains in becoming.

### UBUNTU, EDUCATION AND DIGNITY

Thus far I have shown that *Ubuntu* has an educational record and potential with a cosmopolitan outlook. I shall now examine as to what underscores such an understanding of *Ubuntu* in relation to the cultivation of dignity. Thus far, I have examined understandings of the notion of *Ubuntu* and have particularly highlighted its educational and cosmopolitan potentials. However, the question needs to be asked: what is it about *Ubuntu* that gives it its distinctive form? In reference to the extermination of Jews at Auschwitz which is associated with the term 'holocaust' literally meaning ('completely burned'), Giorgio Agamben (2002: 69) reminds us that the aforementioned act of 'horror' 'marks the end of every ethics of dignity ...'. That is, the atrocious and appalling debasement and degradation of human life at Auschwitz for Agamben (2002: 72) constitute a 'horror' during which 'corpses were produced' associated with extermination of humans at the hands of the Nazis. To act with *Ubuntu* is to never act without 'dignity and decency beyond imagination'—a phrase coined by



Agamben (2002: 69). Thus, dignity implies, firstly, having respect for human autonomy and, secondly, preserving human existence at all costs. *Ubuntu*, with its emphases on education and cosmopolitanism, inherently connects with the cultivation of humanity. This implies that humans' dignity has to be preserved and defended at all costs. Hence, *Ubuntu* means that humans should always be treated with dignity which rules out degradation, debasement, genocide and terror of humanity.

Of course, my potential critic might claim that despite *Ubuntu's* connection with African human practices, there are persistent instances of terror and violence on the continent, most notably nowadays the terror perpetrated by Boko Haram in the northern parts of Africa. Agreeably, like in other parts of the world, there are perpetual outbursts of terror most significantly in the UK, Europe, the USA and, on a larger scale, in the Philippines and Middle East (in particular the 'jihadist' operations of ISIS in Iraq, Syria and countries of the Levant). Because of the overt terror perpetrated by Boko Haram or AQMI (*Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique*, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) against their fellow human beings in various parts of West and Northern Africa, it can be assumed that human rights violations are on the upsurge. By implication, such often heinous terror does not mean that *Ubuntu* is absent on the continent.

Rather, like in many parts of the world, *Ubuntu* or honour for human life is undermined, and decency towards humans is constantly receding. If *Ubuntu* were to have been completely absent, not more than 50 per cent of African nation-states would have adopted democratic forms of political governance and, neither would an African Union with its vision of uniting the continent against crime, corruption and violence have gained priority. So, the sporadic absence of *Ubuntu* in several parts of the African continent is not a vindication of its ubiquitous absence. It is merely a confirmation that on some parts of the African continent, human life and dignity are degraded and conformity to *Ubuntu* is discontinued. Yet, because of *Ubuntu's* educational and cosmopolitan potential, the possibility is always there for humans to engage and be openly reflective about their traditions and cultures and that unexpected and unimaginable stability and non-violence might yet ensue. Being open to new insights implies in the first place that people are not uncritical towards their cultural traditions. They are willing to take their cultural traditions into critical scrutiny and in this way invariably remain open to the unexpected—that is, what might still ensue.

## CONCLUSION: *UBUNTU* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching and learning in post-apartheid South African university classrooms are expected to be engaging, deliberative and responsible considering the legacy of both apartheid and colonialism whereby students were constrained to speak their minds. The democratic transformation of several universities on the African continent, most notably in South Africa, is a testimony to the democratic aspirations of communities of thinking. Such communities in the post-colonial and post-apartheid periods were intent on resolving their societal malaises on the basis of freedom and the unconstrained articulation of speech acts. And, universities with their democratic intent were committed to producing graduates who could serve the democratic ethos of their respective communities. By implication, students had to be taught what it means to deliberately engage with one another, question the assumptions of their respective thoughts and becoming attuned to unexpected and improbable truths that might arise. It is here that *Ubuntu* offers much for the cultivation of teaching and learning on the grounds that the former considers dignified engagement, deliberative attunement and moving towards encounters that are reflectively open to new insights and perspectives.

When university educators and students treat one another dignifiedly, there are always pedagogical opportunities for them to become more insightful and resolute about their optimism to look at things anew. This implies that they would be more open and reflective for that matter on what they produce together rather than just being concerned about their own autonomous reflections and/or articulations. Similarly, being attenuated to *Ubuntu* would instil in them the propensity to engage with one another's views more engagingly, that is, more deliberately. Educators and students would not be indifferent towards one another's divergent and perhaps underdeveloped thoughts as through deliberation they remain open to one another's views even if such views might be incongruent with their own. They would continue to engage deliberately on the grounds that they remain open to what is new and unexpected without prematurely rebuking one another's perspectives—a matter of acting with *Ubuntu*.

Finally, as with many democratic communities, universities that insist on students and educators learning together on the basis of reflection and openness—much in the same way *Ubuntu* requires—also engender

opportunities for educators and students to think about ways as to how their societies can be more democratically transformed. It is in the latter regard that *Ubuntu*, with its emphasis on a reflective openness to what remains in becoming, offers much opportunity for educators and students to see things differently and to proffer ways in which societal advances can be made more politically, economically, culturally and educationally. In the main, *Ubuntu* affords educators and students opportunities to transform societies vis-à-vis engaging and reflectively open processes.

## NOTE

1. IsiXhosa is an indigenous language spoken by many Africans in the Western and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa. It is also the language spoken by the late President Nelson Mandela.

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