

Ubuntu – the good life



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Synonyms

African ethics

Humanness

Human excellence

Self-realization

Summum bonum

Definition

The word '*ubuntu*' is from the southern African Nguni linguistic group, which includes the Zulu and Xhosa languages, and it literally means humanness. To have *ubuntu* is to be a person who is living a genuinely human way of life, whereas to lack *ubuntu* is to be missing human excellence or to live like an animal. It is common for traditional black peoples on the continent to believe that one's basic aim in life should be to exhibit *ubuntu* (though different linguistic groups will have their own, corresponding term), which one can do by prizing communal relationships with other people.

Description

'*Ubuntu*' is the word for humanness in Zulu, Xhosa and other Nguni languages of southern Africa, where it is widely held among indigenous black peoples that one's foremost [goal](#) in life should be to exhibit *ubuntu*. As is explained in what follows, there are similarities between, on

the one hand, a conception of the [good life](#) grounded in ideals of *ubuntu*, which are representative of ethical perspectives in sub-Saharan Africa, and, on the other, Western notions of *eudaimonia*, [self-actualization](#), and [virtue](#). However, this entry also brings out several important and interesting differences between them, with some focus on the idea, so salient in African [ethics](#), that one is to realize oneself solely through others.

Readers should be aware that values associated with talk of '*ubuntu*' (and cognate terms elsewhere below the Sahara) are characteristic of pre-colonial African peoples who are well known for orally transmitting their cultures. It has been only in the post-war, independence era that substantial numbers of Africans have adopted literate forms of communication, meaning that it is recently that the world has obtained substantial access to written documents about traditional sub-Saharan cultures, at least composed by those who have grown up in them and have tended to write about them with intimate familiarity and sympathy. Indeed, it has been only in the last five years that the first anthology devoted to sub-Saharan ethics has appeared (Murove 2009). The following bases discussion of *ubuntu* and African conceptions of the good life principally on this fresh body of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical works written by African scholars and those who have lived in the sub-Saharan region.

As Desmond Tutu, South Africa's renowned Nobel Peace Prize winner, remarks of southern Africans, 'When we want to give high praise to someone, we say *Yu u nobuntu*; Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*' (1999: 31). For many indigenous black cultures and those scholars influenced by them, the more one displays *ubuntu*, i.e., develops human excellence, the better one's life. Implicit in such a conception of the good life is a basic distinction between two possible ways of living, namely, an animal life and a human one, where one ought to live a genuinely human way of life, and to eschew living in the manner of a beast or sub-human. There are facets of human nature that are valuable for their own sake and that are missing in characteristic animal lives, and one's basic goal should be to realize those facets. As Mogobe Ramose, who has grounded a philosophy on *ubuntu*, says, 'To be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them....One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being' (1999: 52).

If a person failed to do so, then many Africans would say of him, 'He is not a person' or even 'He is an animal' (Bhengu 1996: 27). By these statements they would not mean that one who is living poorly has literally lost his humanity, so that, say, he would no longer be a bearer of [human rights](#). Instead, they would be claiming that, although one is biologically or essentially a human being, one who does not live well has failed to develop the valuable aspects of his human nature (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005: 224-226, 236).

Note how a [self-realization](#) ethic of this sort differs from other conceptions of the good life or [meaning in life](#), particularly those popular among contemporary psychologists and philosophers in the West. Most strikingly, it does not focus on [hedonic](#) considerations such as an individual's [pleasure](#) or satisfaction. Instead of deeming living well to be a subjective matter, i.e., a mere function of one's positive mental states, an *ubuntu* conception of the good life is much more objective, implying that there is a way of life that one should seek out and that one *ought to* like and be pleased by (even if one would not, given the current state of one's character).

An *ubuntu* conception of living well is much more like classic Greek ideals associated with [eudaimonia](#). For example, recall that, according to [Aristotle](#) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one ought to focus on developing what is characteristic of human nature, which he maintains is a matter of realizing one's capacities to be rational. One can be rational in two dimensions, for Aristotle, namely, practically and theoretically. In the practical sphere, one realizes oneself by acting justly toward others, participating in politics, being a good friend, and regulating one's appetites and emotions. In the theoretical sphere, one realizes oneself by engaging in intellectual reflection, and, at the pinnacle, by doing philosophy.

A typically sub-Saharan approach to [self-actualization](#) differs from Aristotle's and other influential Greek approaches. The latter tend to maintain that there is a significant self-regarding element to self-realization, that is, a facet, such as theoretical contemplation or self-control, that does not essentially involve other persons (although it often might in practice). In contrast, for many salient sub-Saharan worldviews, realizing oneself is exhausted by other-regard (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005: 222-228; Metz and Gaie 2010: 275). Many black African societies sum up one's proper basic aim in life with phrases such as 'A person is a person through other persons' or 'I am because we are' (e.g., Tutu 1999: 35; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005: 218; Mkhize 2008: 40). Although these maxims have descriptive connotations, to the effect that human beings are interrelated and even [interdependent](#), they also include prescriptive senses. Basically, they instruct one to become a real person or to realize one's true self, and to do so solely by relating

to other people in a certain way. Self-realization, in the dominant swathe of the African tradition, cannot be achieved apart from others.

More specifically, standard sub-Saharan conceptions of the good life cash out self-realization strictly in terms of *communal*, *harmonious* or *cohesive* relationships with others. As Augustine Shutte, one of the first professional moral philosophers to seriously engage with *ubuntu*, says, '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; see also Tutu 1999: 35; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005: 221-228). Hence, although traditional African ethics clearly focuses on self-realization, it is also well understood as *communitarian* in nature.

Community or harmony in sub-Saharan thought is not well understood as just any social grouping. To enter into, or more generally to prize, community (harmony) is not merely to join some society or to adhere to whatever *norms* it may uphold. Instead, it is an ideal form of interaction between people, a type of group that people ought to strive to create and to maintain. Specifically, community (harmony) in sub-Saharan ethics is usefully analyzed as the combination of two logically distinct kinds of interaction, identifying with others and exhibiting *solidarity* with them (the following definitional remarks borrow from Metz 2011: 537-540).

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', for them to take pride or feel shame in the group's activities, as well as for them to engage in joint projects, coordinating their behaviour to realize shared ends. For people to fail to identify with each other could go beyond mere alienation and involve outright division between them, that is, people not only thinking of themselves as an 'I' in opposition to a 'you', but also aiming to undermine one another's ends.

To exhibit *solidarity* is for people to engage in mutual aid, to act in ways that are reasonably 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 sympathizing with them and helping them for their sake. For people to fail to exhibit solidarity would be for them either to be uninterested in each other's flourishing or, worse, to exhibit ill-will in the form of hostility and cruelty.

While identity and solidarity are separable, characteristic African thought includes the view that, ideally, they should be realized together. That is, communal or harmonious relationship with others, of the sort that confers *ubuntu* on a person, is well construed as the combination of identity and solidarity. One will find implicit reference to both facets in typical prescriptions about how to orient one's life, including the following:

'Individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialised to think of himself, or herself, as inextricably bound to others....*Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community. *Ubuntu* promotes the spirit that one should live for others' (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005: 222, 224).

'If you asked *ubuntu* advocates and philosophers: What principles inform and organise your life? 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' (Nkondo 2007: 91).

To see some of the appeal of grounding self-realization on such a communitarian conception of interaction with others, consider that identifying with others can be spoken of in terms of sharing a way of life and that exhibiting solidarity toward others is naturally understood as caring about their quality of life. And the union of sharing a way of life and caring about others' *quality of life* is basically what English speakers mean by a broad sense of 'friendship' or even 'love'. Hence, one major strand of traditional African culture places *friendly (loving) relationships* at the heart of how one ought to live. Speaking of an African perspective on ethics, Tutu remarks: '*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).

Concretely, what is involved in realizing oneself through communal or harmonious relationships

with others? What is it to exhibit *ubuntu* by being a friendly person? It is characteristic of the sub-Saharan tradition to answer these questions by appealing to a variety of [virtues](#) (e.g., Paris 1995: 129-156; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005; Gyekye 2010). Specifically, one exhibits human excellence insofar as one displays character traits such as politeness, kindness, sympathy, [compassion](#), benevolence, [altruism](#), compassion, sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, and [tolerance](#).

In sum, then, to have *ubuntu* is to have humanness or to exhibit self-realization, which, in turn, is constituted by displaying virtues that are ways for an individual to prize communal or friendly relationships with other persons. Although this conception of the [good life](#) is obviously meant to guide individuals in the choices they make, it also has tended to influence societal [decision-making](#) in pre-colonial African societies. In addition, it has been common for contemporary intellectuals and policy makers below the Sahara to appeal to such a view of how to live when thinking about how to organize public and other large-scale institutions (see, e.g., Nkondo 2007; Murove 2009; Eze 2010). After all, if political and economic institutions ought to be designed to improve people's lives, then it is natural to structure them in ways likely to foster *ubuntu*, a plausible understanding of how best to live.

Consider two examples from a South African context. First, an *ubuntu* ethic was largely responsible for the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that famously dealt with apartheid-era crimes in a non-retributive manner (Tutu 1999). Second, South Africa's Constitutional Court appealed to the value of *ubuntu* in order to judge the death penalty to be inconsistent with the [right to life](#) and value of [human dignity](#) adumbrated in its Bill of Rights (Cornell and Muvangua 2011: 65-94).

As noted at the start of this essay, while *ubuntu* as an ethical perspective and way of life has been in existence for several hundred years among indigenous sub-Saharan peoples, written scholarship on the topic is new. Intellectuals and academics in Africa are working diligently to mine traditional sub-Saharan cultural resources for promising ideas about how to organize their societies and lead their individual lives in a post-colonial setting. Ideals associated with *ubuntu* are one major source of such inspiration, and not merely to those living below the Sahara desert. There is good reason for the present encyclopedia to include an entry on *ubuntu*--for the values associated with it should be of interest to global readers. Is the quality of life enhanced merely by people feeling good, as per a typical contemporary Western approach, or is it rather, or at least in the main, promoted by people exhibiting virtues that are ways of being a loving person?

Cross-References

[Vitality, Community and Human Dignity in Africa](#)

[Plato](#)

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